



The Ability of Iraqi Students in Using English Prepositions

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ABSTRACT

Learning English prepositions is not as easy as other parts of speech. Since prepositions are function words, they may form different functions and have different meanings, depending on the context in which they are used. This literal translation cannot be considered. Alongside their importance in writing, prepositions form one of the most difficult parts suffered by the majority of Iraqi students. In our universities, they are tough only the structure of prepositions. Thus, the present study focuses on the difficulties faced by Iraqi students, especially 4th-grade at the University of Babylon/ English Department.

Keywords:

English prepositions, Iraqi students, difficulties

1. Introduction

New Mark (1988: 24) stated that ".....most common prepositions have multiple functions in most languages ". In fact, prepositions in all languages represent a fundamental part of speech which one would never write a text or a paragraph to be empty of. That is why using them is one of the important ways to make any sentence more accurate and acceptable.

Prepositions may form different functions and have different meanings, depending on the context in which they are used. Consider the examples below:

1. Sally lost her keys at home.
2. Mary always does her exercises at breakfast time.

In the first sentence, the preposition "at" refers to a place (home), whereas in the sentence, " at " refers to the time (breakfast time).

Iraqi learners face such difficulty and many errors and mistakes may be noticed in their use of these prepositions. Wide various uses of each preposition create problems for the learners

Prepositions are often conceptually different from one language to another and direct translation cannot be relied on. The lack of correspondence means that a one-to-one translation will produce ungrammatical sentences. Besides, the loss of the rules governing the use of prepositions causes a lot of problems to EFL students (Alexander, 1988: 146).

It can be noticed that using one preposition instead of the other in the same sentence will usually create completely different meanings in English. For instance, replacing "in" instead of "at" creates different interpretations and meanings. As in:

3. Anne is at school. (She is a student).
4. Anne is in school. (She is at a place, i.e., not at home).
5. Anne is in the school. (She is within the building).

2. Meaning and Form

Generally speaking, prepositions are words that indicate the relationship between two things. In the following example, the

preposition shows the relationship between a parrot and a cloud “*The parrot flew above the cloud, behind the cloud, around the cloud, below the cloud, beneath the cloud, beside the cloud, beyond the cloud, into the cloud, near the cloud, outside the cloud, over the cloud, past the cloud, through the cloud, toward the cloud, under the cloud, and finally dived underneath the cloud.*”. They are connecting words between each other to show the relation of a noun or a pronoun to some other words in a sentence. (Shertzer, 1986).

English prepositions can be categorised according to their form and meaning. Basically, meaning is always in someone's mind, whereas a form (spelling and pronunciation) can be in a mind or it can be concrete, i.e., visibly written or audibly spoken (Lindstromberg, 2010: 10).

Trask (1993: 214) represents prepositional forms as members of the lexical category, which usually combine with noun phrases to form larger components. Prepositions are not considered to be "words that have no meaning at all" or "words that have a well-defined meaning." Therefore, the reader can infer it from the linguistic context in which it occurs (Sledd, 1959: 243). Prepositions may or may not have the same

meaning in two different contexts. The meaning of "by" in "I'm here by 6 o'clock", means "at" which is different from the following example: "come and sit by me " which means "next to or beside". Prepositions are associated with various collocations. They can appear at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end

3. Classification of English Prepositions

The present study focuses on meaning only and specifically IN, ON, AT prepositions.

3.1. Prepositions of place:

In this type, prepositions of place are used to show the relationship with the noun phrase in the context of the place prepositions of place is used to give information about the position or the location of someone or something. They are written before the location. A place preposition indicates " where a person, place or thing is?" (Dart, 1982: 7). For example: - "*He lives in Kirkuk*". (It means that the speaker is located within this city " *Kirkuk*"). But if he says: "*We stopped at Kirkuk on the way to Bagdad*". (It means that the speaker sees *Kirkuk* as a point on his way, i.e., it may be a stopping point, an eating place. The table below shows the three prepositions with examples:

at POINT	in ENCLOSED SPACE	on SURFACE
at the bottom of the page	in a box	on the page
at the bus stop	in a building	on the carpet
at the corner	in a car	on the ceiling
at the crossroads	in France	on the cover
at the door	in my pocket	on the door
at the end of the path	in my wallet	on the floor
at the entrance	in Paris	on the menu
at the front desk	in the garden	on the wall

