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Tertiary Level EFL Learners' Use of Complex Prepositions in KTUCLE, TICLE versus LOCNESS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the competence level of tertiary level Turkish EFL students in terms of using complex prepositions in their expository argumentative essays. Yet, another aim is to find out the extent of which they are successful in using these prepositions in their argumentative essays. Local learner corpus KTUCLE (Karadeniz Technical University Corpus of Learner English) data was used in this study in order to investigate the preposition use and the findings were compared with the findings of a native corpus LOCNESS (The Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays) in an attempt to contrast the usages and reveal overuse and underuse patterns in both corpora. This comparative interlanguage analysis of complex prepositions existing in the range of the corpus data mainly searched for overused and underused or misused prepositions. Prepositions in the semantic field of "reference" and "aboutness" in native English presented different colligational and collocational contexts and environments but the degree of this variety is further enhanced in learner corpora used in the study. Findings also suggested that overuse and underuse patterns of the prepositions in the scope of the study presented various levels of divergence when compared with the native corpus. Implications of this for English language teaching were also added to the end of the study.

Keywords: complex preposition, learner corpora, underuse, overuse

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1. INTRODUCTION

Analysis and description of written and spoken forms of language with various genre categories can be done through corpus and corpus tools. Basically described as a compilation of the "performance" data, corpus is generally known as the naturally occurring language examples of learners that are stored and accessed on computer. This huge amount of authentic data enables the investigations on the expression of meaning in written and spoken forms by concentrating on data compiled according to real life authentic examples. So, corpus as a rich and effective tool gives an opportunity to discover the patterns of language use of non-native and native speakers. "Learner corpora", a component of Corpus Linguistics serves to explore the lexical, grammatical and discourse developments of learners through the analysis of the findings which creates an opportunity for solutions of the problems faced in teaching and learning and understanding the SLA. With this in mind, the aim of the study is to examine the development and the use of complex prepositions in the written production of KTU DELL students. The cooperation between the findings in learner corpus and their contributions to Foreign Language Teaching is considered as vital in this study. Technology and its developments make it possible to obtain and store, access and use objective data automatically for analysis purposes.

Computer learner corpora (CLC), for the Sinclair (1996), are:

“...the electronic collections of authentic FL/SL textual data assembled according to explicit design criteria for a particular SLA/FLT purpose. They are encoded in a standardized and homogeneous way and documented as to their origin and provenance (p.2)”.

It is argued that systematic computerized collections of written texts belonging to the various types of learners of language may have a crucial role in foreign language teaching (Leech, 1998; Aston, 2000). The exploration of hardships that learners of another language experience is significant for EFL learners for various reasons. In the identification of the problems, there is need to analyse and compare the EFL learners' use of language with the native speakers' language use, which is called as Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH).

The problem area that this study focused on is the use of prepositions such as “concerning” and “regarding” by EFL learners. Our empirical knowledge tells us that such prepositions are not given sufficient amount of focus in reference or pedagogical materials widely used for EFL learners. The contention is that more information is needed to deal with the use of this lexical items and to monitor their distribution in native and non-native English since divergence between the usage of target forms by non-native and native speakers are not so clear.

Being an in- house learner corpus, KTUCLE (Karadeniz Technical University Corpus of Learner English) is used to examine the written productions of EFL students with the aim of studying the distribution of complex prepositions. Turkish International Corpus of Learner English (TICLE) as a sub-corpus of ICLE (International Corpus of Learner English) is also employed in this study to see whether the use of “concerning” and “regarding” cause problems in general for L1 Turkish speaking English learners or not. ICLE is one of the large reference corpora and its Turkish sub-corpus (TICLE) is used in this investigation. Adding such a significant corpora to the study makes the pedagogical insights available for other learner population for further studies and pedagogical developments which is depicted as "delayed pedagogical use" by Granger(as cited in Aijmer, 2009,p.13). Thus, using KTUCLE, in-house learner corpora as a complement to larger corpus study makes it possible for in house data to highlight specific language use in learner corpora.

