Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 6 (55) No.1 - 2013

ERRORS MADE BY IRAQI EFL UNDERGRADUATES IN THE USE OF PREPOSITIONS

Wiaam Abdul-Wahab Taha AL-BAYATI[1]

Abstract: *Writing forms an essential part in any foreign language syllabus beside being one of the four basic skills in learning that language. When students write, they become necessarily very involved with the new language, but producing a successful written text is a complex task that requires simultaneous mastery over a number of language systems. In fact, prepositions are functional words that basically have no content. They merely show the relationships between groups of words. Thus, it has been hypothesized that even advanced EFL learners find difficulty in using prepositions correctly in their writing tasks. The present study is an attempt to identify the errors made by advanced EFL learners in the Department of English Language/College of Arts, University of Kufa in the use of prepositions. Focus has been on the literary courses taught in the Department, particularly Novel and Drama.*

The current study falls into two parts, theoretical and practical. The theoretical introduces a general background to prepositions where they are classified according to form, function, and position. A representative sample of Iraqi EFL undergraduates' writings has been chosen for error analysis. Errors have been pinpointed and results have been analysed and statistically treated. This study is expected to be valuable to both EFL learners and instructors one the hand and translators to and from English and Arabic on the other. It aims at finding out the common errors that EFL undergraduate learners commit in using prepositions. The reasons behind such errors, then, could provide key answers to questions on such errors.

Key words: *Errors, Prepositions, Error Analysis, EFL learners, L1&L2.*

1. Introduction

Errors are significantly worth studying. Recently, a lot of foreign language learning studies have tended to focus on learner's errors since they may predict the difficulties involved in acquiring a foreign language. These studies deal with difficulties students encounter in their learning process; Habash [13] mentions that learning English or any other foreign language is difficult for the Arab students. In Rababah's [22] words, "Arab learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing". Actually, this difficulty can be indicated by the kind of errors associated with both language use and usage. Corder [5] states that the study

[1] Asst. Prof. Ph. D, College of Arts, University of Kufa-Iraq.

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

of error is part of the investigation of the process of language learning. It provided us with a picture of the linguistic development of the learner and may give indications to the learning strategies. Moreover, Corder [5] clarifies three stages in error analysis: recognition, description and explanation, which are logically dependent upon each other. He also proposes that it is inevitable, perhaps even necessary, that learners make errors since these errors are unavoidable and stand for a necessary part of the learning process. Errors are visible proofs that learning is taking place and that when language learners produce errors, while communicating in a foreign language, these errors, if studied systematically, can necessarily provide significant insights into how languages are actually learned. He also agrees that studying students' errors of usage has an immediate practical application for language teachers. In his view, errors provide feedback to both the teacher and the learner, serve as a diagnostic tool regarding the effectiveness of teaching materials and teaching techniques, and can be used to identify those parts of the syllabus which have been inadequately learned or taught and need further attention. Errors also enable the teacher to decide whether he can move on to the next item in the syllabus or whether he must devote more time to the item he has been working on [4]. Accordingly, Freeman [12] adds that providing learners with feedback, the negative evidence they can use to correct their misapprehensions about some aspect of the target language, is an essential function of language teaching.

A notable feature of the English language is the extremely wide lexico-grammatical use it makes of prepositions [9]; prepositions are, undoubtedly, one of the most difficult areas of English grammar that learners suffer from [14]; an area that seems to be rule-governed, at least for EFL learners. Hence, Swan [26] believes that it is difficult to learn to use prepositions correctly in a foreign language. Writing has always been an essential aspect of the curriculum of English as a major and for academic purposes; in writing EFL, making errors is an inevitable feature of learning. They, however, are not problems to be overcome or evils to be eradicated.

Based on the researcher's experience as an instructor for nine years at the Department of English Language, prepositions are one of the most difficult aspects of English for Iraqi undergraduate students. By analyzing their errors one could build up a picture of the features of language which cause some learning problems. When such problems are understood in the right perspective, remedial measures could be thought of. Hence, the present study focuses on the use of prepositions and students' errors in such uses.

It is, accordingly, hypothesised that Iraqi students have two main problems with prepositions. Students do not know (a) whether or not a preposition is required in a construction, and (b) which preposition to use when one is required. Further, it aims at investigating errors committed by Iraqi EFL learners in using English prepositions. To achieve this aim, this study will identify, classify and explain these errors by adopting the general procedures in error analysis. It will provide some explanation and description of using prepositions as an aspect in grammar.

It is worth mentioning that the current study is limited to the errors in the use of prepositions, those errors made by the Fourth Year Iraqi students of the Department of English Language/College of Arts/University of Kufa in the academic year 2010-2011. This study is expected to be theoretically and practically of value for

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

EFL learners, teachers and textbook writers. The findings may also help language teachers and trainers revise their teaching methods and accordingly call for more effective teaching and learning materials and effective teaching techniques. Finally, the study could help textbook designers and curriculum specialists in designing a syllabus or a programme of teaching including pedagogical grammar where 'syllabuses and remedial programmes can be constructed' [5].

