

Teaching English Grammar with Special Reference to the Use of Prepositions at Al-Balqa Applied University

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the teaching of English grammar with special reference to the use of prepositions at Al-Balqa Applied University, Jordan. The researcher has collected the data from a total of 120 students studying English at the four levels of BA English students. From each level, 30 students were selected to participate in this study. The data on English prepositions and other grammatical categories were analyzed by using a statistical model like SPSS version 16.0. The statistical analysis indicates that: (1) there is plenty of differences in the rate of committed errors by students at all levels. Furthermore, students face many problems in the use of English prepositions than the other grammatical categories. These problems are probably a result of the interference of their mother tongue (Arabic), and the lack of linguistic competence. (2) Errors of prepositions and other grammatical categories were not equally distributed within all levels of students. (3) The statistical analysis shows that prepositions are the most problematic grammatical item for students. Finally, the negative role of mother tongues influences in the learning of English prepositions and other grammatical categories noticed high. Some pedagogical implications have been given.

Keywords: Al-Balqa Applied University, grammar, Jordanian EFL students, prepositions

1. Introduction

In Jordanian universities, English is taught as a foreign language. Syllabus makers have realized that there is a great deal of syntactic errors in the writings of the EFL students at Saudi universities. One of these common errors is that English prepositions. The teaching of English prepositions provides creative linguistic opportunities for the learners because the learner needs to acquire some patterns to generate new phrases. However, the learner should have sufficient knowledge of vocabulary for being creative in speaking or writing. Just by stringing words and phrases together, much communication can be done, but even after that, we reached a point where the written language fail to convey its meaning regarding appropriacy and intelligibility. The teaching of English prepositions helps in disambiguating of speaker's meaning. When a sentence does not obey grammatical rules, then there will be ambiguity. On the other side, Syllabus makers have realized that there is a huge deal of grammatical errors in the writings of the Jordanian EFL students at Jordanian universities. One of these common errors is English prepositions. Many scholars and researchers have clearly stated that prepositions are particularly the most problematic for numerous L2-English students to obtain because of the trouble of using them appropriately (Park & Jang, 2011; Lindstromberg, 2010; Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2016).

On the other side, several Arab researchers stated and confirmed that Arab EFL students in general, do face thoughtful problems in writing or speaking prepositions (e.g. Al-Ahdal, & Asmawi, 2022; Al-Khataybeh, 1992; Rababah, 200; Zughoul, 1991, 2003). Despite that there are many previous hard attempts to study grammar with special reference to the use of prepositions, there are yet questions in the area on preposition errors for Jordanian EFL students in particular and Arab EFL students in general.

2. Literature Review

One of the most controversial topics while learning a second language is learning its grammar. Different types of research have been conducted on how grammar should be taught and whether it should be taught as a separate subject or should it be taught at all? In this chapter, the researcher has tried to clarify some grammar-related concepts. Then, an outline of teaching methodologies and their relation with grammar is given. The focus of this chapter will

be on how grammar should be taught communicatively, for making sense, and meaning. The definition of grammar strongly depends on the current view of language and learning. As per the definition of Oxford Dictionary, Grammar can be defined from the structural aspects only, or it can be defined from semantics and functional aspects. Grammar can be referred to as “the whole system and structure of a language or languages in general, usually taken as consisting of syntax and morphology (including inflections) and sometimes also phonology and semantics” (“definition of grammar in English”). There is a pendulum swing shift on the views of grammar teaching. In the beginning, teaching functions and forms of grammar were considered as the primary aim of instruction. On another hand, there are some views that grammar should have little or no place in language teaching. These views have been replaced by each other throughout the history of language teaching. These shifts can be seen in Ur’s (1988) view on grammar during 20 years.

2.1 Some Concepts in Grammar Teaching

2.1.1 Form and Function

According to Chalker and Weiner (1994), ‘form’ can be defined as ‘the external features of the language.’ Larsen-Freeman (2001), believed that informal grammar, ‘form’ refers to the fundamental rules of traditional methods of teaching a language where much attention is not paid to pragmatics (use and context), and semantics (meaning). Eisenmann and summer (2012), claimed that many people think that learning a language is equal to learning its grammar. Rutherford and Smith (1988) believed; focusing on grammar is a vital portion of learning a language and they claimed that only learning the grammar of a language is sufficient to become successful in learning that language. If a classroom is based on formal grammar, the focus is on language form rather than real communication and language functions. The opposite point of form and formal grammar is function and functional grammar. Functional grammar focuses on communicational and social interactions. Hence, it is the reason why some forms are more appropriate to use than others. Larsen-Freeman (2001) claimed that considering language as a set of rules is not as important as the use of the language. Methods, which are used for teaching grammar, can have dissimilar initial themes, for instance, grammar can be clarified in terms of meaning, and language use, or it can be defined in terms of fundamental rules. According to Chalker and Weiner (1994), function emphasizes how language functions socially and pragmatically and the semantic role of sentences. Teaching grammar rules should be done by creating lifelike situations, where learners can learn the best use of the grammar.