The use of two learner corpora KTUCLE and TICLE and the reference corpora LOCNESS (The Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays) helps to reveal the differences between the non-native and native production. Quantitative and qualitative comparison of the collocational and colligational distribution of complex prepositions underlines the specific areas in which learner usage diverges from target native usage. Also, a native reference corpus makes it possible to establish the norms of native production. The corpus study may serve to highlight specific issues and the results can be utilized to develop pedagogical materials subsequently.

1.1. Prepositions for Non-native Learners

Prepositions are the lexical items which reflect the relations between two grammatical elements, prepositional complement, and the object. Three features of prepositions which are semantic, morphological and syntactic features are introduced by Borjars, K. & Burridge, K. (2001). Considering *Semantic features* Borjars, K. & Burridge, K. (2001) illustrates that the prepositions are the most difficult elements to spot by structural criteria. Relationships between things and events are expressed through the majority of the prepositions whose basic sense is spatial.

It is largely believed that prepositions are difficult for ESL learners (Jarvis & Odlin 2000, p. 554). Sinclair (1991, p. vii) notes that "one of the most common errors that learners make while learning English is to use the wrong preposition". According to Yates (1999) prepositions pose more problems for the non-native speaker or learner of English than any other part of speech. Prepositions are acknowledged as simple words yet learning them is complex for most learners and this complexity largely remains in written and spoken communication. The existence of highly unpredictable and language specific usages of prepositions supports the perception of difficulty in learning prepositions (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

The definition and descriptions of prepositions regarding its forms and meanings are some of the reasons behind the problems involving prepositions. The differences between the use of prepositions in English and in the mother tongue of the ESL users also create complexity. Multiple meanings accompanying the definitions could create confusion on the part of the learners. Being able to use prepositions properly in communication takes more time for EFL learners because of the extension of meanings to time, direction and such although space, place or location are seen as the interests that prepositional meanings have been looked into.

Noun, verb and adjective complement prepositions may be understandable for second language teachers. However, second language learners may have difficulty in finding the relation between prepositions and their complements. Being aware of which words in the category of noun, verb and adjective could be used with certain prepositions is significant for both teachers and learners. The complexity of the descriptions of prepositions regarding its forms and meanings was referred by in Swan (2001) in his words on which prepositions could create problems also to ESL learners, which include "vocabulary problems, word order, -ing forms, prepositions before conjunctions and prepositions and adverb particles" (p. 436).

The main focus of the collocation studies made so far was on the "core" prepositions and their usage patterns. According to the results of the study conducted by Abushihab (2014) the participants made 179 grammatical errors of which 50 errors in the use of prepositions, 52 errors in the use of articles in their written productions. Prepositions have the second highest rank after the articles in the categorized errors. It is argued by the author that this result is caused by the fact that English prepositions have different functions when they are compared with Turkish ones. In Turkish language users treat prepositions as suffixes attached to words, while English users acknowledge them as separate words. This causes complexity for Turkish learners. Therefore, it is expected that Turkish learners could commit such errors. The study conducted by Koroğlu (2014) also reveals that the prepositional errors are at the second rank after the articles. Her study reflects that prepositions are a problematic area for the participants and the results of this study revealed that most of the learners misused prepositions, omitted necessary prepositions or added unnecessary prepositions in their persuasive essays. According to Hermet and Desilets (2009), preposition choice is responsible for 17.2% of all errors. Each language has its own peculiar rules so the situation varies from one language to another language. In writing mostly the preposition errors create a misunderstanding of the message conveyed by the language user and it causes communication gaps. The study of Elkılıç (2012) reveals that Turkish students who are learners of English misuse the prepositions by either omitting or overusing or changing them.