2. Prepositions in English

2.1. Definition

Traditionally, there are eight to ten parts of speech or word classes. A distinction can generally be observed between lexical and grammatical morphemes with the former comprising *nouns, verbs, adjectives* and *adverbs* and the latter comprising *conjunctions, interjections, determiners* and *prepositions*. Following the traditional approach, prepositions therefore fall into grammatical morphemes. Yet, there are several points of similarity between prepositions and other word classes and constructions such as conjunctions, adverbs, participles and adjectives.

Stageberg [24] states that prepositions are words like *of*, *in*, and *to* which are usually followed by a noun, noun phrase, personal pronoun, or noun substitute called the object of the preposition. The unit of preposition plus its object is called a prepositional phrase as in the following examples:

(1) George sat *between* the two deans.
(2) George jumps *on* it.
(3) George went *from* this *to* that.

Quirk and Greenbaum [20] state, "a preposition expresses a relationship between two entities; one being represented by the prepositional complement of the various types of relational meaning, those of place and time are the most prominent and easy to identify". Crystal [8] mentions that prepositions are a class of words that indicate relationships between nouns, pronouns and other words in a sentence. The prepositional complement is characteristically a noun phrase, a nominal wh-clause, or a nominal -ing clause as follows [21]:

Prepositional Phrase	
Preposition	**Complement**
on	the table
from	what he said
by	singing a peace treaty
in terms of	money
at variance with	the official reports

Thomson and Martinet [27] state that prepositions never change their form, regardless of the case, gender etc. of the word they are referring to. For Lyons [17], the term 'preposition' is employed to refer to that class of invariable words, or particles, which has a 'grammatical' or 'local' function and which tend to occur immediately before the noun or noun phrase they modify.

Operationally, a preposition is a word that shows a relationship between its noun phrase and some other word in the sentence .e.g.**.** In (4), the word 'through' is a preposition because it is used to show the relationship between the verb 'flew' and the noun phrase 'the air':

(4) The birds flew *through* the air.

2.2. Types

There is a traditional dichotomy between "simple prepositions" and "complex prepositions. Most of the common prepositions consist of only one word that has no distinctive ending, and do not vary. Several prepositions, however, consist of more than one word. Simple, or single-word, prepositions include: about, at, before, by, down, for, from, in, of, on, out

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

over, round, since, through, to, under, up, with. Complex or multi-word prepositions include: (1) two words, such as ahead of, because of, due to, instead of, near to, (2) three words such as, by means of, as far as, in accordance with, in spite of, on behalf of. The words in these prepositions do not vary freely, as they do in other circumstances. In spite of, for example, cannot change to 'out spite of' or 'in spite for'.

Quirk and Greenbaum [20] emphasize the stress pattern of preposition. According to them, monosyllabic simple prepositions are normally unstressed, polysyllabic prepositions whether simple or complex are normally stressed.

Essberger [11] states that there is "one-word prepositions" (for example ***before***, ***into***, ***on***) and 'complex prepositions' (phrases of two or more words that function like one-word prepositions, for example ***according to***, ***but for***, ***in spite of***) usually come before another word, usually a noun or noun phrase. Crystal [6] emphasizes that prepositional sequences of the type illustrated by *in accordance with* are often called complex prepositions; Essberger [11] also clarifies that it is not possible to produce a definitive list of English prepositions. That means that nobody can create a list of prepositions and say: "Here are all the prepositions in the English language – no more and no fewer" because complex prepositions can theoretically be added to the language at any time.

According to Crystal [7], expressing a relation of meaning between two parts of a sentence, a preposition most often shows how the two parts are related in *space* or *time*:

(5) We sat *on* the bench.
(6) They left *at* three.

What prepositions tell can be illustrated in the following types [10]:

1. **Prepositions of place** e.g. ***in*** *the office* ***under*** *my chair* ***across*** *the road,*
2. **Prepositions of time** ***e.g. at*** *six o'clock* ***before*** *dark* ***for*** *three weeks,*
3. **Prepositions with other meanings** *e.g. a present* ***for*** *my sister*
4. **Many idiomatic phrases with prepositions** such as: ***for*** *sale* ***in*** *a hurry* ***by*** *mistake.*
5. Many idioms where a preposition comes after a verb, adjective or noun e.g. ***wait for*** *a bus* ***afraid of*** *the dark an* ***interest in*** *music* [10].

While Leech [16] makes no mention of the grammatical or lexical nature of prepositions and merely notices the two types of prepositions 'simple' and 'complex', Biber et al [2] draw an important distinction between free and bound prepositions. Free prepositions have an independent meaning as the choice of the preposition is not dependent upon any specific words in the context. In contrast, bound prepositions often have little independent meaning and the choice of that preposition depends upon some other word, often the preceding verb. Although some prepositions can be both free and bound, many prepositions are always or almost always free such as: above, across, against, before, between, beyond, under, outside, since, through,etc; besides, complex prepositions are normally free, compare the following:

(7) Free prepositions: A modest, smiling, bespectacled figure was suddenly seen *on* the stairs. *On* the wall, a brilliant sunrise appeared, then a vivid blue sky.
(8) Bound prepositions: The calculations generally rely *on* an after-tax rate of return of 8% annually.

2.3. Position

Prepositions usually precede noun phrases: *into the building, at two o'clock, without a coat.* Some prepositions can also precede adverbs: *until tomorrow, through*

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

there, at once. Others can also precede gerunds, as in *We're thinking **of moving** house* NOT *we're thinking **of to move** house,* [10] or even pronouns [27], [11].

