

Perversion of Preposition Application as Barrier to Effective Scholarly Writing in Nigerian Higher Institutions

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore writing problems of English major undergraduate students at Federal Universities in Nigeria. The population of this study comprised of 8,231 Fourth Year Undergraduate Students of English Major from the 43 public (Federal) universities in Nigeria who are in their first semester of the academic year 2018/2019. The study was conducted on the randomly selected 600 English major undergraduate students from the five selected universities. The instruments used to gather data in this study were (1) a preposition test which was constructed by the researcher and (2) a questionnaire which was constructed by the researcher in order to elicit information concerning the causes of preposition errors made by students in Nigeria. In order to ensure the validity of the preposition test and the questionnaire, the instruments were shown to a panel of two university professors and two English teachers in secondary schools. The final form of the two instruments was drawn out after taking their comments, opinions and advice into consideration. Cronbach's alpha reliability was computed for the preposition test and the questionnaire revealed that the tools are stable ($\alpha = 0.868$ and $\alpha = 0.764$ respectively). Mean, standard deviation, percentages and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to answer the research questions and test the hypothesis at 0.05 significant level. The findings of this study revealed that Nigerian Undergraduate students encounter problems in using prepositions 'on' and 'in'; the cause of preposition errors are native language interference, the learners' inadequate knowledge of the target language, unawareness of multiple meanings and functions of English prepositions, grammatical weakness and lack of vocabulary and motivation and there is no significant difference in the preposition test scores of students based on their institutions. The study recommended amongst others that there is no significant difference in the preposition test scores of students based on their institutions.

Keywords: Preposition, Scholarly Writing, English, Nigeria, Higher Institutions

Introduction

Using English well in written language can influence the transmission of messages. As learners of English as a foreign language, students should understand the grammatical aspects such as the use of verbs, adjectives, nouns, articles, prepositions, gerunds, and so on. Good understanding will help them to produce meaningful sentences or utterances and create good communication. If not so, errors will occur and disturb the message.

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Errors give more serious effect to the improvement of learners' language ability. Because of that, the occurrence of errors in using English language cannot be ignored. Prepositions have always been widely used in English, even though the number of them is quite limited. Prepositions belong to functional parts of speech and are rather active. In English, some prepositions are among the most common words. Xiangyue (2014) opined that Linguists argue that English language is a prepositional one, which shows that the preposition is one of the most useful and active parts of speech in English. The usage of English preposition has got great concern coming from English learners, teachers, and grammarians. As English majors, it is necessary to learn prepositions well. Nevertheless, things are not always the case. Preposition is a complex area which the learners find difficulty in using them correctly. The importance of using appropriate preposition cannot be ignored. Most of the times the wrong use of prepositions changes the meaning of a sentence. Sometimes the meaning of a sentence depends on the preposition so much so that the using of wrong preposition totally changes the meaning of the sentence. Hence, we may get a message totally opposite to the intended message.

A preposition is a word which is used to show the way in which other words are connected. Preposition may be single words such as "by, from, over, under", or they may be more complex and composed of several words such as "apart from, in front of, in spite of, instead of" (Xiangyue, 2014). Prepositions have objects and are usually followed by a noun, pronoun, or a gerund, but sometimes prepositions' objects can also be a clause, infinitive, adjectives, and prepositional phrases. Prepositions can be categorized on the basis of their functions e.g. Preposition for time (I will reach at four O' clock), place (He lives in Nigeria), direction (Jane went to laboratory), agent (The house was painted by him), and instrument (I opened the locker with key). According to Loke & Anthony (2013), preposition usage is one of the most challenging aspects of English grammar for learners to master. Castro (2013) defined prepositions as words that show the relationship between two words in a sentence. These relationships involve those of time, position, direction, and various degrees of mental and emotional states. Though it is defined clearly in literature why prepositions are so difficult to master, there are many reasons why students still find learning and using prepositions correctly difficult. Özişik (2014) stated that there are no specific rules regarding the usage of prepositions, and this creates problems for both teachers and learners. There are several prepositions in English. According to Hooper (1980) cited in Nina (2017), the several prepositions are: 1) preposition of time – (a) one point in time (at), (b) period of time (on, in), and (c) extended time/duration (since, for, by); 2) preposition of place – (a) the point itself (in, inside, on, at), (b) toward the point (to, into), (c) neighboring the point (by, beside, next, between, near), and (d) away from the point (away, off, across, out of) and some others. Each preposition has its own function and cannot be replaced. The incorrect use of prepositions will influence the quality of the message from the speaker to the listener.

