

# AN INVESTIGATION OF THE USE AND MIS-USE OF PREPOSITIONS BY ESL UNIVERSITY LEARNERS IN THEIR WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*Studies have shown that learning prepositions is among the hardest for second language learners and this is especially true for learners of English. This study sought to analyse the errors related to the target prepositions 'in', 'on' and 'at' in English essays written by first year Centre for Language (CFL) students of the International Islamic College (IIC), to identify the possible sources of preposition errors and to find out if native language interference is a source of error related to the target prepositions. Fifty essays written by first year Malay students of IIC were used in this study and the topics of the essays centred on common human concerns such as family, friendship and marriage. The errors related to the prepositions 'in', 'on' and 'at' were identified and explained. Next, the sources of errors were analysed and presumed explanations were given. The findings of the study show that the students' problem was mostly with the preposition 'in', followed by 'at' and lastly 'on'. It was also found that native language interference was a probable source of errors related to the use of prepositions 'in', 'on' and 'at'. The results of the study were also expanded to pedagogical implications such the use of suitable teaching materials, using Contrastive Analysis, exposure to language, error correction and using technology in teaching prepositions.*

**Keywords:** Prepositions; ESL learners; error analysis; L1; in; on; at.

## INTRODUCTION

Prepositions are known to be challenging for second language learners since the subject possesses an idiosyncratic behaviour that is not subjected to predictable pattern even across nearly identical contexts (De Felice & Pulman, 2008). According to Matula (2007), prepositions can be some of the hardest words to acquire although they might appear easy and straightforward to learn.

This research specifically focuses on the prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* because these three items are widely used and considered as among the most important prepositions in English (Thibeau, 1999). Moreover, there are a number of studies highlighting the difficulties faced by second language learners in learning those particular prepositions (Anwar & Taiba, 2015;

Beena, 2014; Eissa, 2013; Matula, 2007; Sumaira, Waqas & Muhammad, 2017). For example, Matula (2007) contended that the prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at*, do not always refer to spatial relationships which means they can be used to refer to entities and other domains other than physical or spatial relations. Thus, this poses difficulty for language learners as well as teachers. Takahashi (1969) said that "... many teachers simply tell their students that the functions and the usage of prepositions involve intuition, and this reliance on native intuition prevents many ESL learners from mastering prepositions" (as cited in Thibeau, 1999, p. 26).

Consequently, ESL learners are often confused with the correct use of English prepositions. Ruziah (2006, p. 11) observed that ESL learners whose native language was Malay were relatively weak in using prepositions in their writings. She found that "[T]he problematic sentences were the ones that contained the prepositions *for*, *of*, *to*, *on*, *in*, and *at*". Therefore, since the current research also covered Malay ESL learners, the objectives of this study were framed based on that study in particular, taking also into account all of the literatures reviewed above. The objectives include to investigate the hierarchy of difficulty among the errors committed in the use of prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* by first year tertiary level ESL students, to identify the possible sources of these errors, and to find out if native language interference is the most common source of error.

## THE STUDY

The study relies on content analysis as its research method, following which error cross-sectional design of error analysis was adopted to execute the analysis of the data. According to Babbie (2008, p. 350), "content analysis is the study of recorded human communications" and it is suitable in answering several questions of communication research such as "Who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?" Regarding the data collection of research in error analysis, Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982, p. 245) stated that:

No specific minimum guidelines... for sample size, frequency of data collection, length of the language elicitation sessions, or length of study... The decisions regarding these parameters of study are usually controlled... by inevitable constraints on the researchers' resources.

There are two research designs that can be used in Error Analysis research, namely, cross-sectional design and longitudinal design. A cross-sectional design involves the study of language data collected from large sample of learners at one point of their language development. On the other hand, a design is called a longitudinal design when the language data of a few learners are studied over an extended period.

## DATA COLLECTION

The English essays used in the study were obtained from 50 first year Malay ESL learners studying at the International Islamic College Malaysia (IIC). They were first year students whose ages ranged were from 19 to 20 years old. There were 25 females and 25 males. The participants were all students from one class attending Advanced English 2 (CELL 4211) course. They were taught to write general academic writings in which they learned about different parts of an essay such as introductory paragraphs, general statements, thesis statement, body paragraphs, topic sentences, supporting details and the concluding paragraph.

The aims of this course are to enhance students' existing language skills, improve their critical thinking skills, prepare them for more critical courses in their programme and overcome the problematic areas of grammar.

