



Spatial and temporal prepositions: CLT for Arab English learners

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Abstract

A preposition is a marker in a sentence or expression which belongs to the closed word class, a class that does not readily accept new members. It denotes the relation between persons, objects, and locations in a sentence. The linguistic function of the preposition is the time or location of the action, which in speeches or written speeches is important to produce well-formed sentences. This research adds up to the body of knowledge about the grammatical abilities of Arab EFL students by examining their use of spatial and temporal prepositions in Arabic. The study employs a mixed-methods strategy by holding pre- and post-tests to evaluate the efficacy of the intervention, and informally interviewing forty-six Arab EFL learners at a public university in Malaysia. The participants were all male students of two EFL courses with the median age of the group falling at 18.4 years. Pre-test evaluation showed that the participants made specific spatial and temporal prepositional errors. The post-test scores of the learners, on the other hand, showed significant improvement in the learners' scores with far fewer spatio-temporal prepositional errors. Further, the participants seemed to respond better with the Communicative Language Teaching methods for learning English prepositions. The study concludes with some pertinent recommendations for the Arab EFL ecosystem in Malaysia or abroad.

Keywords: Prepositions; Time; Place; Arab EFL; English language; grammatical competence; CLT

1. Introduction

As a grammatical category, prepositions are a vital part of any language. They are the basic indicators of a form of a sentence. Unique relationships between individuals, artifacts, and sites are defined by prepositions. Prepositions in English are also described as a term defining the place of an entity in relation to another. In the case of English, they may be classified into two categories: prepositions of one word like (*of, to, and in*). The others are the complicated or lengthy prepositions that occur as phrases with two or more terms that operate like the one-word prepositions (*according to, but notwithstanding*). Though prepositions are categorized in standard grammar as a component of speech nevertheless, prepositions vary in two main ways from the other sections of speech. Each preposition is formed of a limited set of words with no formal ends. Consequently, each planning signals underlying system structures which work as one of the other sections of the voice. Arab Language Learners (ALLs) have trouble recognizing prepositions in English (Serhan et al., 2019;

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Alahmadi, 2014; Alkhudiry & Al-Ahdal, 2020; Javid & Umer, 2014) and find it challenging to use these properly. There are many reasons for this: One, many English phrases come quite close to standard prepositions, confusing the non-native learners. We take the example of the English preposition *at* which has eighteen uses as per any standard English dictionary. At the same time, separate preposition uses like *in the morning*, *Monday morning*, *in the evening* can be somewhat close to the intended meaning. Further, in some prepositions including *coming in*, certain verbs and adjectives are used, and the most significant issue is the lack of basic conditions that enable ELLs to distinguish the preposition they should or could use. Two, prepositions in English are rough, i.e., ambiguous. Since prepositions in English have more than one value with many English prepositions having a variety of meaning-based connotations. When trying to decide which preposition to use and how ELLs often end up confused as a result of this ambiguity. Prepositions may be hard to recognize according to Guarasci et al., (2020) especially in oral language, as they usually include very few syllables. However, the usage of prepositions differs from language to language, i.e. the same preposition can vary significantly or offer entirely different significance in specific languages.

The confusion, however, does not end here. Where English has twenty grammatical categories, there are only three broad ones in Arabic. Thus, prepositions form a separate and unique group in English but are classified as a part of the broad category of Particles in Arabic (the other two being Nouns and Verbs). The category of Particles in Arabic also includes other ‘linking words’ such as conjunctions and interjections. In general, prepositions make up almost 14 percent of all textual production in Arabic while random sampling indicated that this percentage is much lower at a little over 3 percent in English. The prepositions in English and Arabic inhabit two different worlds, as it were. One evidence of this is the sheer, frightfully large number of prepositions in English as compared to the limited variety in Arabic. The Cambridge Dictionary lists no less than 100 English prepositions while Arab grammarians claim that the language has only five basic prepositions. Further, perfect correspondence is difficult to achieve between English and Arabic prepositions since prepositions may be highly idiomatic in both languages. EFL Arab learners face difficulties in using English prepositions (Aleraini, 2020; Alharbi, 2019; Alzamil, 2020; Hussain & Abdullah, 2019; Serhan et al., 2019). This problem is a core concern for university students as it adversely impacts on both their communication and grades. This is often attributed to the first language intrusion or the vast differences between English and Arabic. Consequently, an explanation often offered is that English and Arabic belong to two different language groups. Arabic is a Semitic language, not an Indo-European one like English. In this situation, many experiments in the field of learning and transition have been carried out in general to determine the errors that language learners make while they engage with English speakers as their target language. However, there has been no work into Arab students' errors in speaking English. It is therefore important that EFL teachers frequently analyze and propose different pedagogical approaches in the EFL classroom (Richards, 2017).