Literature Review

Md. Absar and Mohammed (2015) took several tests from his learners at his university who all are from Bangla language background in order to identify the most problematic linguistic fields where the learners make errors. He examined and analyzed the result and the data showed that preposition is one of the most critical areas where the learners make frequent errors. Hakan (2018) investigated article and preposition errors in the production of Swedish learners of English and compared transfer errors by L1 Swedish and L1 Portuguese learners of English. The study revealed that substitution was the most common preposition error and that many transfer preposition errors supposedly were caused by direct translations. Through the multiple-choice test, the degree to which the first language had an impact on individual errors was also be revealed. Castro (2013) conducted a study to investigate the extent of Filipino's interference in the use of English prepositions in the compositions written by college students at the University of the Philippines. The findings showed that the interference of Filipino is minimal because of the dominance of intralingual over inter-lingual errors. In a study, Özişik (2014) aimed 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.

He gave a 60-sentence gap-filling test to 30 students in the upper-intermediate level of a university preparatory school. 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.

Nina (2017) identified the preposition errors made by students when speaking English. The data were obtained from the interview transcription which was used as the source of data from the research done in 2005 by the writer about grammatical and diction errors made by the first SMAN 2 Padang when speaking English. The finding showed that errors in the use of preposition *in* and *at* occurred more often.

The finding also proved that the occurrence of errors in the use of prepositions in spoken English language is influenced by the speakers' first or second language. Abdelrazig (2017) investigated the problems encountered by students in using English prepositions of time (on - at - in). The study adopted a descriptive, analytical and quasi-experimental method. The sample of the study consisted of (40) students at Posha Academe in the first semester of the academic year 2017 – 2018. To collect data, the researcher employed a test. The findings revealed that the majority of the students encounter problems in using prepositions of time. Sumaira, Waqas and Muhammad (2017) investigated the nature of errors in the writing skill problems of graduate learners, two hundred and fifty graduate (male and female) learners were randomly selected from four colleges and one university. The participants were asked to complete two writing skill tasks: Fifth word deletion and open composition test. The findings of the study showed that the participant made wrong use of prepositions, specifically 'with, in, of' and unnecessary insertion of prepositions. The authors observed that errors are because of the interference of L1 in L2. Bram (2005) examined prepositional errors in the writings of 50 students. He analyzed the most frequently occurring prepositional problems in three categories as the use of an incorrect preposition, the omission of a required preposition, and the use of an unnecessary preposition. The findings showed that the misuse of prepositions was the most frequent category, and the three categories of preposition problems proved to stem from the interference of the learners' mother tongue.

Another study by Tahaineh (2010) in investigating the types of errors of prepositions and determining the possible sources of the prepositions showed that interference from the native language and the influence of the target language itself were the main sources of prepositional errors. In addition to the problematic categories of prepositions and their possible sources, he was also interested in the relationship between different proficiency levels. He found out that learners' performance differs significantly from one item to another among the three proficiency levels.

