



Available online at:
<http://www.udead.org.tr/journal>
*International Association of Research
in Foreign Language Education and Applied Linguistics*
ELT Research Journal
2014, 3(2), 59-69
ISSN: 2146-9814

Identifying preposition errors of Turkish EFL students

Cem Özışık¹

İstanbul Kültür University, Turkey

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to find out to what extent Turkish EFL students are successful in the use of prepositions, and how much impact their mother tongue has on their errors. In order to achieve this aim, 30 students in the upper-intermediate level of a university prep school were given a 60-sentence gap-filling test. Each sentence in the test included a collocation of preposition in which students are likely to misuse prepositions due to the effect of their native language. They were asked to fill in the gaps with a suitable preposition or put a (-) if no preposition is necessary. The result of the test showed that even at this level, students have great difficulty in finding the correct preposition, with a significant number of errors resulting from mother tongue interference. Separate categories as to different error forms and word forms were also included along with the overall results. Such analysis may encourage EFL instructors to prepare remedial teaching activities which will specifically focus on teaching prepositions, considering students' L1 as well.

Keywords: *Error, preposition, collocation, mother tongue interference*

¹ Assistant Professor Doctor, ELT Department, İstanbul Kültür University, Turkey, e-mail: cemozisik@gmail.com

Introduction

In the process of learning English as a foreign language, it is inevitable for students to make errors when they produce the target language. As for English education in Turkey, it can easily be observed that language errors in student essays include a considerable number of preposition errors. As Lynch (2010) suggests, some basic features of English language grammar structure are illogical or dissimilar to speakers of other languages and do not readily lend themselves to being well understood, even in context. He sees prepositions as one of these features which offer exceptional challenge to EFL students because they may be radically different from the manner of expression in the student's first language (L1).

The main reason why students find prepositions very hard to learn is that there are no specific rules in their usage. According to Hermet and Desilets (2009), preposition choice accounted for 17.2% of all errors. Prepositions can be seen as a special class of cognates, in the sense that the same L1 preposition used in different L1 sentences could be translated to several different second language (L2) prepositions. Since each language has its own rules, the situation varies greatly from language to language. Particularly the preposition errors in writing lead to misunderstanding of the message aimed to be conveyed, which in turn causes communication gaps.

In the case of Turkish students, this leads to a process where students switch to L1 and try to use the Turkish equivalents of English prepositions. Not surprisingly, mother tongue interference in preposition use is relatively higher than other language structures in students' English essays. Considering that English textbooks are designed to be studied in various countries, it would be hard to expect them to find a solution to this problem, which undoubtedly appears in different forms in different countries due to the specific features of every single mother tongue. Therefore, coming up with a solution is the responsibility of English teachers, who have the same mother tongue as their students and are capable enough to determine the prepositions which could create problems. James (1996) claims that typical mother tongue transfer errors of the learners can easily be identified by the speakers of the same mother tongue. In parallel with this, Stoitchkov (2006) states that teachers whose native language is the same as their students' have a big advantage over teachers who are English native speakers in that they went through the same stages in learning and faced the same challenges during that period. According to Mendikoetxea, Murcia and Rollinson (2004), teachers having a good understanding of learners' difficulties can help students analyze errors, which will improve their language awareness, leading to promoting proficiency.

It is obvious that the teacher's role has a vital importance at this point. As Paradowski (2008) suggests, a foreign language teacher should be proficient in both L2 and L1 of the learners in order to be in a position to perceive the areas at risk from interference. In order to achieve this aim, using a learners' own writing can be a good option because the study of the speech and writing of learners is largely the study of the errors of learners because they yield more information about the learners' developing systems than correct production (Brown, 1994). Similarly, Erdoğan (2005) believes that the errors that learners make are major elements in the feedback system of the teaching-learning process. For this

reason, it is important that the teacher should be able to detect and describe the errors from a linguistic point of view.

Types of errors

There are two types of errors that are relevant to the usage of prepositions. These are intralingual and interlingual errors.

Intralingual errors are made by various learners regardless of their native language, so this kind of errors can also be called ‘universal errors’. For instance, many learners go through a stage in their English acquisition process where they use ‘present tense’ instead of ‘past tense’. Another example is omitting articles ‘a’ and ‘the’ or plural ‘-s’ although they are needed. Again, the use of ‘eated’ in place of ‘ate’ is a universal error, which is made by learners of English, irrespective of their L1 (Ellis, 1997).