In two constructions, however, it is possible in informal English to move the preposition to the end of the sentence. In questions beginning with a preposition + **whom/ which/ what/ whose/ where**:

(9) *To whom* were you talking*?* (formal)

(10) *Who* were you talking *to?* (informal)

(11) *In which* drawer does he keep it*?* (formal)

(12) *Which* drawer does he keep it *in?* (informal)

Ending a sentence with a preposition was used to be ungrammatical but it is now accepted as a colloquial form. Similarly in relative clauses, a preposition placed before whom/which (can be moved to the end of the clause. The relative accompanying pronoun may often be omitted:

(13) *The people with whom I was travelling.* (formal)

(14) *The people I was travelling with.* (informal)

But in phrasal verbs the preposition/ adverb remains after its verb, so the formal type of construction is not possible,

(15) *The children (whom) I was looking after*

could not be rewritten with **after + whom**

Not only is the preposition acceptable at the end, but sometimes it is also more effective in that spot than anywhere else, sentence (16) is more preferable to (17) below because it sounds more violent, more like murder i.e. a matter of ear [25]:

(16) A claw hammer, not an ax, was the tool he murdered her with.

(17) A claw hammer, not an ax, was the tool with which he murdered her.

2.4. Properties

Richards et. al [23] mention that prepositions may express such meanings as possession (e.g. the leg of the table), direction (e.g.to the bank), place (e.g.at the corner), time (e.g. before now), they can also mark other cases such as: Smith killed the policeman with a revolver. They [23] add that in English, too, there are groups of words (e.g.in front of, owning to) that can function like single-word prepositions.

Many prepositions can be adverbs and a few prepositions can also be conjunctions. Thus, such uses are important to be clarified and illustrated to EFL learners.

(18) They are ***in*** the kitchen. (***Preposition)***

(19) Please come **in**. **(Adverb)**

(20) Everyone came ***but*** Tara. ***(Preposition)***

(21) I asked her **but** she didn't answer. **(Conjunction)**

3. Procedures

3.1. Population and Sample

To achieve the aims of the present study and to verify hypotheses, the prepositional use in English is checked in the subjects who are Iraqi EFL undergraduates of English in the departments of English. A systematic randomly selected sample of Fourth Year students at the Department of English Language/University of Kufa in Najaf /Iraq has been chosen to be the representative sample for the population. These advanced students have been selected because they have normally had a proficiency level and expected to master English language and are, hence, capable of using English prepositions correctly.

A total of thirty-two students' final examination copybooks out of sixty-four students' in each of two literary courses i.e. Novel and Drama in the academic year 2010-2011 have been analysed. Every other

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

copybook of the sample fourth has been selected. It is worth mentioning that such literary courses make advanced EFL learners free to express their proficiency in writing correct English texts, particularly in using prepositions since they were asked to answer subjective and objective question mainly in essay-writing forms. The sample size is believed to be suitable because, as Cohen et. al. [3] thinks, when the size of the sample is relatively large, it is expected that a very high reliability index would result.

3.1. The Model

Going in line with what Crystal [8] thinks that a descriptive Grammar acts as a reference guide to all patterns of usage in a language, Quirk et al (1985) **A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language** will be the adopted model of the present study. The analysis of the data is based on Chapter Nine entitled 'prepositions and prepositional phrases' According to this model, prepositions are *formally* divided into simple and complex. Most of these are one of the following categories:

a) Adverb or prep + prep: along with, as for, away from, out of, up to, etc.
b) Verb/Adjective/conjunction/etc.+ prep: owing to, due to, because of, etc.
c) Prep+ Noun +prep: by means of, in comparison with, in front of, etc.

It is worth mentioning that the noun in some complex prepositions is preceded by a definite or indefinite article, as in: in the light of, as a result of [21]. According to Meaning, prepositions fall into:

a) Prepositions of time, such as: at, in, on, for, over, through, throughout, from, before, after, since, until/till, between, by, and up to; these prepositions express duration of time (a point of time or a period of time) e.g. at noon, on May, in the morning, for two weeks, from June through September, throughout the summer, until midnight, before the war, since leaving school ,between lunch and three o'clock, by the time, up to last week, etc.
b) Prepositions of space or spacial prepositions may include [21]: dimension, destination, relative position, space, and passage; these indicate place, such as: at (in, on) the cottage, away from the door, out of the car, by his brother, with my wallet, in front of (behind) the car, above (below, under) the picture, on the hill, over the body, beneath and underneath, across the grass, through the grass, up and down the platform, beyond the moors, across the river, between two boys, among them...etc.
c) Prepositions expressing either the material or psychological cause of a happening [21], such as: because of the drought, etc. for money, (in order to, to) gain money, from Baghdad, etc.
d) Prepositions that express instrument or agentive, such as: by bus, with a ball, by Tolstoy, etc. Or that express Accompaniment such as *with* you, without us, against the plan.

A preposition, like *over*, may be used in most of the senses discussed above:

- Position: A lamp hung over the door.
- Destination: They threw a blanket over her.
- Passage: They climbed over the wall.
- Orientation: They live over the road.
- Resultative: At last we were over the crest of the hill.
- Pervasive(static): Leaves lay thick (all) over the ground.
- Pervasive(motion): They splashed water (all) over me .