There are also some corpus studies which specifically investigate prepositions or include prepositions in wider studies of learner corpus data. These could indicate that prepositions are problematic for learners of English. In his corpus based study (Yuan, 2014), the effect of L1 over the L2 in written

productions of learners of English has been investigated by exploring preposition misuses and L1 effect. The results show that EFL learners use L1 characteristics in their L2 writings unconsciously and frequently misuse prepositions which are *by, at, in, to, for, on, about, of, with, and as* (Yuan, 2014). Arjan et.al. (2013) conducted a corpus-based study to analyse the use of prepositions of place, *in* and *on* in the students' argumentative essays, The Malaysian Corpus of Students Argumentative Writing (MCSAW) was employed. There were three aspects which had been discussed: the mastery levels, the developmental patterns and the common errors are discussed and the findings have revealed that the learners face some difficulties in using these prepositions of place in their argumentative essays.

Rankin and Schiftners' study revealed the fact that *concerning* and *regarding* are problematic for learners because they overuse these prepositions and there is a constant inappropriate use of these prepositions in various semantic and colligational environments even in higher levels. Reference and aboutness of the semantic field creates difficulties for learners. This situation is explained by illustrating the equivalents of *concerning* in German language with no peculiar distinction existed in materials as the range of this semantic class of German prepositions are seen as equal to *concerning* with no distinct colligational and collocational restrictions. *Concerning* is also overused as a topic prominent device of a new discourse in the learner corpora although it serves to reintroduce a previous information or event (Rankin & Schiftner, 2009).

According to the contrastive interlanguage analysis over- and underuse of complex prepositions exist in all learner corpora. There are some variations and significant overuses of "*concerning*" and an underuses of "*in terms of*" across all learner corpora when it is compared to the reference corpora BNC. *Regarding* is overused too by all learner population but, the result is more striking in the use of *concerning* (Rankin & Schiftner). Based on their L1 language the usage patterns of learners differs. Usage of *concerning* as a topic fronting device carries the traces of L1 transfer for Dutch and German learners. The study illustrates that all groups have difficulties in employing the appropriate prepositions in the 'aboutness' semantic class in collocational and colligational environments. Again, *concerning* is especially problematic in this study and its overuse can be overcome by employing a different preposition (often a 'core' preposition) which would be more appropriate (Rankin & Schiftner, p. 20).

1.2. Complex Prepositions

English prepositions can be simple prepositions, single words, or complex prepositions consisting of more than one word. There is not much clear information of the wider class but they are used in many different ways similar to prepositions and at the same time having relations with other lexical classes like verbs or adverbs (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 667). Complex prepositions may be subdivided into two- and three-word sequences. In two-word sequences, an adverb, adjective, or conjunction can be first words, and the second word can be a simple preposition (usually *for, from, of, to, or with*). In the strictest definition a complex preposition is a sequence that is indivisible both in terms of syntax and in terms of meaning which is similar to prepositions (Quirk et al., 1985, p.669).

This study examines the range of prepositions belonging to this class; *in regard to, with regard to, in reference to*. The full list of prepositions investigated in this study is given in methodology section. The kinds of prepositions under study are used in various ways and one usage is with noun phrases (NP). They are also used as topic fronting device in the initial clause position. To see the extent of explicit attention given to those prepositions as a separate grammatical and lexical class, several grammar reference books used in the English Department of in Karadeniz Technical University were consulted, only to see that these lexical items don't take place in these reference books as a separate grammatical and lexical class.

2. THE STUDY

A corpus-based lexical approach is employed to investigate both NS and NNS corpora in terms of the use of complex prepositions in academic writing. It is expected that through a close examination of L1 and L2 writers' use of complex prepositions, the result can be used as an indicator of L2 learners' language competence in prepositional use.

As mentioned before usage of prepositions in a non-target way was observed in a middle-size university in the north east of Turkey and it was decided to conduct a study by using data from KTUCLE which is made up of written productions of students following degree programs in English Language and Literature Department. Data was sampled at Level 1 as KTUCLE-0 and Level 2 as KTUCLE-1. Taking part in the Department of English Language and Literature degree program necessitates the learners' achieving the Oxford Placement Test held by Karadeniz Technical University. Learners at Level 0 ranged as "intermediate" while learners at Level 1 is "Upper Intermediate". Given that the learner corpora in KTUCLE are relatively restricted in size, the Turkish component of ICLE/TICLE is employed with the purpose of providing additional reference point for Turkish speaking learners. The information about the make-up of the learner corpora is given in Table 1.