As cited in Ellis (1994), Richard explains intralingual errors through four categories. He starts with the “overgeneralization errors”, which arise when the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of other structures in the target language. It generally involves the creation of one deviant structure in place of two target language structures. For example, writing ‘He can sings’ instead of ‘He can sing’. The second intralingual error category he mentions is the “ignorance of rule restrictions”, which involves the application of rules to contexts where they do not apply. An example is ‘He made me to rest’ through extension of the pattern found with the majority of verbs that take infinitival complements, such as ‘He asked / wanted me to go’. The third one, “incomplete application of rules” involves a failure to fully develop a structure. Thus, learners of L2 English have been observed to use declarative word order in questions. For instance, writing ‘You like to sing?’ instead of interrogative word order ‘Do you like to sing?’. The final intralingual error category Richard notes is “false concepts hypothesized”, which arises when the learner does not fully comprehend a distinction in target language. For example, the use of ‘was’ as a marker of past tense in ‘One day it was happened’.

It can be seen that all these errors happen due to a cause-effect relationship among the various structures of one single language, L2, rather than an outside effect, such as L1. In other words, it is not the learners’ knowledge of L1 rules that brings about interlingual errors.

Interlingual errors are the effects of learner’s L1 on L2. According to Tarone (1983), L2 acquisition is a creative process and learners form hypothesis just like people learning their L1. The only difference is that L2 learners are inevitably affected by the language they already know, that is their L1. Such errors are also called ‘negative transfer errors’. Lott (1983) defines these negative transfer errors as errors which learners make in L2, but whose reasons can be found in the structures of their L1. As Ellis claims (1997), this kind of errors are common only to learners who share the same mother tongue or whose mother tongues have the same linguistic features. For example, speakers of Bantu languages in southern Africa frequently use the preposition ‘at’ to refer to direction as well as location, producing errors such as: ‘We went at Johannesburg last weekend.’

This is because their native language has only one preposition to express both location and direction while in English ‘at’ is used for location and ‘to’ for direction. As for preposition errors, it can be understood that if a learner uses a wrong preposition depending on the rules of his mother tongue, this is considered an interlingual error. Any other reason will make it an intralingual error.

Cases

In order to better understand the contrastive process that Turkish students go through while producing prepositions, it is important to consider Turkish cases and their English equivalents.

Table 1
Turkish and English cases

Cases	Turkish	English
Genitive	(n)ın, (n)in, (n)un, (n)ün	duvar-ın of the wall
Accusative	(y)ı, (y)i, (y)u, (y)ü	duvar-ı the wall (as an object)
Dative	(y)e, (y)a	duvar-a to the wall
Locative	de, da	duvar-da on the wall in the room at the station
Ablative	den, dan	duvar-dan from the wall
Instrumental	(y)le, (y)la, ile	duvar-la / ile with the wall

Forms of errors

Whether intralingual or interlingual, errors are classified into four different forms by Brown (1994) as addition, omission, substitution, and ordering errors.

- Addition errors occur when an extra element is added.
 - ‘Does can he sing?’ (‘Does’ or ‘can’ is unnecessary)
- Omission errors take place when a necessary element is not used.
 - ‘I went to movie.’ (An article is missing before ‘movie’)
- Substitution errors occur when a wrong word is used instead of the correct word.
 - ‘I lost my road.’ (‘Road’ is used while ‘way’ is needed)
- Ordering errors take place when the elements are not in the correct order.
 - ‘I to the store went.’ (The verb ‘went’ comes after the subject)

Collocations of Prepositions

As for collocations of prepositions, Koosha and Jafarpour (2006) believe that collocational competence can influence EFL learners' overall language ability. Collocations have an effective role in the successful and native-like performance of EFL learners. Since the use of collocations was highly correlated with EFL learners' language proficiency, collocations should be considered as an important factor in determining their overall proficiency.

To make a collocation, prepositions are usually used with an adjective, a noun, or a verb. If students do not learn the collocation as a chunk but as separate words, it is likely that they will try to use the L1 equivalent of the preposition.

Considering that the purpose of this study is to find out how successful Turkish EFL students are in the use of prepositions, and how much impact Turkish has on their errors, following research questions were formed.