2.1.2 Meaning

Grammatical forms are the means that express specific types of functions and meaning-notions. We communicate through languages. In Cognitive and Communicative Approaches, meaning happens before form; it means speakers use grammatical forms to convey their meanings. In the 1970s, the syllabus based on the function-notion had a broader view on language as compared to the syllabus based on structure. Nunan (1988) demonstrated that the structural syllabuses did not have many advocates as their focus was only on formal grammar. In the 1970s, more emphasis was given to the functions of the language and its purposes, and notional syllabuses were used to achieve communicative competence. During this period, grammar textbooks focused on notional style rather than formal style. According to Nunan (1988), functions can be referred to as “the communicative purposes for which we use language” and notions as “the conceptual meanings expressed through language” (p. 35). Notions can be categorized according to time, location, space, movement, and duration. Chalker and Weiner (1994) demonstrated that: “notional categories included three parts: semantico-grammatical (e.g. time and space), modal meaning, and functions (e.g. how to express disapproval, persuasion, or agreement). (...) In later developments in foreign language teaching, the term *notional* tended to be restricted to the first category (general concepts of time and space, etc.) which were explicitly contrasted with functions, such as agreement or suasion” (p. 266). The Meaning-Based Approach in grammar teaching is about the use of grammar in lifelike situations. It integrates grammar and context. In this method, the learner’s mind is engaged in the learning process. It provides the learners, the opportunity to learn from each other and focus on language meaning

2.2 Significance of the Study

As there is no vast of studies that investigate the teaching of English grammar with special reference to the use of prepositions at Al-Balqa Applied University yet. The researcher conducted this study with expectations to have great contributions in this area. Moreover, it is too expected that the results of this study will help teachers to become more aware of the trouble of English prepositions faced by EFL students and to help students to be aware of their difficulties, and to overcome such troubles to improve their writing skills.

2.3 Research Questions

This study aims at investigating the subsequent research questions:

1. What are the misuse variations of English prepositions by Jordanian EFL learners at Al-Balqa Applied University?
2. What is the most difficult grammatical category by Jordanian EFL learners?
3. How do the influences of the Arabic language affect the process of learning English prepositions and other grammatical categories?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Participants of this study are 120 undergraduate EFL students, majoring in English, all native speakers of Arabic, at the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Al-Balqa Applied University. The participants are in the range age from 18 to 25 years. The researcher had a sample of 120 learners from the four levels of BA, i.e., from each level 30 students were considered as shown in Table (1).

Table 1. Participants Distribution

1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	4 th year	Total
30	30	30	30	120

3.2 Data Collection

Data of the present study were collected through two components; questionnaire and Free Composition Test (FCT). The questionnaire consisted of 30 sentences distributed in different grammatical items such as articles, conjunctions, prepositions, and other grammatical structures such as tenses, conditional sentences and the majority of sentences are on prepositions. Morrow et al (1998) state that objective questions can be achieved and analyzed competently, quickly, and reliably. In such questions, there is less uncertainty. The questions of this questionnaire were objective. The sentences were provided with multiple choices and students were asked to choose the correct answer (option). The second test is Free Composition Test (FCT). This test is to elicit written data from the students where they will be asked to write a free composition test on any two of the four given topics, “**The Importance of English in Jordan**”, “**What are your Future Plans**”, “**What do you want to be in the future?**”, and “**What would you do if you won ten million dollars?**” These four specific topics were preferred with the purpose to motivate students to write more spontaneously and to help them to lessen the psychological tension.

3.3 Quantitative Analysis

For achieving the research questions of this study, the researcher deals with the statistical analysis of the English propositions errors and other grammatical categories data that were collected from the four levels of BA students of the department of English in Al-Balqa Applied University. Data were first sorted out, i.e. edited, coded, categorized, and then tabularized. All data that were sorted out and categorized were organized in detached sheets. After the procedures of coding, categorization, and tabularization, the data were inserted to SPSS “Statistical Package for the Social Sciences” version 16.0, for analysis.

The data on prepositions that were elicited from the four levels of students were analyzed as follows. The following table and graphs show the results of the analysis. (i) “Correct use of prepositions” and (ii) “incorrect use of prepositions”.