In another study conducted by Estevez, Gomez & Gonzalez (2010), the use of prepositions by the students of an upper intermediate English course from the ELT program at Universidad Industrial De Santander was analyzed. It had as a basis a quantitative study whose results were analyzed qualitatively to find common cases of errors of prepositions. The data for this research was collected from the writing production section of the 3 exams which students took during the semester. 54 pieces of writing were collected. Quantitative findings showed 13 prepositions (to, on, about, in, of, at, for, from, with, by, above, because of, into) were the most problematic ones out of 71 errors of prepositions identified. It was found that the most common error was the misuse of prepositions, which was present 30 different times, while the omission of prepositions appeared 25 different times, and the addition of prepositions occurred 16 different times. The study by Khotaba (2013), conducted from a performance analysis perspective aimed to investigate the frequency and kind of preposition and adverb particle errors. The findings of the study showed that the occurrence of the errors was related to native language interference or the learners' inadequate knowledge of the target language, and their unawareness of multiple meanings and functions of English prepositions.

Moreover, Nonkukhetkhong (2013), in his research found that about 47.41% of grammatical errors in the use of verbs, nouns, possessive case, articles, prepositions, and adjectives are made by students in their essays. The result of the study showed that preposition is one of grammatical aspects that are often used by students incorrectly. Hamzah (2012) found that errors on the prepositional use are 12.31%. It is in the fourth place among 14 categories of errors that mostly made by students in English writing. The findings proved that errors in prepositions commonly happen in using English and it becomes serious problem to be discussed. Hafiz, Abdur, Shabana and Sadia (2013) examined the English prepositional errors exhibited in the written specimen of secondary school students of Pakistan while learning English as their second language.

The study sample was composed of 100 written compositions collected from randomly selected different private and Government secondary schools in Sargodha. The study identified, described, categorized and explained the errors found in the gathered written data. The findings concluded that interference of Urdu (L1 of learners) is maximum as the results exhibit the dominance of inters language in prepositional errors. Al Shorman (2012) investigates the sources of syntactic Errors in Yemeni learners' English compositions. His study provides empirical data for the most syntactic errors committed by Yemeni Arabic-speaking University Learners of English to account for the psychological strategies the learners make use of in such a phenomenon. In order to find out the reasons behind committing such errors, 50 Yemeni learners were selected randomly from the Third Year classes of Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida University and asked to write argumentative compositions on some topics related to their families and ambitions. The students' errors were analyzed and the errors were classified into five categories, preposition was the first main category of errors. The prepositions main category was in turn classified into three subcategories: omission, addition and substitution depending on the errors identified in the data.

Myron (2012) investigated the uses and errors associated with the words *in* and *on* in academic writing. Research was conducted by extracting 2,000 samples from student academic writing through the corpus, MICUSP (Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers). Native English speakers wrote half of the student samples and non-native English speakers wrote the other half of the student samples. The result of this study showed that *in* and *on* occurred at different frequencies. 'In' occurred 81% versus only 19% for 'on'. The results from this study also showed that prepositions occupied the significant majority for the types of uses for the two words at 95% for *in* and 92% for *on*. No significant variations exist between native and non-native writers. Thus, second language learners successfully use *in* and *on* in academic writing like their native counterparts. Errors with *in* and *on* are isolated to prepositional uses for both words with the exception of two outliers including particle use and another use. Within the prepositional errors found, choosing the wrong word (e.g., preposition) was the most common error for non-native speakers. Yildiz (2015) in his study found that prepositional interference errors are the most frequently encountered error types in Turkish EFL learners' speaking performances. This is caused by the interference of L1. He also found that English language proficiency does not influence the number of errors made by students. Onike (2017) examines in his study the misuse of preposition by the learners of English Language especially under second language learning situations. It focuses on factors responsible on persistent errors in the students' use of prepositions. Attempt is also made to analyze types of prepositional errors observable in students' use of English. The study also shows the students' knowledge and awareness of the rules guiding the use of prepositions of English as a second language. The results' analysis of the study reveals that the use of prepositions after adjective is the most commonly misused prepositions. This is followed by misuse of prepositions after verbs which are next in rank table correlation.