3.2. Prepositions of time:

Hameed (2015) stated that in order to determine temporal prepositions easily, use the words 'when' or 'how long'. Time

prepositions are prepositions that can be used to discuss a particular time period. These prepositions always deal with time, not a place, so they are easy to distinguish.

at PRECISE TIME in MONTHS, CENTURIES and PERIODS YEARS, LONG on DAYS and DATES

at 3 o'clock	in May	on 25 Dec. 2010
at 10.30 am	in summer	on 6 March
at noon	in the summer	on Christmas Day
at dinnertime	in 1990	on Independence Day
at bedtime	in the 1990s	on my birthday
at sunrise	in the next century	on New Year's Eve
at sunset	in the Ice Age	on Sunday
at the moment	in the past/future	on Tuesdays

4. Methodology

In the present study, the participants were 200 students (120 female, 80 male) which were selected randomly from the 4th class of the English department -University of Babylon.

The students were given a passage containing 24 blank gabs and asked to fill these blank gaps by choosing the correct prepositions (each correct answer has one score). A Cloze test was adopted by the researcher i.e., the scores were considered as follow: below 6 scores 'Weak', from 7 to 12 'Acceptable', from 13 to 20 'Good', and from 21

to 24 'Excellent'. There were equal questions for prepositions (8 blank gabs for each)

5. Results and discussion

As it is mentioned earlier, the current study aims to investigate the difficulties faced by Iraqi students in the 4th class of the English department – at the University of Babylon. And to find out the reasons that cause such difficulties by which the students can improve their use of prepositions. The results showed that the students had a big problem in using prepositions, although the prepositions that were given were familiar to them.

Table 1: Errors committed by gender

Gender	Weak (below 6)	Acceptable (7-12)	Good (13-20)	Excellent (21-24)	Total
Male	60	8	10	2	80
Female	95	11	12	2	120
Total	155	19	22	4	200

Table 1 shows that the total number of responses was 200, 60% were female, and 40% were male. Among males' responses, 60 responses (75%) were weak, 8 responses (8%) were acceptable, 10 responses (12.5%) were good, whereas only 2 responses (2.5%) were

excellent. On the other hand, among females' responses, 95 responses (79%) were weak, 11 responses (9%) were acceptable, 12 responses (10%) were good, and only 2 responses (1.6%) were excellent. As it is shown above, it is worth noting that there is no difference between

gender in using prepositions

Table 2: Overall distribution of errors committed of using IN, ON, AT.

No.	Preposition	No. of errors committed
1	AT	1363
2	IN	865
3	ON	775
Total		3003

Table 2 shows the overall distributions of errors committed by the students; AT is the preposition that has the biggest number of errors 1363 (85%) out of the total number of 1600 blank gabs. Considering the real use of AT, the most common use is that used with time such as *'My lecture starts at 10 o'clock'*. Another use is used with a place such as *'When will you arrive at the hotel?'*, thus, these two uses can make some kind of confusing in using AT. Students can not differentiate precise time such as *at noon*, *at the moment* etc. and a specific point such as *at home*, *at the corner* etc. Possible reasons for problems when using AT are a lack of understanding of the usage and a lack of knowledge of prepositions when writing.

On the other hand, IN comes secondly in the number of errors committed that has 865 (54%) out of the total number of 1600 blank gabs. Finally, the preposition ON has 775 (48%) errors committed by the learners out of 1600 blank gabs. This disparity between AT and the two other prepositions in the number of errors committed relates to the common mistake of the use of AT which is only used with time. Despite the fact that there is a big lack of knowledge concerning the correct use of prepositions because the total number of errors committed is 3003 (62.5%) out of the total number of 4800 blank gabs

6. Conclusion

The present study attempted to find the difficulties of using prepositions particularly AT, IN, and ON. First, the research findings revealed that there is no difference in gender using the prepositions, as it is shown in table1.

The 4th-grade students at the University of Babylon/ English Department faced serious difficulties in using these types of prepositions, especially the preposition AT, because most of the students thought that AT is used only with time, and this caused a big number of errors committed by them as shown in table 2. These errors cause ungrammatical sentences or even give other meanings of what is meant by the speaker/writer. We may relate the difficulties that the students faced in using these prepositions to the low focus oriented by the students or even by the teachers to the real uses of AT, ON, and IN.

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