English prepositions appear simple being a functional word category and therefore are not at the centre of attention of the Arab EFL teachers or students. It is also likely that they avoid in-depth study of prepositions since they find them to be too complicated and troublesome. This study therefore explores and discusses the challenges in the usage of English prepositions confronting ELLs at the university level in Malaysia. There have been prior research works on Arab EFL learners' usage of prepositions, but they looked at the global category (Ahmed & Maros, 2017; Alramadan, 2020; Harb, 2020; Kassem, 2019). This study, however, discusses only the problems faced by EFL learners when using the English spatial and temporal prepositions.

2. Objectives of the Present Study

This study illustrates the challenges confronting Arab ELLs in Malaysia at the university level. It helps to uncover why these problems arise and enables EFL teachers to improve effective approaches for teaching English prepositions. In brief, the following questions are sought to be answered: (1) What are the problems faced by the Arab EFL learners in learning the English prepositions of time and place? (2) Which are the important pedagogical methods that ELLs and EFL instructors should use in a classroom to ensure the best learning outcomes in the case of prepositions?

3. Literature Review

Rabadi and Althawbih (2018) initiated the Remedial Linguistic Program to Improve the Translation of Arabic Prepositions by Translators. The research was intended to identify the problems faced by Arabic translators when translating Arabic prepositions into English. The research was split between a group that followed a correctional language program and a control group. The findings demonstrated statistically significant differences in the mean scores between the experimental group and the control group. The corrective language system was seen to facilitate the proper usage of prepositions by translators working from English to Arabic. Similarly, Aajami (2018) found that the Communicative Linguistic methodology is more successful in teaching learners the sense of the English preposition. Aajami (2018) further affirmed that it is difficult to understand English prepositions because they have many definitions or because they are polysemous. They are the most common English words and have a wide range of applications causing L2 students great difficulty in using the prepositions in English (Brenda, 2019; Mariani, 2020; Jubier, 2019; Monaikul & Di Eugenio, 2020; Premjith et al., 2019). This question is often approached using the Communicative language approach by exploring English preposition and supporting networks in spatial settings, semantic relations, and figurative perception. English prepositions establish spatial relations between an individual and a symbol. The various definitions correlated with English prepositions can be systematically expressed in a driven semantic network (Lee et al., 2020; Chanturidze et al., 2019).

Prepositions according to Hattab (2012) are short words which connect certain elements to a certain sense. She says that prepositions are required to provide adequate sense to language used and play an important role in the shared understanding of speakers. She states that their learning causes problems only for advanced students of English as their usage varies from the mother tongue to the language they have mastered. The question is how to use or how to interpret them: first, some prepositions are used in more than one context. Furthermore, sometimes there may be no one to translate. However, it is impossible to establish the exact description. Hattab (2012) reiterated that prepositions are syntactic and semantic word categories. Semantic relations are defined by space, time, comparison, content, agent, device, cause, reference, and function. Hansard (2012), on the other hand, classifies prepositions into two kinds according to their uses in sentences, which are for position or place and for direction. While the former is used with verbs of motion, the latter appears with verbs of condition and state of being. Both prepositions may lead to syntactic and semantic errors depending on the extent to which the EFL learners are exposed to ample and relevant use of prepositions in their daily language use.

Al-Bayati (2013) described the errors produced in the implementation of prepositions by Iraqi students of EFL and the explanations behind these errors. The English Language Department in Kufa University requested students to answer theoretical and empirical problems in essay type. The texts of 32 learners were selected for the error analysis. The findings showed that it is difficult for students to use English prepositions. When there is first language interference, they made interlingual mistakes. The errors were grouped into three categories: elimination, substitution, and expansion. In a similar vein, a study on the Iraqi students' (studying in Malaysia) acquisition of English prepositions showed

that first language interference was the cause of students' preposition errors (Shakir & Yaseen, 2015). The interference between L1 and L2 led to a wrong transfer that affected semantic and syntactic structures in language use.

Similarly, Al Yaari & Almaflehi (2013) established difficulties among Arab EFL students in the translation of common English prepositions into Arabic, such as *over*, *in*, and *on*. They explored the correct understanding of these three prepositions between men and women. Fifty Arab EFL students, twenty-five men, and women each were requested to render twenty sentences into Arabic, including the words *over*, *within*, and *on*. Results showed that the conversion from English to Arabic is problematic for Arab EFL students because of the lack of a clear counterpart and a lack of experience in prepositions. They also revealed that the women were better off than men in getting the English prepositions right.