The analysis of errors in the usage of the prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* was conducted on data provided by 50 individual essays written by the 50 students mentioned above. The essays were one of the tasks required to be completed for the course. The format of the essay is that of expository essay and students were given three choices on the topic to write, each centring on common human concerns such as family, friendship, and marriage. Length-wise, students were given instruction not to exceed 250 words for their essays.

## DATA ANALYSIS

For this research, the researchers analysed the errors in the use of prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at* committed by the students in their writing task. These errors were explained by means of Error Analysis and Contrastive Analysis. Every assignment was read and analysed systematically. The errors were categorised into errors of omission, addition, selection and ordering as suggested by Corder (1973).

The study employed simple statistical scoring methods for identifying and categorising the errors. This method is proposed by Norish (1983) and has been used in numerous Error Analysis research. According to Norish (1983), "frequency" refers to the number of times an error occurs in a piece of writing. The frequency count can be regarded in two ways; the first one is the "absolute" frequency of an error, which refers to the number of times an error occurs. The second is the number of times the error could have occurred, relative to the length of the essay. The former was used as statistical scoring in which for each category of the preposition analysed for this study, frequency of errors is divided by total number of errors and the total is multiplied by 100 to obtain the percentage.

## FINDINGS

The discussion of the analysis that follows is subject to quantitative and qualitative method of analysis, respectively. Identification and classifications of errors will be covered first, following which the errors will be described for the purpose of understanding the sources of errors.

### *Identification of errors*

Table 1

*Frequency of errors for 'in', 'on' and 'at'*

No. of essays	Prepositions	Frequency of errors	Percentage (%)
50	In	51	50
	On	11	10
	At	41	40
Total		103	100

The results obtained shows that students do make errors in the use of the prepositions *in*, *on* and *at*. The analysis revealed a high occurrence of errors in the use of the preposition *in* which is 50%. This is followed by the preposition *at* which is 40% and lastly, the preposition *on* which is 10%. The frequency of preposition errors was counted based on the number of their occurrences.

### ***Classification of errors***

Table 2

*Frequency of errors for 'in', 'on' and 'at' based on their functions.*

No. of essays	Classifications	Frequency of errors	Percentage (%)
50	Place	57	55.3
	Time	21	20.3
	Miscellaneous	25	24.3
Total		103	100

Next, the preposition errors were classified according to their functions such as place, time and miscellaneous. The miscellaneous category includes prepositions used after or before nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives. As shown in the table above, the highest occurrence of errors is in the use of the prepositions related to place which accounted for 55.3%. This is followed by errors in the use of the prepositions classified as miscellaneous which is 24.3%. Finally, the preposition errors related to time is 20.3%.

### ***Description of Errors***

Table 3

*Frequency of errors based on error description*

Preposi- tion	<u>Omission</u>		<u>Addition</u>		<u>Selection</u>		<u>Ordering</u>		<u>Total</u>	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
In	2	1.9	22	21.3	27	26.2	0	0	51	49.4
On	0	0	3	2.9	8	8	0	0	11	10.9
At	1	0.9	18	17.5	22	21.3	0	0	41	39.7
Total	3	2.8	43	41.7	57	55.5	0	0	103	100

Table 3 shows that the omission error in the use of the preposition *in* is 1.9% while *at* is 0.9%. No omission errors for the preposition *on* were found. Furthermore, *in* has the highest

addition error which is 21.3%, while the least addition error is in the use of preposition *on*, at 2.9%. The addition error for *at* is 17.5%.

For selection category, the preposition *in* has the highest percentage of error which is 26.2%. The second highest percentage for error in selection error is the preposition *at*, which is 21.3%. The lowest percentage for the selection error category is the preposition *on*, which is 8%. The table also shows no errors under the ordering category. It can be concluded that the selection error occurred the most, that is, 55.5%, followed by the addition error, 41.7% and the omission error, 2.8%.

### ***Preposition ‘in’***

The frequency of errors for this preposition is 50%. It is the highest number of errors committed by students among the three prepositions. Some examples of errors in the corpus in the use of the preposition *in* are:

- (a) Omission error  
...if he or she is too anxious to sit down to engage [ ] a consistent study program.
- (b) Addition error  
...campaign ‘Anti-rokok’ launched *in* last year...
- (c) Selection error  
...entertainment just *in* television only...

In sentence (a), the student omitted the preposition *in* needed for the phrasal verb ‘engage in’. For the second example (b), the student added the preposition *in* erroneously before the word ‘last year’. The preposition *in* is not needed there. The last example (c) shows that the student has selected a wrong preposition which is *in*. The correct preposition that should be used here is the preposition *on*.

