

## An Error Analysis of Using Prepositions of Time among Third Semester Students at Faculty of Languages and Translation

**Mrs.Najah A.Al Jroshy**  
English Department  
Faculty of Languages and  
Translation  
Misurata University  
n.aljaroushi@lt.misuratau.edu

**Mr.Abdalkareem A. Benmustafa**  
English Department  
Faculty of Languages and  
Translation  
Misurata University  
binmustafa1964@gmail.com

### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the errors made by third-semester students at the Faculty of Languages and Translation when using time prepositions (*in*, *on*, and *at*). A qualitative research method was applied. The study involved 23 participants: three English teachers and 20 students from the Faculty of Languages and Translation. The researchers used a document analysis method to collect data by analyzing essays which have been written by third semester students. Additionally, interviews were conducted to investigate the approaches that teachers use for teaching these prepositions and the difficulties that hinder students' learning. The data were analyzed using content and discourse analysis techniques. The results revealed that the main causes of students' errors in using time prepositions are interference from their first language and a lack of understanding of the rules governing the use of these prepositions. The interview results indicated that the most effective way to teach prepositions is to present them in phrases and within context, rather than in isolation.

**Key Words:** Preposition, Errors, Analysis.

## تحليل الأخطاء في استخدام حروف الجر للزمن لدى طلبة الفصل الدراسي الثالث بكلية اللغات والترجمة.

أ.نجاح عبد الحميد الجروشي

أ.عبد الكريم عبد السلام بن مصطفى

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية/ كلية اللغات والترجمة- جامعة مصراتة

### الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل الأخطاء التي تحدث من قبل طلبة كلية اللغات والترجمة في استخدام حروف الجر التي تفيد الوقت. وقد استخدم الباحثان المنهج النوعي الوصفي. العدد الكلي لعينة البحث (23)، 3 أعضاء من هيئة التدريس داخل قسم اللغة الإنجليزية و20 طالبًا وطالبةً من طلبة الفصل الثالث ممن يدرسون مادة فهم وتعبير كتابي 3 استخدم الباحثان منهج التحليل الوصفي لاستكشاف الأخطاء في استخدام حروف الجر بشكل صحيح وتحديد أسبابها وذلك بتصحيح مجموعة من المقالات التي تمت كتابتها من قبل الطلبة، بالإضافة إلى ذلك حاور الباحثان عدد ثلاث من الأستاذات من أجل تحديد أفضل الطرق لتدريس حروف باللغة الإنجليزية، وماهي العراقيل التي قد تعيق الطلبة للوصول إلى الاستخدام الجيد والصحيح؟ وقد أوضحت النتائج أن الأسباب الرئيسية وراء الأخطاء في استخدام حروف الجر هي تداخل قواعد اللغة الأم وتأثيرها على فهم قواعد استخدام حروف الجر، كذلك نقص الفهم اللغوي الصحيح لقواعد اللغة الإنجليزية فيما يخص استخدام حروف جر الوقت بشكل فعال وصحيح.

الكلمات المفتاحية: حروف الجر، الأخطاء، التحليل.

### Introduction:

Language is the primary means of communication of humans and to learn any language, learners must know basics of various grammatical structures and rules which facilitate and enhance the proper use of human languages. Therefore, when learning English language, students should be aware of some major grammatical aspects such as nouns, adjectives, preposition...etc.

According to Azar, (2016)

Students frequently encounter difficulties with English grammar, which can hinder their overall proficiency. Grammar, often perceived

as a secondary concern in language education, plays a crucial role in effective communication. Among the various grammatical challenges, the correct use of prepositions is particularly problematic for learners (p.45).

Prepositions in English are highly idiomatic. Although there are some rules for usage, much preposition usage is dictated by fixed expressions. Additionally, any preposition has certain attribute during using it in a sentence and the incorrect use of prepositions causes mistakes in writing and grammatical structure.

While Nina Suzanne (2017), says that:

each preposition has its own function and cannot be replaced, the incorrect use of preposition will influence the quality of the message from the speaker to the listener, prepositions (in, on, and at ) are commonly used by language learner. (p.15).

Precisely, preposition is defined as a word or group of words used before a noun, a pronoun or a noun phrase to show direction, location, position, place or time. A prepositional phrase is a collection of words that includes a preposition, a noun or pronoun object of the preposition and any modifiers of the object.

Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (2019) states that

Prepositions function as connectors in a sentence, always followed by a noun or pronoun. They establish relationships between the noun phrases they follow and other sentence elements such as the subject, verb, object, or complement. Prepositions help indicate various relationships including position, place, direction, time, manner, agent, and condition (p.120).