In Malaysia too, a similar phenomenon was reported by Hassan and Abdullah (2016) in their comparative investigation of Arab native speakers in a Malaysian university use of English and Arabic prepositions. Their findings revealed that when translation is used, Arab learners have problems with precise mapping between Arabic-English and English-Arabic prepositions. This suggests a non translational approach to be used in such classrooms.

Likewise, Khrisat (2017) spotted the grammatical mistakes of students in English-language prepositions and concluded that prepositions were the most frequently wrongly used and hardest for the students. The analysis illustrates and explains the essential usage of time and location prepositions (*in*, *on*, *at*). Data gathered from two studies suggest that students had problems in interpretation and faced serious issues due to predispositions such as relocation, use of incorrect prepositions, lack of other vocabulary parts, and substitution structures, such as verbs and substantives indicated by the study's performance. The instructors and students, who are considered as critical influences in the process of teaching, shared their thoughts as to why these issues arise; their responses showed that a lack of knowledge of prepositions and their specific interpretations coupled with poor English resulted in excessive use of the appropriate location or the right time preposition. During the interviews, these results were discussed and solutions were suggested.

Mahmoodzadeh (2012) also completed an L2/TL error study of Iranian EFL students (N=53) who were interim English learners of the Mashhad Foreign Language Institute (FLI). The researchers aimed to examine the status of various forms of errors produced by students with respect to transitional constraints between Persian and English. The work compiled and examined data using a translation methodology. The findings showed that many of the errors related to the incapacity to precipitate L2. Earlier research on concerns relating to establishing second language prepositions through transfers for Iranian EFL students between L1 and L2 was also endorsed by the findings.

Shousha et al., (2020) addressed the most frequent written errors of Arab University students that prevented them from fulfilling their goals, achieving the desired outcomes of learning, and boosting their writing efficacy. Such research is important as it demonstrates the difference of writing between students of science and the arts and addresses the writing issues linked to formal education, family involvement, language content, and training strategies for teachers. It is a quantitative study. This shows the sources of errors and suggests effective solutions from the students' point of view. The tests will help teachers, students, and course creators. The errors applied primarily to interlingual and intralingual media. This was explained in particular as the absence of understanding of English, inadequate usage of main and written linguistic concepts, memorization of subjects in learning, interference, and precise retention from the mother tongue. Suggested approaches included a fair and timely explanation of the student's typical errors and a timely contribution to the student's particular level, interests, and desires. Moreover, students should take care of variations in English-Arabic

grammar and phrase systems, gaining greater access to the target language (L2), and facilitating appropriate, and funny educational content for correcting errors.

4. Methodology

This study follows a hybrid approach with the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. The current sample comprised 46 Arab EFL graduates from the second year EFL courses at the University. While the sample size cannot be deemed representative of the original population of concern, the generality question was not the primary objective of this analysis. The main goal of this research paper is to evaluate if a common teaching strategy is more effective than other techniques in a certain university classroom. This research focuses on helping Arab EFL students overcome the difficulties of studying English ideas by more effective teaching methods. Research ethics protocols were followed strictly since this study passed through the research ethics review committee of the university.

The study uses two instruments: Open-ended interviews and pre- and post-tests. A specially designed communicative language teaching-oriented set of activities on prepositions were adapted by the researchers based on Godhaniya (2014). The intervention was carried out by the researchers in the two EFL classrooms while physical learning was still ongoing at the public university before the shift to the online mode. Godhaniya proposes a basic methodology that involves using pictures, newspapers, and poetry to teach prepositions. In the current research, each of these activities was followed up with structured reinforcement exercises. The intervention lasted six weeks during the second semester of the university. As far as possible, the researchers gave prompt feedback to the participants on their output. As part of the tutorials or non-class help that students are permitted to seek out of the teacher three times over a two-week period, the teacher conducted informal interviews with the students. All interviews were phone-recorded with due permission of the respondents and later manually transcribed to isolate common themes.

5. Results and Discussion

The study used a pretest to evaluate the proficiency of the participants to use English spatial and temporal prepositions. A similar test with different test items was administered after the intervention to check language gain by the participants. Table 1 below summarizes the results of these tests.