Marginal prepositions are some words which behave in many ways like prepositions, although they also have affinities with other word classes such as verbs or adjectives, e.g., excluding, concerning, regarding, considering, expecting, following, including, etc. [21].

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

These prepositions are excluded from the current study.

3.2. Error Analysis

Conducting an error analysis is one of the best ways to describe and explain errors committed by L2 learners. This kind of analysis can reveal the sources of these errors and the causes of their frequent occurrence. Once the sources and causes are revealed, it is possible to determine the remedy as well as the emphasis and sequence of future instructions.

Crystal [7] defines error analysis as "a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the mistakes made by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics". Error analysis also is a means of describing the learner's knowledge of the target language at any particular moment in his learning in order to relate this knowledge to the teaching he has been receiving [5]. In this study, the researcher has adopted Crystal's [7] definition of error analysis.

Pedagogically, learners' errors will enable teachers to infer the nature of the learner's knowledge of the prepositions at a given stage in his learning career and discover what he still has to learn. For learners, a study of their errors could provide devices which could be used to fulfill progress in the learning process. The advantages of using error analysis in ELT, then, are two. First of all, it gives information concerning learners 'difficulties at different stages in their L2 acquisition. Such information is important so that appropriate courses can be devised and new teaching materials constructed. Secondly, error analysis provides knowledge of the way a learner learns and what his built-in syllabus is (i.e. what patterns and rules of the L2 each individual learner acquires when and in what order). This information can help teachers … to adapt themselves to his (the learner's) needs rather than impose upon him their (the teachers') preconceptions of how he ought to learn and when he ought to learn [5].

Furthermore, pioneers of contrastive analysis believe that by making cross-linguistic comparisons one could predict learning difficulty. Lado [15] assumes that a student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some of its features quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult. For Lado[15], and in the light of the notions of crosslinguistic influence, learners' errors were seen as falling into two possible categories: 'interlingual' confusions, caused by interference or transfer from the mother tongue, and 'intralingual' confusions, caused by complexities in the second language itself. The first type of error occurs when a learner of a foreign language carries over the habits of his mother – tongue into the foreign language. This interlingual interference means that his L1 habits (patterns, systems or rules) interfere or prevent the learner, to some extent, from acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language.

Thus, the main problem seems that learners of a foreign language, even in their very first lesson, do not start learning that language from zero or a neutral point. They, instead, interpret any new phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic patterns through those of their native language.

3.3. Discussion of Errors

3.3.1. Common Uses

The data for error analysis was selected from sixty four students' examination textbooks in the academic year 2010-2011. Corder [5] states that from a practical point

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

of view, the study of expressive errors is clearly easier to make a systematic study of written materials. He adds that written work produced by learners can be of two kinds: spontaneous production (free composition) and controlled production. The three stages of *recognition, description and explanation* in error analysis *(cf.* 1.) above will be emphasized throughout the present data analysis. The students' other errors, rather than those in using prepositions, that could be found in their literary written texts, such as errors in the use of verbs, nouns, articles, pronouns, vocabulary, and spelling, will be irrelevant for the purpose of the study here.

Two questions have been investigated:

(1) Do Iraqi students misuse English prepositions?

(2) What are the reasons behind such misuses or errors?

Answering these questions, the study has identified these errors and then classified them into three categories: errors of **omission, substitution and addition)** so that they could be presented along with their source. As the number of the errors seems so large for the size of the study, only a few examples for the sake of illustration to the three categories will be given and discussed**.**

Intralingual errors are viewed as the excessive application of the overgeneralization strategies, i.e. ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete applications of rules, hypothesized false concepts, and transfer of training within L2. Further, interlingual errors are due to mother tongue interference (MTI) that has occurred because the Arabic version of the literal translation is equivalent to English ones. It is obvious that prepositions, for instance, seldom have a one-to-one correspondence between English and Arabic. One preposition in Arabic might stand for the meaning of two English prepositions or more and vice versa. This happens unfortunately when students think in Arabic and write in English.

To make the analysis as accurate as possible, errors in prepositions have been identified and classified as follows:

Step (1):Collecting Errors in Prepositions

Each preposition error was copied, as it appeared in the literary written text under the heading incorrect. The correct form of the incorrect sentence was given under the heading correct with the preposition that suited the context. For example:

3. William goes to London *in* eight o'clock. (Incorrect).
4. William goes to London *at* eight o'clock. (Correct).

This error or misuse of prepositions related to the category of substitution and specifically to Time category. If two errors appeared in the same sentence, the researcher repeated the sentence twice noting one of the errors indicates time and the other indicates a place.