So, learners may make errors by using prepositions in incorrect contexts. Specifically, errors in preposition usage in writing often arise from the complexities of English grammar rules and regulations. Achieving proficiency in writing presents significant challenges, particularly within the context of language acquisition. Many students struggle with the correct use of prepositions since it serves the purpose of establishing connections between things. For instance, confusion between prepositions such as ( in, on and at ) can lead to ambiguity or misunderstanding in a sentence. Additionally, incorrect placement of prepositions can alter the meaning of a sentence or make it grammatically incorrect. Furthermore, prepositions can also vary in usage based on dialect or regional differences, adding another layer of

complexity for English language learners. Understanding the appropriate use of prepositions is essential for achieving clarity and precision in writing.

However, numerous studies have indicated deficiencies in English writing proficiency, particularly in the area of preposition usage among students. This issue has been observed in various student populations including Libyan university students. One of these populations is at Faculty of Languages and Translation at Misrata university where English language is taught as a foreign language. The researchers are members of the teaching staff where they noticed the problem of having errors and mistakes in writing courses that have been delivered in the college. Therefore, the researchers have set research goals to identify the common errors and their causes as well as developing strategies for teaching prepositions of time in an effective way.

In this academic exploration, the researchers delve into the various types of errors that can occur in the use of prepositions, examine common misconceptions, and provide strategies for improving prepositional accuracy in writing. By addressing these errors, writers can enhance the overall effectiveness of their communication and convey their intended meaning with clarity and precision.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the causes of the third-semester students' errors in using prepositions of time at Faculty of Languages and Translation?
2. What are the suitable approaches for teaching prepositions of time from teacher perspective?

### **Research Objectives**

This study aims to investigate the underlying reasons behind the errors which third-semester students make when using prepositions of time in their writings at Faculty of Languages and Translation. Additionally, the study aims to identify effective teaching approaches and techniques that instructors at the Faculty of Languages and Translation use to enhance students' mastery of prepositions of time.

## Limitation of the Study

The current study is restricted to third-semester students who are enrolled in Faculty of Languages and Translation, English Department. It is Focused solely on analyzing errors related to the use of prepositions of time in students English writing. This study was conducted during the 2022 academic year.

## Literature review

### Error Analysis

Error analysis can be used to uncover strategies employed by learners in language acquisition, identify the causes of learner errors, and gain insights into common language learning challenges. It can also serve as a teaching aid or assist in the preparation of teaching materials (Etisa, 2017).

Linguists have expressed a variety of views on the definition of errors. According to Ellis, (2008), defines error as:

Errors in language learning are seen as a reflection of the learner's developing interlanguage, which represents a transitional state between their native language and the target language. An error is defined as a noticeable deviation from the norms of the target language, revealing the learner's current stage of linguistic competence. These deviations, whether in speaking or writing, indicate areas where learners are still developing and adjusting their understanding of the target language's rules.

### Misconceptions about prepositions:

Misconceptions about preposition usage in English are quite common and even the most seasoned writers can trip up.

One prevalent misconception is the belief that prepositions can be used interchangeably without affecting the meaning of a sentence. However, each preposition carries a specific meaning and usage, and using the wrong one can alter the intended message.

Another misconception is that prepositions must always come before a noun or pronoun. While this is generally true, prepositions can also be a part of phrasal verbs or expressions where they come after the verb, such as “ put up with “ or “ get along with”

Additionally, some learners may mistakenly believe that prepositions always have a one-to-one translation in their native language, which can lead to errors in usage. However, prepositions often do not have direct equivalents across languages and must be learned in context.

It is essential to recognize these misconceptions and work towards a deeper understanding of preposition usage to avoid errors and enhance the clarity of writing.

### **Common causes of preposition errors**

Prepositions of time, such as in, on and at are notoriously difficult for language learners to master. Error analysis studies have shown that students frequently make mistakes when using these prepositions, leading to confusion and ambiguity in their writing and speech.

One common error is the omission of prepositions, where learner simply leaves them out altogether. For example, they may write “I go school on Monday” instead of “I go to school on Monday”. Another frequent issue is the misformation of prepositions where the students use the wrong one, such as, “I was there on 2o'clock ‘instead of “I was there at 2o'clock “.

Researchers have attributed these errors to several factors, including interference from the learner first language, lack of exposure to natural language use, and insufficient instruction on the nuanced rules governing preposition usage. Pedagogical implication suggests that explicit teaching of preposition usage, along with ample practice opportunities, may help students overcome these errors.