Table 1. Descriptive scores of the participants' pre and post-test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Descriptive Interpretation
Pre-test	46	8.23	1.22	Fair
Post-test	46	12.36	2.42	Very Good

Notes: 13-15- Excellent; 10-12- Very Good; 7-9- Fair; 4-6- Poor; 1-3- Very Poor

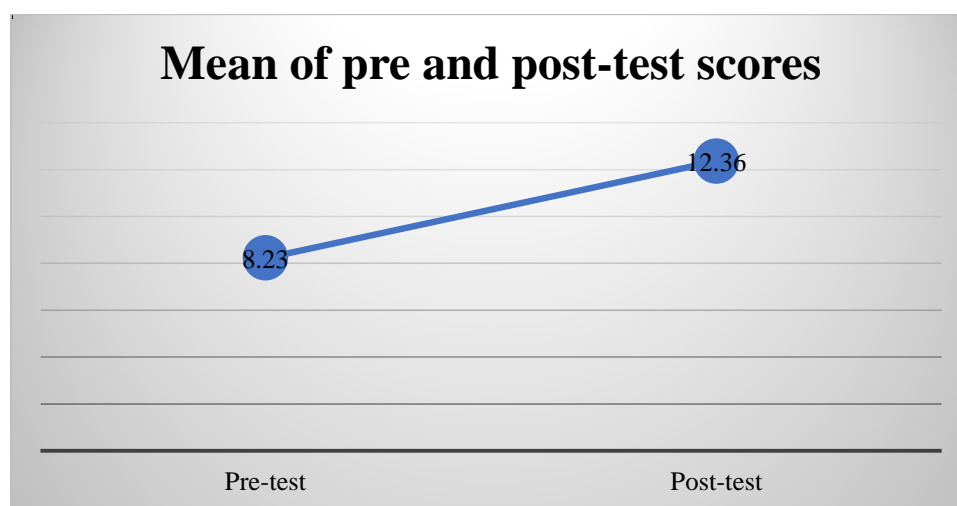


Figure 1. Line Graph of Mean of Participants' Pre and Post-test Scores

The descriptions of the respondents' scores of in the pre and post-test show that the EFL learners have a fair entry score while before the implementation of the remedial method. However, in the post-test after the implementation of the communicative teaching methods for teaching English spatial and temporal prepositions, the learners show marked improvement with the group mean jumping from 8.23 in the pre-test to 12.36 in the post-test. The data clearly show improvement in the scores of the respondents after the implementation of the communicative method in English prepositions. The researchers created opportunities for the learners to use the English language, which is English, through interaction and collaboration among themselves. Teacher talk was lessened, and student talk was given more time and priority. Another essential feature of two-way oral communication, which provides learners' increase of achievement attitude, is that activities are contextualized. In general, the use of two-way communication in this study highlighted the following: (1) emphasis in integration rather than the separation of skills; (2) focused on form and function; (3) learner-centered rather than teacher-centered activities are contextualized. Integration focuses not on formal elements, but the practical dimensions of language. It is based on the idea that by communicating it, proper and adequate English language learning can be achieved. The method, therefore, is interactive. The participation of learners in actual communication thus improves their language skills on prepositions. The effectiveness of CLT corroborates with previous studies showing its superiority as a communicative approach (Alvarez, 2017; Jahanshahi, 2017; Ngu & Rethinasamy, 2006; Oakey, 2020; Richards, 2017). The findings of the analysis and the questionnaire further demonstrated the efficacy of the CL process. Specific and persuasive are modern developments in defining the context. When studying a second language, CL's views cannot be overlooked or neglected because they give a different account than traditional approaches. In comparison, semanticized linguistic theory involves a conceptualization of language implicitly or subjectively. This allows you to learn how participants think and how to adapt to the language they have learned.

Table 2. Frequency of Errors Committed in Spatial and Temporal Prepositions before and after the intervention

	Spatial (Frequency)	Temporal (Frequency)	Total
Pre intervention	43	54	97
Post intervention	14	17	31