Table 1. The learner corpora used in the study

| Corpora | No. of Texts/ Participants | Number of Tokens |
|--------------|----------------------------|------------------|
| KTUCLE – 0 | 193 | 32.657 |
| KTUCLE – 1 | 243 | 120.381 |
| TICLE | 280 | 203.923 |
| LOCNESS | 306 | 326.093 |
| Total | 1.022 | 683.054 |

The LOCNESS (326,093 tokens) corpus was used as the native corpus for comparison. This makes contrastive interlanguage analysis possible through the analysis of the distribution and use of prepositions in various learner corpora by comparing them with the usage in native corpus. The variation, overuse and underuse patterns between the native and non-native usages in certain contexts were identified.

Table 2. The list of prepositions under investigation

| No | Complex Prepositions | Complex Prepositions |
|----|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | concerning | |
| 2 | regarding | |
| 3 | in terms of | |
| 4 | in reference to | with reference to |
| 5 | with regard to | in regard to |
| 6 | in respect to | with respect to |
| 7 | in respect of | |

The full list of prepositions investigated was given in Table 2 above. Concordances of these prepositions were extracted from the learner corpora using AntConc 3.2.2.1w (Laurence, 2008). Occurrences were also found in reference corpus LOCNESS. Then, with the aim of identifying usages of complex prepositions concordances were sorted out manually.

Firstly, grammatical distributions of the prepositions were investigated. It was possible that learners and native speakers used prepositions in different colligational environments. Concordances were given codes according to the grammatical use of complex prepositions. Other grammatical uses were coded according to the lexical class of the phrases that are post-modified by the prepositions such as NP, VP, AdjP, etc. Then, the collocational study of the prepositions was handled by examining the set of occurrences where a preposition post modify a NP and head nouns were divided into semantic categories. It was anticipated that native speakers may have specific collocational choices for the semantic class of nouns followed by complex prepositions and these choices may not exist in the learner data.

3. RESULTS

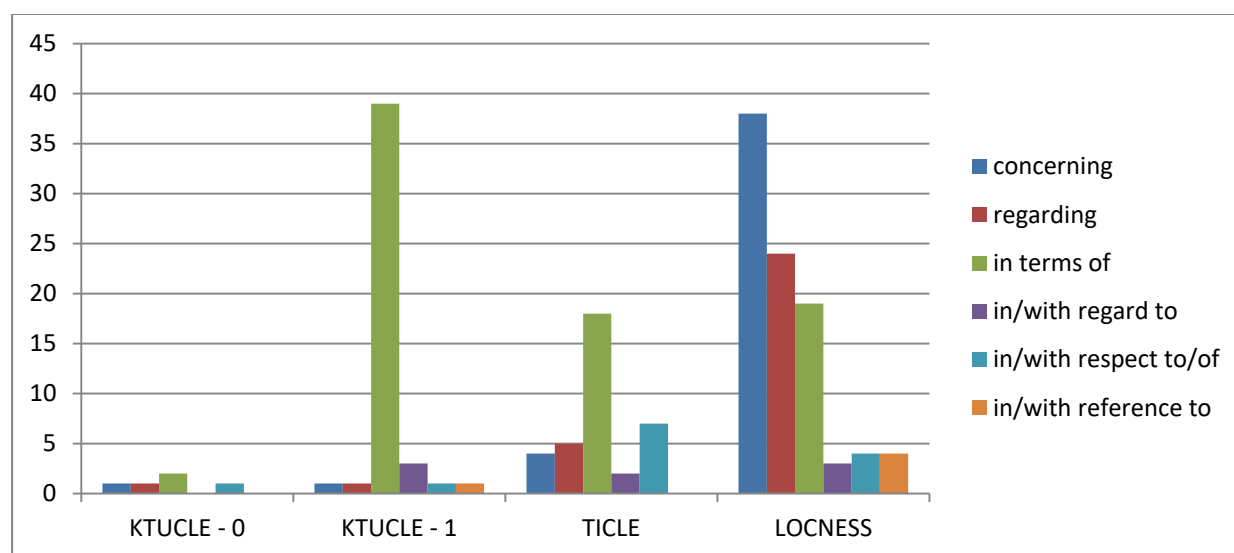
The results of the study revealed some interesting patterns of underuse in all three learner corpora. When the use of complex prepositions in KTUCLE0 and KTUCLE1 is compared, the use of *regarding* and *concerning* remains the same and the usage of them doesn't increase in KTUCLE1, which is an