1. How capable are the students of using the correct preposition?
2. What's the percentage of errors caused by mother tongue interference?
3. What's the percentage of errors caused by mother tongue interference in terms of error forms?
4. What's the percentage of errors caused by mother tongue interference in terms of word forms the prepositions are used with?

Methodology

Participants

A group of 30 students in a private university prep school participated in this study. They were in the upper-intermediate level, which was the top level in the prep school. They were placed in this level as a result of the proficiency test given at the beginning of the academic year.

Test

The students were given a test consisting of 60 questions about the prepositions likely to be misused due to mother tongue interference. The questions on the test were based on the interlingual errors on collocations of prepositions in various student essays, which had carefully been collected and sorted by the researcher over the years. This complies with the idea of Calkins (1980) argues that the best way to improve students' grammar is to teach the grammar subjects focusing on the students' own piece of writing. In addition, academics working in English Language and Turkish Language departments were asked their opinions on the content of the test. The questions in the test were not multiple choice but were designed in a way that the students could write a suitable preposition in the gaps. The purpose here was to make the students produce the answer on their own rather than seeing and remembering it in a choice. Similarly, Grabe (2009) believes that gap-filling is a more beneficial question

type in measuring the knowledge of some target structures such as prepositions. Considering that this research focused on student errors due to mother tongue interference in essay writing, where students normally do not choose a preposition among given choices but write one from their minds, the design of the questions can be said to be appropriate to the purpose of the research.

Data Analysis

First, all the answers were divided into categories of “correct answer”, interlingual error”, and “intralingual error”. Then, three different categories were displayed in terms of error forms: addition, omission and substitution. Because of the gap-filling nature of the test, it was only possible to analyze these three error forms, so ordering errors were excluded. Finally, 3 categories were formed related to the word forms the prepositions were used with: adjectives, nouns, and verbs.

Findings

This section starts with the presentation of overall findings. Then, findings are presented in terms of error forms and the word forms prepositions are used with.

Overall findings

Table 2

All sentences in the test

Answers	Number	Percentage
Correct	948	52,67
Interlingual error	402	22,33
Intralingual error	450	25,00
Total	1800	100,00

The test had 60 sentences, which made 1800 answers in total. As it can be seen above, nearly half of the answers are wrong. Errors due to mother tongue interference account for almost half of the wrong answers.

Findings in terms of error forms

Table 3

Sentences where students are likely to make addition errors

Answers	Number	Percentage
Correct	137	41,52
Interlingual error	97	29,39
Intralingual error	96	29,09
Total	330	100,00

A sample question about a possible interlingual addition error:

‘I thank _____ my family for their support.’

Here, the correct answer is (-), but writing “to” is considered an interlingual error as in Turkish the dative form “-a” is used with the verb “thank”, which means that English dative case “to” would be a direct translation from Turkish.

In terms of error forms, students were mostly unsuccessful in this part. There were 11 sentences, with a total of 330 answers. More than half of the answers are wrong. The numbers of interlingual and intralingual errors are almost the same.

Table 4

Sentences where students are likely to make omission errors

Answers	Number	Percentage
Correct	166	61,48
Interlingual error	50	18,52
Intralingual error	54	20,00
Total	270	100,00

A sample question about a possible interlingual omission error:

‘We waited _____ our friends in front of the cinema.’

Here, the correct answer is “for”, but writing (-), which means no preposition is necessary, is considered an interlingual error as in Turkish the accusative form “-ı” is used with the verb “wait”. That means writing (-) would be a direct translation from Turkish since English accusative case is used without a preposition.

Students got the best results in this part. There were 9 sentences, with a total of 270 answers. While the numbers of errors in both error types are not so different from each other, the percentage of the correct answers exceeds 60.

Table 5

Sentences where students are likely to make substitution errors

Answers	Number	Percentage
Correct	646	53,48
Interlingual error	253	21,08
Intralingual error	301	25,08
Total	1200	100,00

A sample question about a possible interlingual substitution error:

‘The train had gone when we arrived _____ the station.’

Here, the correct answer is “at” but writing “to” is considered an interlingual error as in Turkish the dative form “-a” is used with the verb “arrive”, which means that English dative case “to” would be a direct translation from Turkish.

Considering error forms, this part has the highest number of questions, 40, which makes a total of 1200 answers. Slightly more than half of the answers are correct. Nearly half of the wrong answers are due to mother tongue interference.