Overall, error analysis studies have highlighted the persistent challenges that language learners face when it comes to using prepositions of time accurately.

### **Related Studies**

In a study, conducted by Nina Suzanne (2017) in Indonesia, "An analysis of preposition errors with 'in,' 'on,' and 'at.'" This study aimed to identify preposition errors made by students in speaking, specifically focusing on the prepositions 'in,' 'on,' and 'at.' The research followed a descriptive method. The data source was an interview transcription (document) completed in 2005 by the author herself. The findings revealed that errors in using the prepositions

'in' and 'at' were more frequent than errors involving the preposition 'on.' Furthermore, the errors were classified into two categories: misformation errors and addition errors. These errors were caused by the speakers' first language. The current study, however, analyzes preposition errors in writing rather than in speaking.

Additionally, a study was conducted by Nurdawati (2018) in Makassar, entitled "*Student Errors in Using Prepositions: A Study of Eighth-Grade Students at SMP Kartika XX-3 Yon Armed Makassar.*" This research identified errors made by students in using prepositions of place. The study concluded that the factors causing these errors were the different functions of the prepositions "in," "on," and "at" in English, which students had not fully understood or had not encountered all the phrases within one academic year. The incompleteness of the rules hindered students' learning processes. Additionally, the students were still influenced by their mother tongue. The current study, however, investigates essays written by university students rather than high school students.

In contrast, the study conducted by Ngugi (2021) in Kieni East, Nyeri County, Kenya, focused on identifying errors in compositions marked by teachers. This study was designed to analyze prepositional errors in written English among upper primary learners. Based on the findings, learners made errors in the use of adverbial prepositions, leading to substitution errors. The study also concluded that prepositions are a challenging aspect of learning English due to their high degree of polysemy. Therefore, teachers should employ creative techniques in the teaching and learning of prepositions.

Another research was carried by Ben khaial (2011), in Libya, under the title of problems of English Prepositions of time encountered by Libyan secondary stage students. This researcher suggested some remedial techniques in order to overcome the errors encountered by Libyan secondary school students. Data were collected through a written test given to 38 male and female students in Zliten secondary schools, as a tool to find out how they use the preposition of time. After analyzing the test, the researcher had come to the conclusion that students at that stage find difficulty in the use of English prepositions of time as shown by their low performance during the written test, and the reasons behind these errors are the interference from Arabic language and other learning problems such as misuse, omission or addition of the preposition where it isn't required. According to the researcher, the best way to deal with

these difficulties is to give an adequate attention both in initial teaching and in subsequent revision and reinforcement in order to develop their skills in using prepositions. Also, teachers need to clarify to the students the differences and similarities among the types of English prepositions.

By reviewing the literature, it has been noticed that there is a lack in the studies which address the problem of making errors in using prepositions of time among Libyan students. The current study shed light on third semester students who study English language as a foreign language in English department at Faculty of Languages and Translation, Misrata University. The researchers will analyze essays written by the students who have studied grammar and writing for three courses as well as the researchers will interview teachers who teach grammar at Faculty of Languages and Translation.

## Methodology

This study employed a document analysis method to examine errors related to the use of time prepositions among second-year university students. The participants consisted of three teachers and twenty third-semester students enrolled in the Writing III course at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, University of Misurata, Libya, for the academic year 2022. Participants were selected purposively due to their enrollment in the Writing III course, which involves writing various types of essays. The researchers utilized two main tools: interviews with teachers to gain insights into different teaching approaches for prepositions, and the analysis of students' written essays to identify errors and address the primary research questions.

## Results and discussion

### Discussion of the Analysis of Students Writing

The errors analysis of students writing answers the first question which is, "what are the causes of the students' errors in using preposition of times?" that has been classified into three aspects according to the preposition errors being analyzed.

### Errors with the preposition 'at'

The results show that most students use the preposition "at" correctly, as in the examples: "My day starts at 7:15 am" and "I go to bed late at night."



However, three students incorrectly used "on" and "in" with times instead of "at." For example, they wrote: "I have dinner with my family in 12:00 pm," "I always get up in 8 o'clock," and "I start by getting up on 4:30 am." Additionally, two students incorrectly used "at" with times of the day, such as "After having dinner at 9:00 pm" and "I go to bed at 12 o'clock."

The researchers attribute these errors to the direct translation of prepositions from Arabic to English. In Arabic, the preposition "at" is not used in the same way as in English, which leads students to apply their native language patterns to English. For instance, students write: "I go to sleep at 12:00 am" and "I cook lunch for my family usually at 3:00 pm" correctly, but also incorrectly as: "We try to do something good and useful in our holidays" and "Children know that they play in their holidays and adults focus more on their holidays time as reading and fishing."