Table 2. It shows the correct use of prepositions

	N	Correct use of the Prepositions		
		Frequency	Percentage	Mean
1 st Year	30	56	22.3	1.88
2 nd Year	30	53	20.4	1.73
3 rd Year	30	55	24.3	1.92
4 th Year	30	77	31.2	2.62
Total	120	241	100	2.04

Table (2) shows the correct use of prepositions for undergraduate students at the Department of English at Al-Balqa Applied University. In Table (2), the researcher sees the degree of development in the comprehension of the English prepositions in the dissimilar levels. In level one, 22.3% of students were capable to select the right option providing for English prepositions. The percentage decreased to 20.4% in level two. There is slight development in level three from that of level 24.4%. In level four, 31.2% of students display the precise usage of English prepositions. Level four students were the best at choosing the right options.

Table 3. It shows the incorrect use of prepositions.

	N	Incorrect use of the Prepositions		
		Frequency	Percentage	Mean
1 st Year	30	182	24.65	6.13
2 nd Year	30	186	26.22	6.22
3 rd Year	30	185	25.65	6.17
4 th Year	30	165	23.51	5.44
Total	120	718	100	5.99

Table (3) shows the incorrect use of prepositions for undergraduate students at the Department of English at Al-Balqa Applied University. Table (3) proves the incorrect selections that students choose in each level. It supports us to measure the awareness of English prepositions that the students have been capable to increase in all levels. The percentage of students pledging errors reductions from level 1 to level 4. The percentage of students who could not deliver precise answers to English prepositions fell from 24.65% in level one to 23.51% in level four. The reduction of the errors proposes development in the students in advanced levels.

In our data which were collected from undergraduate students at the Department of English, Al-Balqa Applied University, we found some other grammatical errors such as “articles, conjunctions, tenses, conditional sentences, and prepositions”. These errors were examined and analyzed. The following table and graphs show the results of these errors and analyses.

Table 4. It shows the comparison between the students’ performances in the grammatical structures examined in our analysis

	Articles	Prepositions	Conjunctions	Other grammatical errors
1st Year	20.66	22.77	37.58	40.88
2nd Year	41.00	20.65	50.04	49.22
3rd Year	43.50	22.74	53.11	47.29
4th Year	44.83	33.42	52.33	55.04
Total	38.50	26.23	51.12	52.41

Table (4) shows that prepositions were the most problematic for the students from all grammatical structures which were analyzed. The overall mean percentage of the students of the department of English in four levels performance in the prepositions was 26.23%. Articles got to be the second in the hierarchy of the problematic items for the four levels of students. The four levels students got 38.50% as the mean percentage in the uses of articles. The students scored 51.12% and 52.41% on the uses of conjunctions and other grammatical structures separately. Regarding the percentages, the number and mean of errors at each level in each grammatical structure are revealed in the Table above.

Table 5. It shows the correct uses of other grammatical categories

	N	Correct other categories		
		Frequency	Percentage	Mean
1 st Year	30	223	22.55	7.22
2 nd Year	30	224	23.66	7.54
3 rd Year	30	226	25.25	7.44
4 th Year	30	258	28.02	8.75
Total	120	978	100	7.54

Table 6. It shows the incorrect uses of other grammatical categories

	N	Incorrect other categories		
		Frequency	Percentage	Mean
1 st Year	30	251	26.32	7.67
2 nd Year	30	227	25.63	7.47
3 rd Year	30	228	25.28	7.37
4 th Year	30	185	22.77	6.63
Total	120	865	100	7.54

Tables (5) and (6) show the correct and incorrect use of other grammatical categories which have been analyzed along with prepositions. To be more precise, the grammatical categories that were analyzed were compared and brought together to give a perfect image about the use of these grammatical categories and to elucidate the contrast to display which structure(s) is/are most problematic for the students surveyed. The four levels students' performances well in the above grammatical categories were analyzed, compared, and presented together as shown in the above Tables.