### ***Preposition ‘on’***

The frequency of error occurrence for the preposition *on* is 10% which places the item as the lowest in terms of errors committed by students in their essays. There was no omission error found for this type of preposition. Examples of errors in the use of the preposition *on* are:

- (a) Addition error  
...we heard something louder *on* upstairs.
- (b) Selection error
  - i) ...and *on* the mainland you can visit...
  - ii) ...but it is also famous *on* their history.

For the first example (a), the student has wrongly added the preposition *on* which is not needed in the sentence. In the second sentence (b) (i), the student should have used the preposition *in* instead of *on* and the third sentence (b) (ii) shows that the preposition *for* should have been used instead of *on*.

### ***Preposition ‘at’***

The frequency of errors in the use of the preposition *at* is 40%. This is the second highest percentage of errors committed by the students. Examples of errors in the use of the preposition *at* are:

- (a) Omission  
I look [ ] white paper...
- (b) Addition  
Around *at* 2.30 a.m...
- (c) Selection  
...the doll will danced *at* the floor...

Example (a) shows that the student has omitted the preposition *at* needed after the word 'look', whilst in the second example (b) the student has wrongly added the preposition *at* prior to the stated time. The third example demonstrates that the preposition that should be used by the student is *on* instead of *at*.

### ***Presumed Sources of Errors***

The discussion for this section will revolve around qualitative analysis of the data as we attempt to elaborate further on some of the errors committed along with detailing the

Presumed sources of errors	No.	Percentage (%)
Native language interference	52	55.9
Inherent difficulty of the target language	41	44.1
Total	93	100

presumed sources of errors, founded mainly upon probability. Analysis will be based on the figures presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4

#### ***Presumed sources of errors***

The table above shows the percentage of presumed sources of errors in the use of prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* found in the students' essays. Upon analysis from the data gathered, native language interference is assumed to be the major source of errors, at 55.9%, while inherent difficulty of the target language has been identified as the second major source of errors, which stands at 44.1%.

#### ***Native Language Interference***

Native language interference cannot be avoided in the language learning process. It can either be positive or negative. Fried (1968) wrote that "the learner's native language will always be present as a factor of interference or support in the teaching process" (as cited in Jassem Ali Jassem, 2000, p. 61).

In the case of negative interference, Haja Mohideen (2002, p. 2) suggested that it should be taken seriously since it can result in "erroneous utterances, direct translation and unacceptable language switch". This shows that negative transfer does not provide any help to the language learners in mastering the target language compared to positive transfer and this has become a hindrance in the language learning process.

In the present study, the errors in the use of *in* have been identified as the highest at 50%. These errors may be traced to native language interference. Below are some of the errors in the use of preposition *in* found in the students' essays which may be attributed to first language interference.

- (a) *In* Malaysia has 14 states which include Sabah and Sarawak.  
*Di* Malaysia terdapat 14 buah negeri termasuk Sabah dan Sarawak.
- (b) ...many activities are allowed *in* there.  
...terdapat banyak aktiviti yang dibenarkan *di* sana
- (c) ...we stayed *in* there for 2 week.  
...kami tinggal *di* sana selama 2 minggu.
- (d) ...give bad effect to family and people *in* around...  
...memberi kesan buruk kepada keluarga dan orang-orang *di* sekeliling.
- (e) ...we celebrate *in* happily.  
...kami menyambut *dalam* keadaan gembira.

When phrases or sentences are translated into the Malay language, it can be seen clearly that the source of errors in the use of the preposition *in* derives from the native language interference.

As can be seen in (a), (b), (c) and (d), the students have added the preposition *in* wrongly since they followed the Malay preposition '*di*' as used in the Malay language. According to Imran Ho Bin Abdullah (2008), preposition '*di*' in the Malay language is generic and not specifically used to refer to only place. '*Di*' as used in the Malay language can be equivalent to *in*, *on* and *at* in English. Example (e) shows that the student has added the preposition *in* before the adverb 'happily'. This is because in the Malay language, the preposition '*dalam*' which means *in* is needed in such sentence constructions.

The same type of error was also detected in the use of prepositions *at* and *on* which accounted for 40% and 10%, respectively. Below are the errors committed by the students for the prepositions *at* and *on*. It must be noted that the examples used in this section are taken directly from the students' essays without any modifications:

- (a) ...I listen something else that very louder *at* outdoors.  
...saya terdengar satu bunyi yang kuat *di* luar.
- (b) ...it takes 4 hour to reach *at* Dabong.  
...ianya mengambil masa selama 4 jam untuk sampai *di* Dabong.
- (c) We visited many beautiful place *at* there.  
*Kami* melawat banyak tempat-tempat yang menarik *di* sana.
- (d) ...we heard something louder *on* upstairs.  
...kami terdengar sesuatu bunyi yang kuat *di* tingkat atas.
- (e) ...it depends *to* student to decide...  
...ianya bergantung *kepada* pelajar untuk memilih...