Tunaz, Muyan and Murataglo (2016) investigated the categories of preposition errors made by EFL learners of elementary and intermediate proficiency levels by comparing the rate of preposition errors (addition, omission, substitution) to their total preposition uses in their essays, and by comparing the overall preposition usage of learners of both proficiency levels. The study was conducted with 75 learners of elementary level (A2) and 75 learners of intermediate level at Erciyes University School of Foreign Languages. 75 exam papers for each group were randomly chosen as the sample of the research. The results of the independent-sample t-test indicated that; a) there was no difference between groups in terms of addition type error; b) learners of elementary level made statistically more omission type errors than learners of intermediate learners; c) learners of intermediate level made statistically more substitution type errors than learners of elementary level; d) percentages of preposition errors to total preposition usage in elementary level essays were statistically higher than those of intermediate level. McDonough, Choi and Mandler (2003) compare native English with native Korean speakers and found that concepts of containment and support and concepts of tight and loose fitting heavily influence how each group will interpret a motion event and therefore utilize prepositions differently. Cronnell (1985) cited in Myron (2012) analyzed the writing of Mexican-American students (from 3rd and 6th grades) and categorized their English errors into a variety of areas. Cronnell emphasizes, "the biggest vocabulary problem... was the use of prepositions" (p. 172) from the student's errors. If L2 students in these lower grades are finding difficulty in using the correct prepositions, then obtaining data from college level students will be useful for comparison.

Maysaa (2014) investigated some problematic uses of English prepositions in Iraqi EFL college students' recognition and production of English preposition, i.e. their compositions and recognition at four levels of proficiency. The prepositional errors for each level, their frequency and percentage were calculated and compared across these levels to identify developmental and fossilized errors in the learners' recognition and production of English prepositions. The analysis of the students' answers shows that (8) prepositions are fossilized, i.e. the students didn't develop their competence of these prepositions throughout the learning process. As for the production test, i.e. students' compositions, (15) Prepositional error types are identified, of which the most frequently made is the wrong selection of prepositions after verbs. Out of the fifteen error types, six are identified as developmental and nine as fossilized. The study concludes that most of the students commit fossilized errors mostly in prepositions such as phrasal, compound and participial which show the permanent retention of prepositional errors in their recognition and compositions. A study found 29% of the errors made by intermediate and advanced L2 students were preposition errors (Bitchener, Young and Cameron, 2005). De Felice & Pulman (2008) confirmed how challenging prepositions puzzle L2 learners. They used a small corpus and found that 12% of errors were related to incorrect preposition use. They also note that errors are high with determiners (17% of the total errors from their data).

Problem of the Study

As a Linguistic lecturer in a Nigerian University, I have witnessed students make a variety of errors with their writing. I have also observed the extensive errors in student writing. One of the most prominent errors that the undergraduate students make at all of the proficiency levels is that they frequently use the wrong prepositions in their writing. The two prepositions most frequently confused by the undergraduate students in my experiences are 'in' and 'on'. The number of errors committed by the undergraduate students potentially increases with greater frequency of usage and/or greater number of usage types. The reasons connected to the confusion with preposition selection are worth researching for the purpose of reducing student errors. The present study intends to fill part of this gap by studying the uses of 'in' and 'on' in order to understand how L2s (undergraduate Nigerian students) are misusing the words in academic writing.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To find out if undergraduate students do encounter problems in using preposition in their written English.
2. To examine the causes of preposition errors.
3. To find if there is a difference in the preposition test scores of students based on their institutions.

Research Questions

To guide the study, the following research questions were raised:

1. Do students encounter problems in using prepositions 'in' and 'on'?
2. What are the causes of the preposition errors?
3. Is there any difference in the preposition test scores of students based on their institutions?

Hypothesis

1. There is no significant difference in the preposition test scores of students based on their institutions.

Methodology

This research used descriptive design. The population of this study comprised of 8,231 Fourth Year Undergraduate Students of English Major from the 43 public (Federal) universities in Nigeria who are in their first semester of the academic year 2018/2019. Simple random sampling technique was used to select five universities, such as Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University, Bauchi State, Federal University, Lokoja, Kogi State, Federal University, Ndifu-Alike, Ebonyi State, Federal University, Otuoke, Bayelsa State and University of Lagos. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 120 undergraduate English Major Students from the five selected universities, which gave a total sample of 600. The instruments used to gather data in this study were (1) a preposition test which was constructed by the researcher and (2) a questionnaire which was constructed by the researcher in order to elicit information concerning the causes of preposition errors made by students in Nigeria.