upper intermediate corpus. The usage of *regarding* is slightly higher than *concerning* in TICLE and the two prepositions have higher percentages than KTUCLE 0-1. Complex prepositions *In/with regard to* and *in/with reference to* are absent in intermediate KTUCLE0 while they exist in KTUCLE1 at the same rank with *concerning* and *regarding*. *In / with reference to* also doesn't exist in TICLE. As Figure 1 indicates there is a development in KTUCLE data considering the use of prepositions. Apart from *in terms of* the underuse of prepositions is revealed through this study with a comparison to the LOCNESS.

There is a striking overuse of a complex preposition “*in terms of*” in KTUCLE1 and TICLE. This complex preposition seems to have been used more than any other complex prepositions in all three learner corpora and it is even higher than the reference corpora when it is compared to KTUCLE1.

In the LOCNESS, the overall occurrence of the six prepositions examined is 2.82 per 10,000 words. The occurrence of the prepositions in all learner corpora except from KTUCLE1 is lower in each of the learner corpora examined. In the Turkish component of the ICLE has an overall occurrence of six prepositions is 1.76. Normalized frequency of KTUCLE0 ranks lowest with 1.53. KTUCLE 1 ranks as the first before LOCNESS with a frequency of 3,82 .

Figure 1. Frequency of the complex and marginal prepositions studied per 10,000w



The distribution was statistically investigated by employing log-likelihood measures and can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Distribution of prepositions (per 10,000 words) and statistical significance

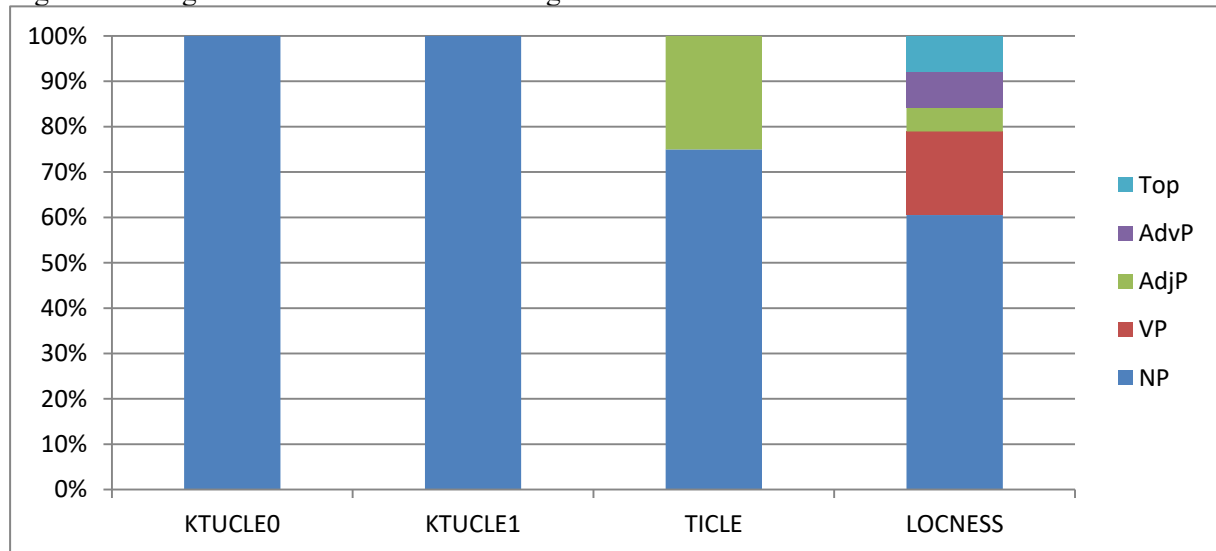
| | KTUCLE 0 | KTUCLE1 | TICLE | LOCNESS |
|------------------------|----------|---------|-------|---------|
| Concerning | 2.75 | 17.20 | 18.14 | 1.16 |
| Regarding | 0.98 | 9.31 | 4.75 | 0.73 |
| In terms of | 0.00 | 40.81 | 1.58 | 0.58 |
| In/ with regard to | 0.57 | 1.43 | 0.00 | 0.09 |
| In/ with respect to/of | 0.55 | 0.13 | 2.84 | 0.12 |
| In/ with reference to | 0.76 | 0.13 | 3.89 | 0.12 |