The grammar structures of the first language often do not align with those of the second language, causing difficulties in learning and understanding grammar. Examples of errors due to first language interference include: "He will have too much extra time in other days of the week" and "People in their holidays can do anything that makes them relax."

### **Errors with the preposition 'on'**

The preposition of time *on* is used with days and specific dates. Two students demonstrated the correct use of *on* with days and places, as in the examples: "Libya is one of the largest countries in Africa, with a huge history of religious and cultural significance, as well as some of the oldest architecture on the planet," and "On Friday, this is my holiday." However, two students incorrectly used *in* with days, and one student used *at* with places instead of *on*. Examples of these errors include: "We will have or he will have to match extra time in other days of the week," "That's all I do in my day," and "I have breakfast with my family at the table." These errors are attributed to interference from the first language.

The preposition *in* is used with months, years, seasons, parts of the day, and centuries. For example: "Libya and Muammar Gaddafi in 2011; the Libyan people overthrew the government due to injustice and suffering," and "Their staff goes to the sea in the summer, getting ready for the winter season." Some students used *on* with parts of the day and seasons instead of *in*. These errors are due to a lack of knowledge and first language interference. Examples

include: "There are a lot of places to relax on the summer vacation," "Summer vacation is the best part of the year for students," and "I enjoy on this day."

### Results of the Analysis of Students Writing

The analysis results indicate that most of the errors in student's writing in using preposition of time (in, on, and at) were the lack of linguistic competence of the rules that enhance the use of preposition of time and the interference of first language e.g, using one preposition in different ways and the students don't distinguish between prepositions of time and prepositions of place.

### Discussion of the Teacher's Interview Results

1. "Why is it important to learn about the prepositions of time?" The teacher answered that learning prepositions of time is important to distinguish between other prepositions and the prepositions of time have a variety of uses. The other teachers said that the prepositions are considered as a part of speech so the English learners need to use them.

2 "How do you teach prepositions of time to English department students?" The first teacher suggested teaching prepositions of time in phrases. In contrast, the other teachers explained the usage and rules of prepositions of time and provided examples to help students understand them.

3. "Do you use any techniques for teaching prepositions of time? If so, what are those techniques?" The first teacher responded that they used pictures and match them with the prepositions. The second teacher teaches prepositions of time in phrases. The third teacher, however, does not use any specific techniques.

4. "What are the difficulties that may restrict students' learning of prepositions?" Two teachers responded that students often get confused about using them and may use one preposition in different contexts. In contrast, the other teachers noted that the primary difficulty is the influence of the mother tongue on learning prepositions.

5. In response to the last question, "What is the easiest way to teach prepositions?" The first teacher said that students should memorize the prepositions. The second teacher suggested that the easiest way to teach

prepositions is by providing key points and incorporating practice. The third teacher recommended teaching prepositions primarily through phrases.

The interview provided the researchers with sufficient information to identify suitable strategies for teaching prepositions of time. The teachers stated that they teach prepositions of time by explaining the usage as well as the function of each preposition, and presenting the new preposition in phrases with examples. They also use pictures and other authentic materials for illustrating real contexts to guarantee the mastery of the proper use of them. According to the teachers being interviewed, the difficulties that restrict the students learning of prepositions were mostly the interference of their mother language.

## Conclusion

The results provided answers to the research questions. In data analysis of students writing, the majority of the students found difficulty in the selection of the correct prepositions. Also the results revealed that the errors made by the students were caused by two factors: interference from the mother language and the lack of linguistic competence as the misformation of preposition rules that was clear in different situations, like misuse, omission or addition of the preposition. Students learn patterns that are completely different from the patterns of their own language, Arabic, they resort to literal translation before they form English patterns. These reasons answer the first question “What are the causes of students’ errors in using preposition of time?”. The interview results answered the second question “what are the suitable strategies for teaching preposition of time from teacher perspective?”. The results concluded that there are possible solutions for the teachers to develop the students capacity in using prepositions, these include teaching prepositions in phrases and providing authentic materials which may help in illustrating a real context where prepositions are used differently.

## Recommendation

In the light of the study results, the researchers present several recommendations for students and other researchers:

1- Other studies may investigate the effectiveness of using prepositions of time in large sample of whole university.

2- The researchers suggest conducting studies about prepositions of place because there are noticeable problems in using them.

3- Learners must be always informed about the differences between their mother tongue rules and those of the target language by applying contrastive analysis approach.

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