5. William goes *on* London *in* seven o'clock. (Incorrect).
6. William goes *to* London *at* seven o'clock.(Correct).

Thus, the number of the incorrect prepositions is 460 out of 1749 uses of English prepositions and the percentage of errors to the total use of these prepositions is 26.30% **(**see Table 1. and Fig. 1. below):

Table 1

Correct and Wrong Use of Prepositions

Total	Correct Use	%	Error	%
1749	1289	73.70	460	26.30

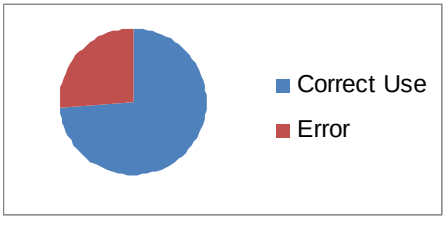


Fig. 1. *Correct and Wrong Use of Prepositions*

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

Step (2): Grouping Errors

Each sub-type of error, such as sentences in which "on" was substituted for "in", was recorded again on a separate sheet of paper for further classification. This was done for each preposition and each different error. The aim was to group similar sentences together so as to clarify the most common errors in using prepositions. Consequently, thirty-six separate sheets have been made; these again have been reconsidered and reduced into thirty lists by putting together the prepositions of the same frequency. Then, these errors have been listed into two main lists: the first contains one-word prepositions or simple prepositions, such as ***before***, ***into***, ***on***, and the second contains complex prepositions, such as ***according to***, ***in spite of, etc.*** (see Table 2. below). The three types of error have been classified as:

(1) Errors of Substitution

The data analysis has revealed instances of the substitution of prepositions which seemed to be caused by both, the students' mother tongue interference and the influence of the target language itself as in:

A. Substituting (at) and (in), as in the following illustrative examples:

7. He was hunting *at* the morning.
8. She had a bad dream and woke up *at* the night.
9. *In* the first, Mrs. Morel loves her husband.
10. *In* night, Mr .Morel quarreled with his wife.

In (26) and (27) above, the learners used 'at' instead of 'in'. Again these errors are attributed to overgeneralization that arises from the learners' uncertainty, particularly, of using one preposition to express different relationships and meanings, as in this case. In (28 and 29) students overgeneralised the preposition 'in' to be used instead of 'at'.

B. *Substituting (Between) and (among).* The following are illustrative examples:

11. There is a gap *between* the people.
12. There is a gap *between* the classes.
13. He was hidden *between* the trees.
14. The struggle *between* social classes.

In the above sentences, some learners used 'between' instead of 'among'. The meaning of *between* and *among* is very similar, *between* usually involves two persons or things e.g. *Iraq lies between Saudi Arabia and Iran*. Whereas, 'among' always involves more than two persons or things. Since *between* is more frequently used, it is overgeneralized by the learners in the study to convey the meaning of *among*. In fact, Iraqi EFL learners misuse *between* and *among* although these prepositions are particularly taught to them at the primary, intermediate and the preparatory stages and even in the Department of English during the four years of study.

C. (by) instead of (of) as in:

15. Paul suffered the domination *by* his mother.
16. They accused him *by* falsehood.
17. He has the hope *by* facing the difficulties of life.
18. She was proud by them.

Despite the fact that students use (*of)* in the highest frequency (see Table (2) and Fig.(2) below), they could not master its use and confused it with other two or more prepositions. This imperfect command led them to overgeneralise 'by' over 'of', resulting in the above three ill-formed sentences.

D. (*From*) instead of (*of*) as in:

19. It consists *from* different things.
20. The determination *from* Santiago is clear in the novel.

Millions *from* people suffer from death.

E. *On*) instead of (*in*) as in the following illustrative examples:

21. There is no job for everyone *on* the world.

(1) The people who live *on* the Bottoms are suffering too much.

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

(2) To complete their fight *on* other countries.
(3) The miners *on* Bestwood are very poor.

It is obvious that some of the learners in this study overgeneralised the preposition 'on' to be used instead of 'in', a case which clearly indicates that the learners could be ignorant of the rules of English grammar and be very likely overgeneralizing the preposition 'on' over 'in' due to faulty analogy that sounds to be a major factor in the substitution process, or misuse of prepositions.

(4) He wins a prize *from* the paintings.
(5) He could not make any love affair because of his love *towards* his mother.
(6) He represents challenge *through* this novel.
(7) They considered him a victim to the world.
(8) Your dreams *about* the future will come true.
(9) Industrialization is like a prison to them.
(10) He told him that he was under his service.
(11) She sacrificed her soul *to* the old man.

Errors in the above sentences are attributed to the mother tongue interference (L1 i.e. Arabic). Actually, students think in Arabic and express themselves in English in their written texts.

In sentences (53-60) below, the impact of the learners' native tongue is very obvious, on the one hand. The data analysis shows that the main reason behind the substitution errors is that the learners, in most cases, tend to select an improper preposition as equivalents for those with more than one meaning in their mother tongue.

(12) He becomes responsible *of* his cottage.
(13) The nature *for* Paul was presented by his affairs.
(14) He was the leader *to* the revolution.
(15) Mr. Morel is very happy *to* his sons.
(16) It concerned *on* the significant issues.
(17) It is related especially *with* social behavior
(18) There is an appearance *for* the theme of waiting.
(19) His wife takes care *with* him.

On the other hand, the effect of intra-lingual is obvious in sentences (61-65) where students substituted a preposition for another. Indeed, these errors are miscellaneous and all related to the target language.

(20) He could be closer *for* them.
(21) The problems which are related *with* money….
(22) They know each other *since* million years.
(23) The answer *on* this question is correct.
(24) The writer must be conscious *to* everything.

