

A Study on the Issues of Conceptualizing English Prepositions by Sinhala Students Learning English as a Second Language

Ven. D. Sumanasara¹

Introduction

Currently, the English language has become a world-famous due to using it millions and millions of people in day-to-day life for diverse purposes all around the world.

Effective communication in English requires learners to master the four components of language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among them writing in English seems to be a complex process for the beginners learning English as a second language.

Being an important part of any form of communication prepositions play a vital role in grammar. Though they are the subtle and a set of small words in the English language (Huddleston, 1984) their functions in the construction of meanings are decisive. According to Lindstromberg (1998), prepositions are traditionally categorized into three parts: prepositions of place, direction and time. They function as prepositional complement such as a noun phrase, a nominal wh-clause or a nominal – ing clause in sentences. Besides, Swan (2005) investigated that prepositions have polysemous behaviors and different functions to express particular meanings, and they do not have one rule to choose prescribing the accurate prepositions to use in a particular context. Furthermore, prepositions help to create new meanings in combination with other parts of speech and to construct idiomatic expressions (Kennedy, 2003).

At present, most of the English language learners encounter diverse difficulties using appropriate prepositions in the sentences due to multifarious reasons. Some students fail to understand the meaning of prepositions, the context of their usage and which preposition to use in the appropriate place in sentences. Lack of practice of using prepositions and students' native and target languages also influence to make errors in learners' writings.

Seen from students' perspective the complexity of preposition use is stemming from the different semantic and contextual patterns and traditions of

1. University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka. sumanasara.rev@gmail.com

the expression of ideas in the English language.

This complexity and confusion requires empirical research studies to explore and explain the exact sources from which those issues are deriving.

Research Questions

1. What are the issues of using prepositions in the communication of the English language?
2. Why do they find it difficult to use the appropriate prepositions in the construction of sentences?
3. Has their mother tongue influenced the perception of prepositions in the English language?

Review of Literature

Habas (1982) observed ‘the occurrence of students’ errors in the use of English prepositions’ and found out that students have faced more difficulties using spatial prepositions than the temporal prepositions. Reef (2000) examined the errors regarding the prepositions of place and tried to reveal whether those errors occurred due to poor teaching or the interference of the learners’ first language. He found that learners’ inability to distinguish the semantic content of using four types of prepositions such as, position, relative, passage and orientation and on the other hand, employing the poor teaching methods in the classrooms as the principal causes for all those errors which students encountered. According to Kim’s (2001) study on “the errors in the use of English prepositions in the written work of Upper Secondary Malay Students” he discovered that students’ inability to use the appropriate prepositions of place, time and direction to fill up the gaps given in the Cloze test and sentences. Rumiya (2008) investigated Indonesian English learners who have made more errors in the prepositions use of place, time, manner, direction, purpose, management, similarity, capacity and association. Further, she stated that the Indonesian students encountered more difficulties using the preposition of direction other than the above types of prepositions.

Objectives

1. To identify how students understand the meaning of English prepositions such as omissions, additions and error usage of prepositions in students’ compositions.
2. To explore students’ issues of using the above-mentioned prepositions

appropriately in expressing and writing their ideas.

3. To analyze semantic issues of conceptualizing problematic prepositions in the education of the second language.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study could be perceived in terms of three factors, such as the academic significance, practical significance and the temporal significance. The academic aspect of this research is capable of unearthing the hidden knowledge concerning the issues of using English prepositions. The erroneous use of English prepositions could be conceptualized and theorized enhancing the academic domain of studies of learning a second language.

The Limitations of the Research

This research was confined to the first-year students of group No. 5 and 6 in the academic year of 2022/2023, who study English as a compulsory credit bearing program.

The research is mainly focused on only the three components of prepositions, such as omissions of the prepositions, additions of the prepositions and error usage of prepositions in students' free writing compositions.

Methodology

Research Area

The study was carried out with the first-year students who studied at the Department of English Language (DELT) in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura University.