3.1. Colligation Patterns for “concerning”, “in terms of” and “regarding”

Figure 2 shows the preposition “*concerning*” which is mostly used to post modify NPs in 28 sentences among 43 sentences involving this preposition, as for example “*problems concerning*” or “*arguments concerning*”. The usage of “*concerning*” as a topic fronting device was seen in only three sentences among 43. “*Concerning*” which has a very restricted usage when it is used as a topic fronting device should be employed just to refer the instances in previous discourses. This structure is only traced in the essays in reference corpora LOCNESS. Unlike the study conducted by Rankin and Scifftner’s (2009) “*concerning*” was not used by the students in L2 learner corpora to topicalize a situation

appropriately or inappropriately. This usage is strikingly missing in all of the learner corpora while overuse is revealed in Rankin and Sciftner's study and their usages cannot be considered as proper.

Figure 2. Colligational Patterns of “concerning”



In all learner corpora *concerning* also wasn't used as a topic- fronting device unlike the study conducted by Green et al. (2000). His study revealed that Chinese learners of English overuse this marginal preposition as a topic fronting device to depict a new information rather than referring to previous discussion or events. The sentences including “concerning” as a topic fronting device carry the traces of previous referents as follows;

Concerning foster care, many children are bounced from home to home, with no means for stability in their life. (LOCNESS)

Concerning vital issues like the running of the country, and foreign policy, the government should continue to have the last say and not let the European Communities’ institutions decide. (LOCNESS)

Concerning some matters the same laws will have to apply throughout Europe to make this market effective. (LOCNESS)

In KTUCLE 1 “in terms of” is used as a topic fronting device to refer previous information as follows;