4. Results and Discussions

As the analysis shows that prepositions were the most problematic among the other grammatical categories for undergraduate students at the department of English at Al-Balqa Applied University. Then, articles came after. The performances of the students on choosing the right answers in conjunctions and other grammatical structures were higher than their performances on prepositions and articles. This means prepositions got the lowest correct options. The performances of the students were upgraded in some grammatical structures and weakened in some other grammatical structures, but even when there was the development of the performance, it was not satisfactory particularly the progress of the level three and level four students. There was satisfactory progress of level two students' performance on the use of articles and conjunctions but their performance on the use of prepositions was declined. The level three and level four students' committed unremarkable progress or insufficient progress in their performances on the grammatical structures examined. Furthermore, level four students' performance on conjunctions was declined. Such unacceptable progress is due to the students' knowledge of L1 (Arabic) while learning English prepositions and other grammatical items. Meanwhile, together with the organizations "Arabic and English" are actual unlike as far as prepositions system is apprehensive, the "influences" from Arabic disturb the learning of English prepositions and numerous errors due to this influences. This result matches in line with results which proposed that the errors made by the Arab EFL students of English prepositions are a consequence of the "influence" or "interference" or "transfer from the L1 that is Arabic" (See Abu Ghararah, 1990; Alkhudiry & Al-Ahdal, 2020; Al-Sindy, 1994; Tahaine 2010). Furthermore, this result seems to be inconsistent with the result of Al-Shormani (2012), who claims that the L2 result is the uppermost cause for the mainstream of regularly dedicated errors by the Yemeni EFL students.

The results of the composition test show an agreement with the results of the questionnaire. To reveal the nature of prepositions errors and other grammatical structures which were analyzed from the data collected from students in the composition test come under two reasons, (i) there is negative transfer from L1 i.e., Arabic, (ii) students lack linguistic competence. Moreover, the total of several errors in the questionnaire and composition test were mostly attributed to prepositions. The negative transfer from Arabic to language two i.e., English caused most errors occurring. It seems that as students translated prepositions literally from L1 to L2.

The first type of error i.e., negative transfer, for example, students used to insert some prepositions from their L1 as the same case as it is found in their mother tongue. In the example below some students inserted the prepositions "of" where it is obviously as used in Arabic. Arabic allows two prepositions to occur subsequently in the context and to be accompanied by the quantifier "some".

- I have to make some of the duties*.

The second type of error which students committed as a result of the subjects' lack of competence. These errors were found to occur as a result of no resemblance for such errors neither in L1 nor in L2. Such errors occur due to the learner still does not have sufficient knowledge of English rules and he/she has no equivalent in his/her mother tongue. So, he/she refer back to creating a new kind of usage of prepositions. Such a process got to bring two types of errors, (i) replacement, (ii) omission.

In the error of "replacement", the students could not use the correct preposition and they replaced them with new ones that do not exist in their L1 or L2. As in the example below, the student wrote "according to" instead of writing

“regarding” or “for”. Such error is due to a lack of knowledge of using the correct preposition as well as a lack of equivalent in L1.

- **According to** me, my future will be good*.

In error of “omission”, the students omit prepositions where it needs to write preposition. In the below example, the student did not write the preposition and omitted it. This indicates that the students lack competence in such structures and still need to get improved to write well-formed sentences.

- I will go the USA soon*.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that many variations in the degree of committed errors by many learners in different levels of Jordanian learners. The errors dedicated by learners were not correspondingly circulated surrounded by all English prepositions and there are noteworthy differences in learners’ correct answers and incorrect answers in English prepositions and other grammatical types’ crossways the four levels. The results designate that the students of levels one and two achieve the minimum achievement in the answers of the correct grammatical categories and English prepositions. It is noted that level one students yield an extreme number of errors in the usages of English prepositions. This can be due to the point that English and Arabic vary concerning the structure of prepositions organizations. Students possibly return to their Arabic system of prepositions while writing and choosing the correct answers. They adopt from their mother tongue, that is, Arabic. Also, the students of levels one and two use their awareness of their first language (Arabic) when they learn English as a foreign language. But meanwhile (Arabic and English) are dissimilar as far as prepositions structure is apprehensive, the interference from Arabic disturbs the learning of English prepositions in the early years, particularly in students of level one. Additionally, the results display that prepositions are the maximum challenging category among the other inspected grammatical categories. What's more, the undesirable role of Arabic effects has been seen in the early years, particularly in level one and two students.

6. Recommendations and Limitations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that EFL teachers should study the variances of English and Arabic organization when it comes to prepositions. Students should be given continuously separate classes on Arabic and English differences in preposition systems. “Influences of students’ mother tongue i.e., Arabic” on learning English prepositions should be highly considered. Also, EFL teachers should give extra attention to prepositions while teaching Saudi EFL students the English language, especially in the initial years. Moreover, the study recommends that there should be a way to develop and establish new techniques for teaching prepositions and other grammatical items to help Jordanian EFL students especially and other Arab countries in general. . Finally, the study limits itself attempts to study grammar with special reference to the use of prepositions, there are yet questions in the area on preposition errors for Jordanian EFL students in particular and Arab EFL students in general. Further studies may come to real on other universities on Jordan investigating the same topic but with different samples.

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