In sentences (a), (b) and (c), it can be seen that the students have added the preposition *at* although it is not required. As mentioned before, the students are influenced by the use of the Malay preposition '*di*'. Example (d) also shows that the preposition *on* has been wrongly added as a result of native language interference.

Example (e) demonstrates that the reason for the wrong choice of the preposition *to* in the sentence can be due to native language interference since in the Malay language, the correct preposition that should be used is '*kepada*' which means *to* in English. Therefore, the student might have directly translated the sentence from Malay to English. The preposition that should be used here is *on*.

### ***Inherent difficulty of the target language***

Another important source of errors that cannot be denied in this study is the inherent difficulty of the English language. This happens due to the complexity and uniqueness of the language (Haja Mohideen, 2002). As mentioned before, prepositions in English can cause huge problems to language learners since many prepositions seem to be inconsistent and whimsical in their uses.

This is not only a problem for the learners, but also for the teachers as well. The preposition errors found in the essays written by the students in this study reflect that only ample exposure to the target language can help students to grasp the correct uses of the prepositions in English.

- (a) ...if he or she is too anxious to sit down to engage [ ] a consistent study program.
- (b) The fees to enrol [ ] the universities...
- (c) ...and Kota Bharu in Kelantan state *in* infrastructure, social and economic.
- (d) *In* the other hand, handset...
- (e) *An* addition, while me swimming...
- (f) ...I choose this music as my favourite music base *own* my felling...
- (g) *In* the morning of festive all Muslim will...
- (h) After that, *on* 2007...
- (i) ...they can focus on one subject that really going to be useful *at* the exam time.

Sentences (a) and (b) suggest that the students might not know that the verb 'engage' and 'enrol' in the sentences should be used with preposition *in*, while sentence (c) shows that the student does not know that he or she should use the word 'in terms' instead of the preposition *in*. English prepositions can pose problems for learners.

Sentences (d), (e), (f) and (g) reflect a possible lack of knowledge of the correct expressions that they have used in their essays. Sentence (d) should be written as '*on* the other hand' instead of '*in* the other hand' and (e) should be written as '*In* addition' instead of '*An* addition'. In (f), the student has written 'base *own*' instead of 'based *on*'. This is not due to carelessness since the students have repeatedly written the incorrect forms in their essays.

Sentence (g) shows that the student has committed the error in the use of *in*. The appropriate preposition that should be used is *on*. The student might think that it is correct to use the preposition *in* in such a sentence, because *in* refers to the time of the day which is morning.

This is because in some other contexts, it is perfectly fine if the preposition *in* is used to refer to the time of the day. For instance, 'I wash my clothes *in* the morning everyday'.

In sentence (h), it can be seen that the use of preposition *on* referring to the year is inaccurate. The student should have used the preposition *in* instead of *on*. The two prepositions might have seemed identical to learners.

Sentence (i) shows that the use of the preposition *at* is incorrect and it should be replaced with *during*. The student might be confused because *at* can be used to refer to time in some other contexts such as in the sentence: 'I felt really scared *at* that time'. However, in this context the use of the preposition *during* would have been more appropriate.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to analyse the errors related to the prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* in the written English of 50 first year Centre for Language (CFL) Malay students of the International Islamic College (IIC), identify the possible sources of preposition errors and find out if native language interference is the major source of error. The study revealed the following pertaining to the three research questions:

### 1. What is the hierarchy of difficulty for the three target prepositions?

The highest occurrence of errors among the three prepositions is *in*, that is 50% and the least occurrence of errors is in the use of *on* which is 10%. The occurrence of the errors related to the use of the preposition *at* is 40%. This means students have the most problem in using preposition *in*, followed by *at* and lastly, *on*.

### 2. What are the possible sources of preposition errors committed by the learners?

Sources of errors found by the researchers are the negative interference from the native language, and the inherent difficulty of preposition use.

### 3. Is native language interference the most common source of error?

Based on the findings, it has been assumed that native language interference is the major source of preposition errors in the students' essays. The result reveals that 55.9% of errors probably resulted from native language interference. This shows that the use of the three prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* by the students is strongly influenced by their native language which is the Malay language.