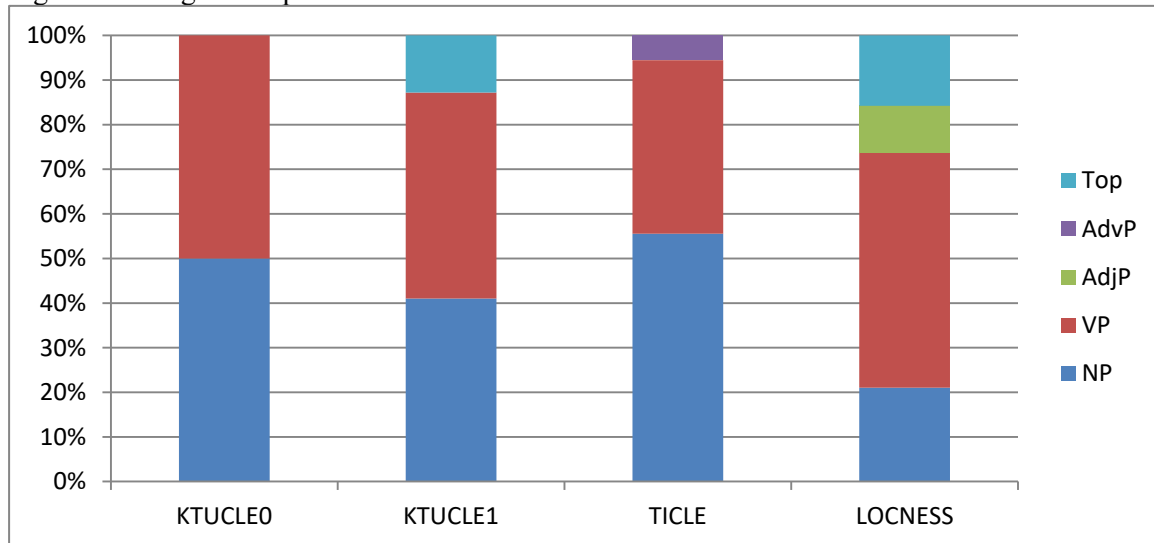
From creating world to now, there are always bad things and good things. ...*In terms of* good and bad (harms or benefits for humankind), world is changing day by day, so one question is in my mind because I am worried about future of world.

Improvement of technology is a necessary and beneficial...*In terms of* phone technology, social web sites, computer technology, a new world was created.

Internet is also useful thing for students’ parents. *In terms of* internet, for instance, student is in İstanbul and his/her parents are in Kastamonu, it seems that they have to miss each other.

But, after I had considered benefits, I could not help myself thinking about harms. This thought directs me a question is that I now need to consider what can be harm(s) of internet. *In terms of* my observations, I determined that there are three harms of internet which are lazing, wasting time, and danger of destruction of our social values.

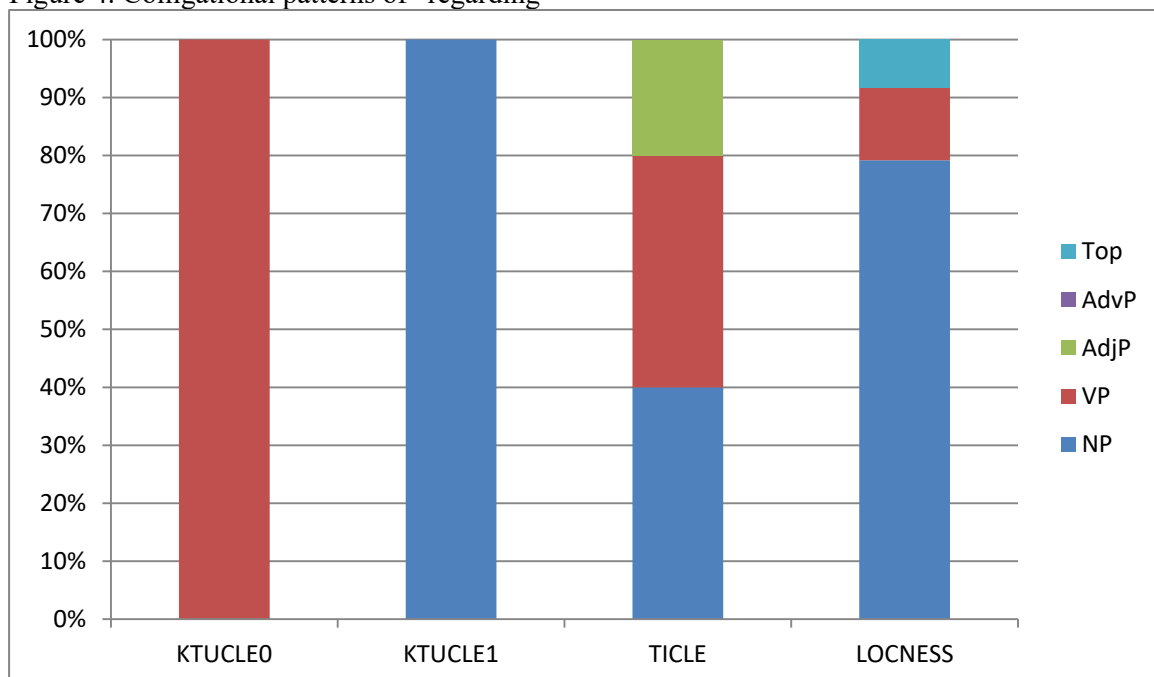
Figure 3. Colligational patterns of “in terms of”