(2) Errors of Addition

The analysis of the data has shown that the majority of the students' errors in the use of prepositions due to inter or intralingual reasons, were errors of substitution. Yet, when prepositions are used where they are not needed, they represent 'addition of preposition'. The data analysis has revealed instances of the addition of prepositions, as in (66-87), which seemed to be caused by either students' L1 or L2 itself. Here some illustrative examples:

(1) We must recognize *on* Luther's speech.
(2) They shall die *in* one day.
(3) Waiting for Godot reflects *to* a religious theme.
(4) He asked *from* him to study.
(5) The authority which dominated *upon* England, …..

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

(6) He shows *about* new generations.
(7) He expresses *about* his feelings.
(8) They didn't ask help from anyone *until* his daughter.
(9) He meets *with* animals.
(10) There are many *of* elements in this play.
(11) Against *of* the traditional view, …
(12) He expresses *about* his feelings.
(13) He shows to us.
(14) Industrialization made the miners as prisoners by paying *to* them a little *of* money.
(15) He started to improve *from* his illness.
(16) Their father returned *to* home again.
(17) She is *in* thirty seven years.
(18) He acquires confidence *towards* himself.
(19) She dominated *on* their life.
(20)Industrialization affected *on* people.
(21) They didn't indicate *to* the reality.
(22) He doesn't feel *in* happy.

The errors in the above examples are attributed to the L1 interference. The researcher as a native speaker of Arabic tries to grasp the way students think of prepositions in both languages in order to interpret such errors. It seems that students have not been practicing thinking in English; their teachers might not heavily rely on English and could explain things in Arabic i.e. teaching via code-switching.

The errors in the following examples could be attributed to L2 interference**:**

(23) I have done very well, considering *of* the difficult circumstances I passed.
(24) Everyone can get *on* a new profession.
(25) This will assist the population *on* to find enough houses.
(26) Santiago respects *on* other creatures.
(27) He wishes *for* the death of his father.

The learners overgenaralised the use of prepositions due to wrong analogy, rote-learning of rules, or their ignorance of rules restrictions such as using 'on' in positions where it is not required.

(3) Errors of Omission

The analysis has not only revealed instances of the addition of prepositions but also the omission of prepositions which may be attributed to the same causes. Here are some illustrative examples:

(28) To deal with the hero requires knowledge ^ his experiences.
(29) He stayed ^ 84 days without getting any fish.
(30) He says ^ himself.
(31) In the beginning ^ the third month…'
(32) He talks ^ him in the morning.
(33) The tool ^ the communication is ..'

Sentences (93-98) above show that some prepositions were omitted. 'of', for instance, is required in sentences (93, 96, and 98) while 'for' and 'to' in sentences are required in (94, 95 and 97). The only plausible explanation for this type of error may be the learners' native language interference. The analysis has shown that the subjects of this study in most cases omit prepositions in case equivalents are not required in their mother tongue. Furthermore, the strategy of simplification can play an important role in the production of such errors.

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

Table (2)

Frequencies of Errors in Prepositions Compared to Uses

No	preposition	Use		Error	
		T.F.	%	T.E.	%
1	Of	393	22.47	98	21.30
2	In	225	12.86	50	10.87
3	From	196	11.20	42	9.13
4	By	134	7.66	33	7.17
5	Between	116	6.63	25	5.44
6	For	95	5.40	25	5.44
7	About	86	4.90	20	4.34
8	With	85	4.85	22	4.78
9	To	60	3.40	30	6.52
10	Against	52	2.95	10	2.17
11	Towards	49	2.80	10	2.17
12	On	36	2.05	21	4.56
13	According to	22	1.25	5	1.09
14	Through	21	1.25	12	2.60
15	At	19	1.08	10	2.17
16	without	18	1.03	6	1.30
17	In spite of	17	0.95	5	1.09
18	Throughout	16	0.90	5	1.09
19	Before	15	0.85	4	0.86
20	In addition to	14	0.80	3	0.65
21	Because of	11	0.60	3	0.65
22	After	10	0.57	_	0
23	Until	9	0.50	3	0.65
24	Inside into	8	0.45	3	0.65
25	Like	6	0.34	2	0.43
26	Among	5	0.28	2	0.43
27	Beside	4	0.20	2	0.43
28	Behind near During still	3 3	0.17 0.17	_ 2	0 0.43
29	Under Till Upon	2 2 2	0.11 0.11 0.11	_ 1 1	0 0.21 0.21
30	Over	1	0.05	_	0
Total.		1749	100%	460	100%

Note:
F = Frequency, E=Error, T = Total, T. F. = 1749, T. E. =460 TE/TF *100 = 26.30**%**