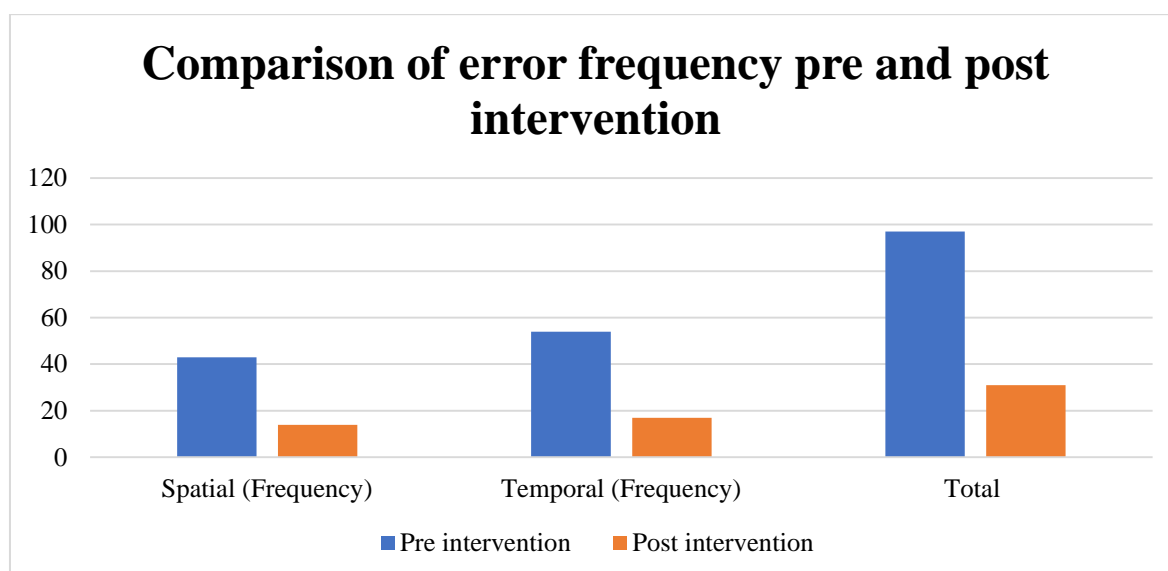


Figure 2. Frequency of Errors Committed in Spatial and Temporal Prepositions before and after the intervention

Gass and Selinker (2001) noted that systematic occurring of errors. Sometimes they happen and the student is not aware of the mistakes that he/she makes. Therefore, only the researcher/s or instructor may identify them or point them out. At first, the students do not realize what is real and what is false. Preliminary findings revealed that the group of Arab EFL students make errors in two kinds of prepositions. These two forms are the time and location prepositions. From the findings, it can be seen that after the intervention, the frequency of errors in English spatial and temporal prepositions dropped drastically. Similar findings have been affirmed by previous studies (Al-khresheh et al., 2020; Hamid, et al., 2020; Rakhlin et al., 2020). In order to explain their errors and provide them with the right approaches to these mistakes, EFL students were taught the accepted doctrinal techniques which the researchers used in the corrective program. The other approach was to allow participants to learn all time and place prepositions by way of collocation and by clarifying the uses of prepositions using illustrations. The effects of the implemented correction instruction method were checked later. The findings revealed that most EFL students could address questions related to location and time prepositions.

6. Conclusion

This research adds up to the body of knowledge about the grammatical abilities of Arab EFL students by examining their use of spatial and temporal prepositions in Arabic. Using qualitative and quantitative methods shows that before the implementation of the remedial methods in the two groups of respondents, the EFL learners already have an average performance in the English language. Consequently, looking at the post-test scores of the learners after the implementation of the teaching methods using CLT for prepositions, the learners were able to improve their performance remarkably. Informal tutorial-based interviews also showed that learners felt more confident of using the English prepositions after the intervention, something they were mortally scared of earlier. Generally, the finding shows that the students performed better in learning preposition using the Communicative Language Teaching.

7. Recommendations

The study gives several proposals to address this question in light of the findings. It is suggested that teachers use appropriate techniques to teach prepositions using real objects, pictures and cards. Students may approach English mother-tongue users to help them know the language. Students may also be advised to consider the correct versions of dictionary and internet content on prepositions. Supervisors and teachers must be able to teach prepositions correctly and it is also recommended to be distinguished and balanced in both first-language and target-language (English). Instructors are encouraged to use constructive pedagogical approaches to prevent the challenges their students encounter.

8. Implications to Teaching

The use of CLT in teaching prepositions will develop more opportunities in language learning for learners when sufficiently utilized by the teacher in developing students' language abilities. The present study highlights the effectiveness of CLT strategies when integrated or complemented with the traditional lecture method. It implicates that language instructors must be trained enough to apply an eclectic teaching and learner-centred approaches in the language of English which ensured students' engagements in the real-life use of the language.

9. Limitations

In this pilot test, drawbacks must be remembered. First, these findings were skewed in general, confining themselves only to 46 participants. Therefore, the findings would be more generalizable if more participants were involved representing the whole population. The results thus, cannot refer to other Arab EFL groups of other universities. The usage of mixed and quantitative methods will also produce more greatly solid outcomes. Thirdly, future studies should consider and correlate variables like the students' cultural background, income levels, and parents' level of education. Finally, this study did not cover the intellectual and perceptive effects of other language teaching strategies, there is a need to identify and explore them in future research.

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