Sources of Data

Primary Sources

The academic year 2022/2023 first year 120 students from the class numbers 5 and 6 enrolled in the compulsory English program were selected as the primary sources of this study.

Secondary Sources

Data for this study were collected from students' free essay composition writing in the classes pertaining to the study. Specific and general literature falling into the scope of this study were also referred to depending on their availability.

Sampling Method

The participants of the study were 120 students from mixed-ability groups of five and six in the academic year 2022/2023. Those students were males and females between the ages of 20 and 22 years from non-English speaking backgrounds and their first language was Sinhala. A random sample of 120 students were selected for the academic year 2022/2023. Gender representation was not considered in the sampling as over 95% of students were females and the rest being males. The reliability of data collected from the sample was ensured by the technique of observing and interviewing writing essays in an environment of face-to-face contact. Apart from the researcher, the four temporary assistant lecturers also observed the whole processes of interviewing essay writing and evaluation of those practices. Accordingly, the objective assessment of data was ensured leaving no room for researcher's subjective interpretations or any bias.

Tools of Data Collection

Interview technique:

Students of the selected sample were interviewed to gather data relating to this study. Focus group interviews were carried out. These interviews were carried out first in English with the objective of observing their use of prepositions in expression of ideas. Such interviews revealed the errors of using appropriate prepositions in verbal communication. Thereafter they were interviewed in Sinhalese to learn about the mistakes they made. In addition, the errors of prepositions application in their essays were also taken into account in those interviews with them.

Case Studies:

Documents of English writing were selected adopting the case study method and gathered data regarding the use of prepositions in sentence construction. In particular each student was asked to write an essay on a selected theme out of three themes given to them and they advised to write an essay of 500 words or more within the period of one hour. Their essays were written in front of the researcher without any reference to books and articles. These tools of data collection seemed the most appropriate as the researcher was able to get reliable information regarding the problem of using prepositions in real social settings in the appropriate way of using them.

Method of Data Analysis:

The gathered data from the students' free essay compositions were analyzed according to Pit Corder's five types of grammatical error analysis

methods, such as collection of samples of learner language, identification of errors, classification of errors, explanation of errors and evaluation of errors. Besides, the above compositions were duly analyzed in terms of the sociological and linguistic methods.

Results and Discussion

After analyzing errors in the students' free writing compositions, the researcher was able to identify 504 preposition errors under three components. The most frequent errors were the omissions of the prepositions 263 (52.18%) which led to produce syntactically and semantically incorrect sentences. The least frequent errors on prepositions were errors of prepositions used in sentences 72 (14.29%). The overall preposition errors displayed the students' lack of competency, poor understanding of the meanings and their correct usage context to apply them appropriately in the production of the sentences. Moreover, this reveals that the students need much more exposure from teaching and continuous practice to minimize their errors and produce grammatically correct sentences in the English language as second language learners.

As is apparent from the errors students have not developed comprehensive understanding of the contextual meaning of English prepositions. The common use of prepositions was not a vast problem for the majority of students. These findings indicate the lack of adequate amount of reading in English literature. The errors of prepositions were more evident in verbal communication compared to that of written. It is because of the time available for deciding on the appropriate prepositions to be used. With reference to the third objective of the research most of the errors indicated semantic issues of contextual variations in the use of prepositions lack of adequate period of listening to different versions of English expressions and limited reading in English seemed to have been conducive to the semantic understanding issues.

Conclusion

To conclude, most of the students had developed misconceptions of English prepositions as a result of their direct translation of English prepositions into the prepositions of Sinhalese. This is wrong, but easy to study method has confused conceptual meanings of prepositions in the English language and it was well evident from the analysis of students' writings. Accordingly, this research contains that the method of language education should be carefully adopted in the case of proper understanding of the different uses of prepositions by the students learning English as a second language.

Keywords: English as a Second Language, Prepositions, Errors of Application, Semantics, Issues.

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