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

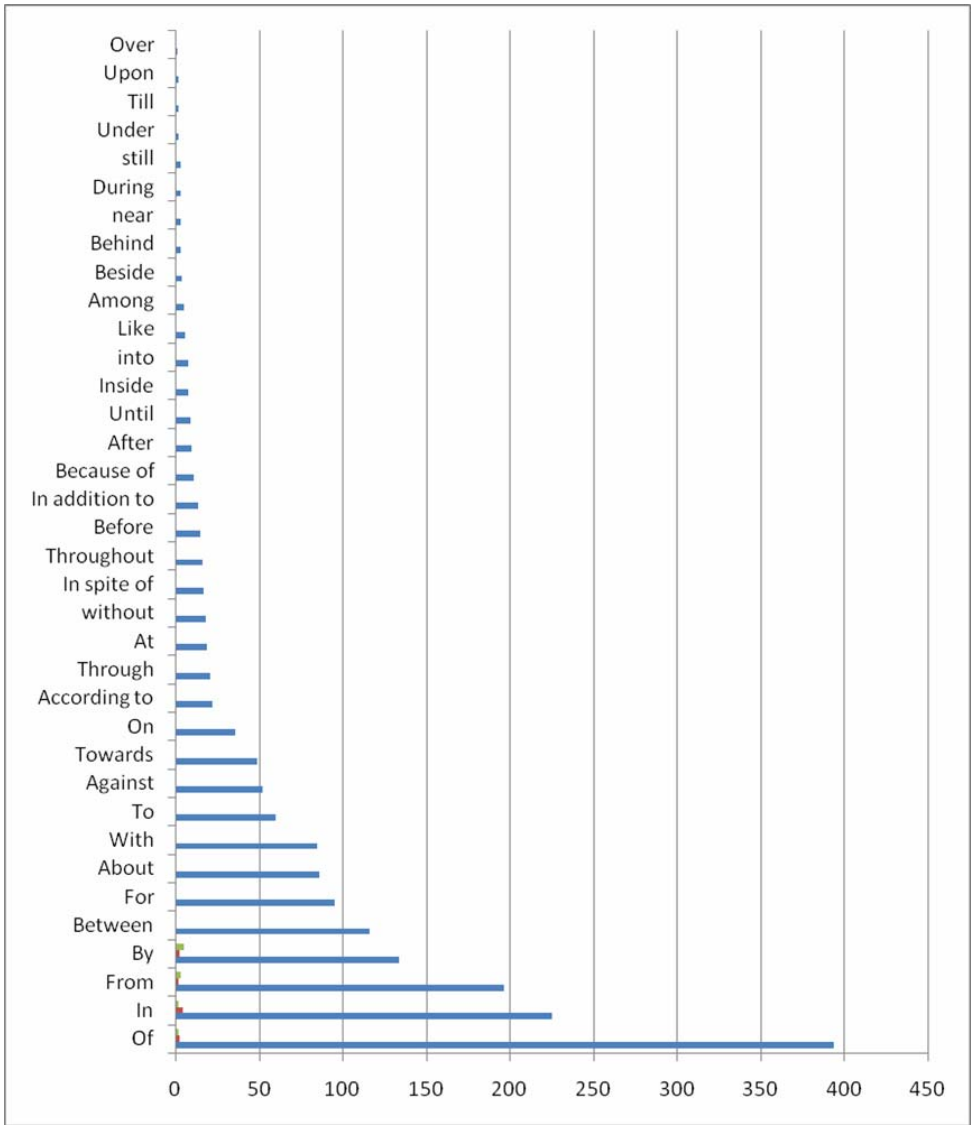


Fig.2. *Frequencies of Prepositions according to Uses*

3.3.1. Other Uses

By processing the data, the study has also revealed that some students did *not* realize that many words used mainly as prepositions can also be used as conjunctions and adverbs that can occupy different positions, such as prepositions before wh-clause, as in:

(34) I'd better make a list *of what* we need.

In this respect, Swan [26] states that in English, prepositions can come at the end of clauses in certain structures, especially in informal styles, e.g.

(35) She is not very easy to talk to.

(36) I hate being shouted at.

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

None of the students has used any of these structures. This means they are not qualified to use prepositions in different well-constructed forms. Only four complex prepositions are used by students out of entire sample's writings (see Table 2. & Fig. 2.). Students, then, tend to use simple preposition in a higher percentage 88.89% than the complex ones 11.11%.

It seems that students mainly tend to use simple preposition rather than complex prepositions. This indicates that students do not know how to use complex preposition, probably due to lack of enough practice in using prepositions. Depending upon the model adopted in this study, few students use prepositions that indicate the material cause or the psychological cause of a happening such as because of, for, in order to, to.. etc. They even didn't know how one preposition just like *over* may be used in different senses such as: position, destination, passage, orientation, resultative and pervasive (static & motion) as shown in (3.2) since 'over' is used once among other prepositions.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusions

The findings of the current study go in line with other researchers such as Mohammed [18], Mohammed [19], and Abisamra [1] who point out that Arab EFL Learners commit serious interlingual errors because they depend heavily on their L1. Arab EFL learners commit interlingual errors more than intralingual ones.

As the present study is consistent with results of previous studies on Arabic-speaking learners of English, learners whose native language is Arabic face two particular difficulties stemming from the following:

(1) An Arabic preposition is equivalent to more than one English preposition.
(2) Interference from the native language is related directly to the problem of literal translation from Arabic into English.

Actually, the study reveals that the selection of the wrong prepositions was due in some cases to L1 interference which was found to play an outstanding role; yet, in some other cases it was due to the absence of the preposition in L1 and the misapplication of rules in L2. The study has found that the Iraqi EFL learners tend to select the improper prepositions where equivalents are not used in their mother tongue, to delete prepositions where equivalents are not required in their mother tongue, to add prepositions where equivalents are required in their mother tongue, and to use the English prepositions properly where equivalents are there in their mother tongue. However, transfer strategies of L2 itself as overgeneralization (wrong analogy) and ignorance of rule restrictions have appeared to be the most plausible twofold cause of intralingual errors.