In order to ensure the validity of the preposition test and the questionnaire, the instruments were shown to a panel of two university professors and two English teachers in secondary schools. The final form of the two instruments were drawn out after taking their comments, opinions and advices into consideration. Cronbach's alpha reliability was computed for the preposition test and the questionnaire which revealed that the tools are stable ($\alpha = 0.868$ and $\alpha = 0.764$ respectively). This revealed the preposition test and the questionnaire are reliable tool to measure the construct consistently. The preposition test comprises fifteen statements about the prepositions of time ('on' and 'in'). The students were asked to write the correct preposition in its correct place. Mean, Standard deviation, percentages and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were the statistics which were used to analyse the collected data.

Results

Research Question One: Do students encounter problems in using prepositions ‘in’ and ‘on’?

Table 1: Test on preposition

S/N	Tense Sentences	Correct Preposition	Test Scores	
			True Answers N (%)	False Answers N (%)
1	My sister studies ---- England.	In	120 (20%)	480(80%)
2	You should pay your bills ---- time.	On	250(41.67%)	350(58.33%)
3	I can see many colours ---- the pictures.	In	380(63.33%)	220(36.67%)
4	The sun rises ---- the east.	In	240(40%)	360(60%)
5	My mother invests her money ---- the bank.	In	100(16.67%)	500(83.33%)
6	Have you ever been ---- a boat before?	On	330(55%)	270(45%)
7	We crossed the river ---- a boat.	In	210(35%)	390(65%)
8	He insisted ---- carrying his bag.	On	450(75%)	150(25%)
9	She spoke ---- behalf of our club.	On	270(45%)	330(55%)
10	We stood ---- a queue for 30 minutes.	In	390(65%)	210(35%)
11	I listen to the radio ---- my way to school.	On	470(78.33%)	130(21.67%)
12	Do you like swimming ---- the swimming pool?	In	189(34.5%)	411(68.5%)
13	I work ---- the morning.	In	130(21.67%)	470(78.33%)
14	We were ---- the 2 nd floor.	On	210(35%)	390(65%)
15	Kenneth was born ---- 2019.	In	280(46.67%)	320(53.33%)
TOTAL			45%	55%

Table 1 shows the students’ preposition test scores in the five selected universities in Nigeria. Table 1 also shows the total number of participants that got the items correctly and incorrectly. The table also shows that the participants failed more question on preposition with 55%. This means that Nigerian Undergraduate students do encounter problems in using prepositions ‘on’ and ‘in’.

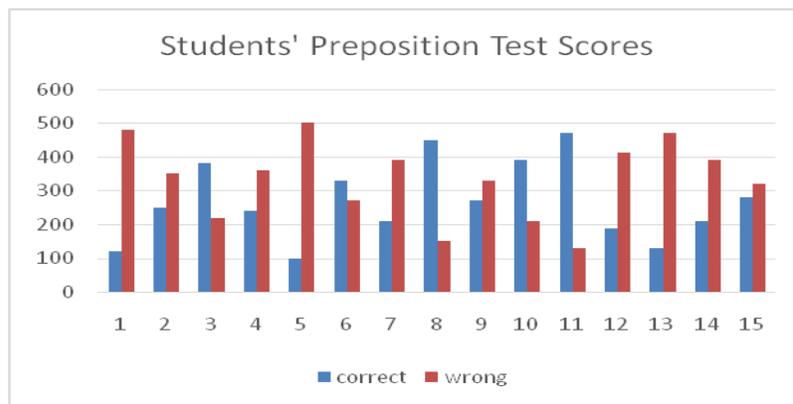


Figure 1: Students’ Preposition Test Scores

Figure 1 shows the students’ preposition test scores in which the number of failures in the preposition test scores is more than the number of passes in most of the preposition questions.