## ***Pedagogical Implications***

The results from the study show that the most problematic preposition among first year Centre for Language Malay students of IIC is the preposition *in* under the category of selection. This

is followed by the preposition *at* and the preposition *on*. Therefore, the following section provides some suggestions for ESL instruction pertaining to the teaching and learning of prepositions *in*, *on* and *at*:

### ***Teaching materials***

Buckingham (1975) suggested several ways to help teachers in assisting students to learn prepositions effectively (as cited in Mohamed Farhat Mehdi, 1981). One of them is to develop a 'set' in the students to learn prepositions. One way of doing this is to read a short paragraph which contains the three prepositions *in*, *on* and *at*. Students have to do something active each time they hear the prepositions. For example, the teacher can ask the students to explain every usage of the prepositions in the paragraph. The teacher can also teach the students how to expect the prepositions when they occur with their noun objects.

The teacher may also play games with the students during which he or she uses the prepositions through role play. Furthermore, cloze techniques can also be used. The teacher can read a sentence and ask the students to insert the proper prepositions. Also, the teacher can provide a situation where the students can communicate with each other and with the teacher using the prepositions. The students should also be taught the idiomatic uses of prepositions such as '*on* a topic', '*in* the discussion', after they have grasped the basic uses, e.g. *on* the table, *in* the meeting room.

It is also important that prepositions are taught as a system. This includes presenting prepositions in their relevant groups, such as temporal, spatial, explaining and illustrating their meanings, for example, by using objects in the classroom and drilling the correct uses of the prepositions (Zeinab A/Salam Habash, 1982). Further, the teacher may also teach verbs, nouns or adjectives that govern the prepositions, e.g. *sit in groups of four*, *depart on Monday*, and *meet at 3 o'clock*.

### ***Using Contrastive Analysis***

Another good way of teaching prepositions, especially *in*, *on* and *at*, is through contrastive analysis. Based on the findings of this study, the main source of errors related to the prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* is native language interference. Therefore, in the teaching of prepositions, contrastive analysis can be used to provide comparisons of prepositions between the two languages, Malay and English.

The comparison can also be used in planning the materials for the students. Moreover, via comparisons, the teacher can also make the students realise that not every English preposition has a definite Malay equivalent. Therefore, direct translations cannot simply be performed since there may result in erroneous constructions.

### ***Exposure to language***

Exposure to the English language is very important if the students intend to master the correct use of prepositions, specifically the three prepositions. Therefore, the teacher may encourage the students to read widely. The purpose of doing this is to help the students to get the 'feel'

for the language and this is vital if the students wish to use prepositions effectively (Bolman, 1989).

Developing the 'feel' for the language does not only stop at reading, but it also includes writing. Thus, regular writing assignments are also recommended to achieve this. Haja Mohideen (2002) insisted that the students should be exposed to real language as spoken by real people. Therefore, any tasks or materials given to the students should emulate communication outside the classroom.

### ***Error correction***

In order to help students to commit fewer errors in the use of the prepositions *in*, *on* and *at*, the teacher should also be generous in giving feedback, be it in writing or speaking. When marking essays, the teacher should mark the essays in a way that can draw the students' attention to their errors. Students should be made aware of their errors related to the prepositions. They should understand why their errors are considered as errors.

The teacher should familiarise himself or herself with the common errors made by the students related to the prepositions so that appropriate remedial attention can be applied. This is also important because this knowledge can help in developing remedial measures for subsequent classes.

### ***Teaching prepositions using technology***

The use of technology can also benefit the students in learning prepositions of English. Technology can be utilised to present illustrations of prepositions used to indicate time, place, and direction. Quizzes on prepositions and videos on learning the prepositions may be a good way to teach prepositions since they can prevent boredom and keep the interest of the students primed. Furthermore, prepositions that function as subordinate conjunctions or prepositional phrases might be - explained better with the help of technology.

As found by Khadijeh Jafarinejad and Mohsen Shahrokhi (2015) in their research on Iranian students, students' mastery of prepositions can be enhanced using internet online games and they proved that there is a significant difference between the students who are taught using internet online games and those who are taught by conventional teaching. The study unfolds possible future study for ESL learners whose native language is Malay.

### ***Limitation of Study***

Admittedly, though this study has reached its major objectives, it has some unavoidable limitations within which our findings need to be interpreted carefully. The researchers barely touched the surface on plausible causes of errors committed by the students as we could not produce solid evidence to corroborate the causes of errors listed in the study. It was attributable mainly to the limited time to which the researchers were afforded. Consequently, interview with participants had to be forfeited.

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