The findings confirm that students find difficulty in the use of English prepositions and the errors reflect the learners' inability to think in English. Spontaneously, they use their L1 as a means to understand English.

The other conclusion is that students mainly tend to use simple preposition rather than complex prepositions. Due to lack of enough practice in using prepositions, students probably do not know how to use preposition, especially complex ones. Only few students use prepositions indicating material or psychological causes.

4.1. Recommendations

In accordance with the conclusions of the study, the following recommendations could be helpful in solving students' problems in using prepositions in English:

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

1. It would be needless to say that a practice-based effective teaching is, to a large extent, required. Being a problematic issue, using prepositions requires considerable attention.
2. The traditional methods based on translation into and from the L1, i.e. Arabic, should be avoided as much as possible. Teachers should teach English prepositions in a communicative based method; they should use authentic situations to enable their students to practice the use of English prepositions and then be competent to communicate and write effectively.
3. Although the influence of the native language is not always negative, teachers should state the similarity between the two languages and give direct translations where they are appropriate and not likely to lead to overgeneralisations.
4. Students should be encouraged to think in English as a separate language that differs from their own native tongue. Teachers should be careful in that all language practice must focus, in a systematic manner, on those points of language use that present significant learning problems as shown by error analysis.
5. More exposure to the English language through reading and listening is necessary.
6. Finally, serious collaborative efforts are needed here by all who are concerned, including syllabus designers, teachers, learners, and researchers alike.

References

1. Abisamra, N.: *An Analysis of Errors in Arabic Speakers' English Writings***.** American University of Beirut, 2003. Retrieved August 1, 2010,from http://abisamra03.tripod.com/nada/languageacq-erroranalysis.html
2. Biber, D., Johansson S., et al.: *Longman Grammar of Spoken and written English***.** London. Longman, 2000, p. 74**.**
3. Cohen, L., Manion, L. et al.: *Research Methods in Education*. 5th Edition. London. Routledge, 2000, p. 11.
4. Corder, S. P.: *Introducing Applied Linguistics*. London. Penguin Books, 1973, p. 265.
5. Corder, S. P.: *Error Analysis*, Allen J. p. B., Corder S. Pit (eds.) *The Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics:* Vol. 3. London. Oxford University Press**,** 1974, p**.** 27, 125-8.
6. Crystal, D.: *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. 5th Edition. Oxford. Blackwell Publishing, 2003a, p. 368.
7. Crystal, D.: *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 165, 213.
8. Crystal, D.: *How Language Works*. London. Penguin Books, 2007, p. 232, 242.
9. Downing, A., Locke, P.: *English Grammar: A University Course*. 2nd Edition. Canada. Routledge, 2006, p. 531.
10. Eastwood, J.: *Oxford Guide to English Grammar*. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 225-9
11. Essberger, J.: *English Prepositions List.* E-book British English, 2012: at *EnglishClub.com.* p.6.
12. Freeman, D. L.: *Teaching Grammar***.** In: *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, 3rd edition, Murcia M. C. (ed.). New York. Heinle & Heinle, 200, p. 262.
13. Habash, Z. A. S.: *Common Errors in the Use of English Prepositions in the Written Work of UNRWA Students at the End of the Preparatory Cycle in the Jerusalem Area.* In: M. A. Thesis. Birzeit University, 1982, p. 20-1.
14. http://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk p. 2.

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)

15. Lado, R.: *Linguistics Across Cultures*. Michigan. University of Michigan Press, 1957, p. 2**.**
16. Leech, G.: *A Glossary of English Grammar*. Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press, 2006, p. 90.
17. Lyons, J.*: Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 1968, p. 302.
18. Mohammed, A.: *MSA vs NSA: Where do Arab students of EFL transfer from?* In: Language, Culture and Curriculum, **13** (2000) No.2, p. 126-136.
19. Mohammed, A.: *Interlingual Transfer in Foreign Language Learning: A Critical Survey of the Second Half of the Past Century*. In: The Educational Journal, **20** (2004) No. 77.
20. Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S.: *A University Grammar of English*. London. Longman, 1973, p. 143.
21. Quirk, R., Greenbaum S., et al.: *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. New York. Longman, 1985, p. 657, 667.
22. Rababah, G.: *Communication Problems Facing Arab Learners of English: A personal Perspective*. In: TEFL web journal, **2** (2003) No. 1, p. 15-27.
23. Richards, J. C., Platt, J., et al.: *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics*. Essex: Longm, 1992, p. 286.
24. Stageberg, N. C.: *An Introductory English Grammar*. 4th Edition. New York. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, 1981, p. 169.
25. Strunk, W., White, E. B.: *The Elements of Style*. 4th Edition. New York. Longman, 2000, p. 77-8.
26. Swan M.: *Practical English Usage*. 3rd Edition. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 425.
27. Thomson, A. V., Martinet, A. J.: *A Practical English Grammar*. 4th edition. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 64.

BDD-A20106 © 2013 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:21:43 UTC)