Research Question Two: What are the causes of the preposition errors?

Table 2: Causes of Error

Causes of Error	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
Native language interference	2.71	1.24	Accepted
The learners’ inadequate knowledge of the target language	2.53	1.25	Accepted
Unawareness of multiple meanings and functions of English prepositions.	2.51	1.21	Accepted
Grammatical weakness	2.64	1.24	Accepted
Lack of vocabulary and motivation	2.54	1.26	Accepted

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of the perceived causes of preposition errors. The mean of all the items are greater than the criterion mean of 2.5, therefore, they are accepted as the causes of the preposition errors.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in the preposition test scores of students based on their institutions.

Table 3: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) showing the difference in the preposition test scores of students based on their institutions.

Variable	Sum of Square	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (p-value)
Between Groups	57813.943	4	14453.486	20.677	0.738
Within Groups	41589.575	595	69.898		
Total	99403.518	599			

$\alpha=0.05$

Table 3 shows that the F-value is 20.677 and p-value is 0.738. Testing the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significant, the p-value (0.738) is greater than the alpha level of 0.05, consequently, there is no significant difference. Therefore, there is no significant difference in the preposition test scores of students based on their institutions.

Discussion of Findings

Research question one revealed that Nigerian Undergraduate students do encounter problems in using prepositions 'on' and 'in'. The findings of this study is in agreement with the findings of Md. Absar& Mohammed (2015) who took several tests from his learners at his university who all are from Bangla language background in order to identify the most problematic linguistic fields where the learners make errors. He examined and analyzed the result and the data showed that preposition is one of the most critical areas where the learners make frequent errors. Moreover, Yildiz (2015) in his study found that prepositional interference errors are the most frequently encountered error types in Turkish EFL learners' speaking performances.

Research question two revealed that native language interference, the learners' inadequate knowledge of the target language, unawareness of multiple meanings and functions of English prepositions, grammatical weakness and lack of vocabulary and motivation are the possible causes of preposition errors made by the undergraduate Nigerian students' errors. The findings of this study is in agreement with the findings of Khotaba (2013), who conducted from a performance analysis perspective aimed to investigate the frequency and kind of preposition and adverb particle errors. The findings of the study showed that the occurrence of the errors was related to native language interference or the learners' inadequate knowledge of the target language, and their unawareness of multiple meanings and functions of English prepositions.

Hypothesis one revealed that there is no significant difference in the preposition test scores of students based on their institutions. The findings of this study are in line with the findings of Myron (2012), who investigated the uses and errors associated with the words *in* and *on* in academic writing. The results of the study showed that prepositions occupied the significant majority for the types of uses for the two words at 95% for *in* and 92% for *on* and there were no significant variations between native and non-native writers.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that Nigerian Undergraduate students do encounter problems in using prepositions 'on' and 'in' and the possible causes of preposition errors among the Nigerian undergraduate students are native language interference, the learners' inadequate knowledge of the target language, unawareness of multiple meanings and functions of English prepositions, grammatical weakness and lack of vocabulary and motivation

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Students should give more attention to English in general, and prepositions in particular
2. To enrich vocabulary, students should spend some amount of their time based on their limitations. They should make a good use of English Dictionary such as Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary to look up the meaning of unknown and difficult words. In addition, they should maintain a diary to note down the usage of these words.
3. Adequate teaching aids and modern equipment should be provided in universities to motivate the students to use English with the teachers.
4. Teachers should deliver intensive exercises to students concerning prepositions.

5. Feedback will help students improve their own writing. The weak students should be divided into small groups and put under the supervision of the teachers / lecturers for the whole period of their study at the university. It is always helpful to encourage students to use different activities and strategies to improve their writing, e.g. keep a journal, poster presentation, use a word processor, etc. The English teachers need to spend a great deal of time checking, marking and giving feedback to their students.
6. Curricula designers should pay more attention for prepositions in designing syllabuses.

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