Underuse of concerning may be prevented by focusing on its value as an element to refer previous information instead of *in terms of* which is frequently used to reintroduce previous information. Only the last sentence from KTUCLE1 is topicalizing new information with the help of “*in terms of*”.

“*Regarding*” or “*in terms of*” would be more appropriate for the contexts in which an element or situation introduced to learners as discourse new information. But in all learner corpora the usage of regarding as a topic fronting device is missing too, while it is employed in the essays in reference corpus all the way similar to “*concerning*”.

Figure 4. Colligational patterns of “regarding”



In LOCNESS regarding is used as a topic fronting device to topicalize the information as follows;

Regarding Algeria, presidential supremacy was quickly established. De Gaulle made important decisions without consulting his minister or Prime Minister. (LOCNESS)

Regarding Europe too he was autocratic. Apprehensive ministers would learn at the same time as the rest of the world at De Gaulle press conferences any change of French policies. (LOCNESS)

Interchangeability of complex prepositions as topic fronting devices which are semantically related are not permitted because the usage of “concerning” is appropriate only when it is used to reintroduce the information in the previous discourse. So, it is more appropriate to use “in terms of” and “regarding”.

Divergence of structural usage of the prepositions “concerning” and “regarding” isn't observed in KTUCLE0 and KTUCLE1 and they are used as VPs or NPs not as top or other structures. Yet *in terms of* has more diverse usage structurally and it is the only topic fronting device in KTUCLE0/1 and TICLE. All three prepositions are used as *tops* in reference corpora.

4. CONCLUSION

The wide ranging belief that Turkish EFL learners have problems with using the prepositions appropriately is confirmed by the findings of this study. The findings revealed underuse and overuse patterns over a limited number of prepositions on certain contextual situations and misused prepositions in sentences which are not intended to carry these specific prepositions when compared with the reference corpus LOCNESS. Especially, the use of complex prepositions in the semantic field of “reference” and “aboutness” presented problems for the users. Complex prepositions “concerning, regarding and in terms of” were the selected prepositions on which the study was done and it was observed that these prepositions continued to be used in a non-target way throughout different proficiency levels. The other prepositions were observed to be having relatively low frequency in the non-native corpora (KTUCLE and TICLE) and they were excluded from the initial analysis of the study.

The use of non-native corpora as research tool for this study constitutes an important milestone in the development of English proposition research in Turkey. This comparative investigation towards the non-target usages of the complex prepositions “concerning”, “regarding” and “in terms of” in learner corpora hinted important data related to the overuse and underuse and even misuse patterns of the prepositions. The L1 tertiary level Turkish EFL learners in this study seemed to have continuously underused the prepositions (*regarding* and *concerning*) in all levels when compared to their native partners.

The striking overuse of a complex preposition “in terms of” in KTUCLE 1 and TICLE compared to the reference corpus can be due to the several reasons. This complex preposition seems to have been used more than any other complex prepositions in all three learner corpora and it is even higher than the reference corpora when it is compared to KTUCLE 1. The first reason may be that “in terms of” is very similarly used with its Turkish equivalent “*açısından, yönünden, bakımından*” in writing and for this reason it may have been overextended to include English texts in similar ways by Turkish EFL learners. Another reason may be that

Finally, the researchers' contention is that there is a clear need to integrate proposition teaching into the language teaching programs through explicit instruction, which may help raise EFL learners' awareness towards the lexical and structural limitations and variations in English language in an attempt to achieve greater understanding and appreciation for the complicated structure of English prepositions while writing.

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