Findings in terms of word forms prepositions were used with

Table 6

Sentences where prepositions were used with an adjective

Answers	Number	Percentage
Correct	220	73,33
Interlingual error	28	9,34
Intralingual error	52	17,33
Total	300	100,00

A sample question about a possible interlingual error where the preposition is used with an adjective:

‘Malatya is famous _____ its apricot.’

Here, the correct answer is “for” but writing “with” is considered an interlingual error as in Turkish the instrumental form “ile” is used with the adjective “famous”, which means that English instrumental case “with” would be a direct translation from Turkish.

In terms of word forms prepositions were used with, students got the best result in this part. There are 10 sentences, with a total of 300 answers, and nearly 3/4 of them are correct. This is the part where interlingual errors have the lowest percentage with 9,34.

Table 7

Sentences where prepositions were used with a noun

Answers	Number	Percentage
Correct	113	37,67
Interlingual error	87	29,00
Intralingual error	100	33,33
Total	300	100,00

A sample question about a possible interlingual error where the preposition is used with a noun:

‘Studying hard is the key _____ success.’

Here, the correct answer is “to” but writing “of” is considered an interlingual error as in Turkish the genitive form “-(n)ın” is used in such a phrase with the noun “key”, which means that English genitive case “of” would be a direct translation from Turkish.

With 10 sentences and a total of 300 answers, this is the part where students got the worst result. Almost 1 out of 3 answers are wrong, and nearly half of the wrong answers are interlingual.

Table 8
Sentences where prepositions were used with a verb

Answers	Number	Percentage
Correct	615	51,25
Interlingual error	284	23,67
Intralingual error	301	25,08
Total	1200	100,00

A sample question about a possible interlingual error where the preposition is used with a verb:

‘She couldn’t marry _____ the man she loved.’

Here, the correct answer is (-) but writing “with” is considered an interlingual error as in Turkish the instrumental form “ile” is used in such a phrase with the verb “marry”, which means that English instrumental case “with” would be a direct translation from Turkish.

With regard to the word forms prepositions were used with, this part has the highest number of questions, 40, which makes a total of 1200 answers. Slightly more than half of the answers are correct, with both error types having similar percentages.

Discussion and conclusions

This study firstly attempted to find out the capability of Turkish EFL students in the use of prepositions when they produce the target language. The second aim of the study was to identify the effect of mother tongue on students’ errors in the production process of prepositions.

The answer to the first question is that the participants in the study, who were Turkish EFL students, were able to answer barely half of the questions correctly. This result proves that the use of prepositions is one of the significant problems the learners have. The second question was about the effect of mother tongue interference, and it can be concluded from the results that the native language of the learners has considerable impact on their production, with nearly half of the errors being interlingual. Some other studies on prepositions carried out in various countries (Blom, 2006; Lakkis & Malak, 2000; Koosha & Jafarpour, 2006) reached similar results in that students had difficulty using the correct preposition, and interlingual errors constitute a significant part of the total number of errors. It should also be remembered that the errors are considered interlingual only when the students write a wrong preposition considering their L1 rules. In other words, there is usually one

specific answer for an error to be interlingual. Any answers other than that specific one will lead to an intralingual error. Considering the results of this study with this difference in mind, it can be claimed once again that mother tongue plays an important role in the learner's choice of prepositions in the production process.

The third and the fourth questions were related to error forms and word forms respectively. It was found that the most common preposition errors were in the form of addition, whereas omission errors were the least frequent ones. As to the word forms prepositions were used with, nouns seemed the most problematic, while adjectives created little problem for the students. This might be because of the emphasis put by textbooks on adjective + preposition chunks, such as 'interested in', 'famous for', 'keen on', etc. Blom's (2006) study with Swedish students also found that prepositions used with nouns were the most challenging for the learners. However, prepositions used with adjectives also proved problematic, while students were most successful in prepositions used with verbs.

It can be stated that the results of this study might have some implications for EFL education, especially in terms of collocations with prepositions. It should be noted that unlike many grammar structures, prepositional chunks in English do not have specific rules. This not only constitutes a challenge for EFL learners, but also brings about the need for raising awareness of such collocations by the teacher in the classroom. If the teacher speaks the same native language as his students, he can easily predict the possible problematic collocations of prepositions. Besides, since a considerable number of errors stem from mother tongue interference, taking learners' L1 into account while teaching prepositions should be one of the priorities of the teacher.

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