

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE PREPOSITIONS: AN ALBATROSS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN NIGERIA

By

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### ABSTRACT

The acquisition and learning of a language involve understanding and mastery of what constitutes its grammar. This paper assessed the performance of second language undergraduate students in the use of English prepositions and determined the likely sources of challenges in its correct use. One hundred and ninety eight undergraduate students were randomly selected from the Department of English Language of a Nigerian University. An assessment test on preposition use was the main instrument for data collection. The results show that the highest number of the students scored between 15 and 19 over 50 which is the modal class. Less than average (43.7%) scored fifty and above. The challenges and difficulties encountered in the use of prepositions are linked to the nature of English prepositions: polysemy, idiomatic usage and substitution with first language (L1) prepositions. The difficulties were made manifest as majority of the respondents wrongly substituted 'on' with other prepositions such as 'in', 'at', 'over', 'for', 'by', 'with', 'to' usually influenced by L1 meaning. To address the difficulty in preposition use, the study recommended an eclectic approach combining collocation, prototype and cognitive linguistic approaches for teaching following a comparative and contrastive study of the preposition systems of the languages (L1 and L2) involved. Learners are encouraged to use dictionaries and e-learning modules to complement the classroom teaching.

**Keywords: Preposition, ESL, Learning, Teaching**

### INTRODUCTION

The English language is a highly important and useful international language with a growing potential of acquiring more learners. It is traditionally accepted to have eight parts of speech namely: noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, interjection (Wilkins 1972). The focus of this paper is the English Prepositions which are connecting words that link and show relationships between a subject and its object (Quirk *et.al.* 1989, Mathews 1997, Agoi 2003). Prepositions are parts of speech which often precede nouns, pronouns or other substantives. They head phrases functioning as verbs, nouns or adjectives. Prepositions perform a wide range of functions. They are used to express relations which may be spatial (indicating direction or location) or temporal (denoting position in time), and often surface in idiomatic

expressions as well as with other parts of speech like the verb, noun and adjectives in special usages. Unlike other grammatical categories with morphological rules, even if irregular, there seems to be none for prepositions. It is observed that it follows no rules in particular. It is a closed set which seems to be learnt through length of use and wide reading. It is of note that despite the fact that most prepositions are monosyllabic (on, in, at, for, by, to, with, from, off, of, out, ...), they constitute a major problem in second language situations especially where the first language (L1) has even much more less equivalents ( Farooq 2012, Jibril 2012). This is succinctly captured in the following submission by an anonymous researcher on the subject

*... Is it any wonder that prepositions create such troubles for students for whom English is a second language? We say we are **at** the hospital to visit a friend who is **in** the hospital. We lie **in** bed but **on** the couch. We watch a film **at** the theatre but **on** television.*

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The result of the discrepancies in these prepositions is misuse in the form of narrowing and extension of usage most of which can be attributed to the influence of the learner's L1. Researchers on different languages with which English is in contact have attested to learners' difficulty in learning and using prepositions (Onike 2007, Al-Marrani 2009, Tahaimh 2010, Bukhari *et.al.* 2011, Jalali *et.al.* 2012). Grubic (2004) concludes that speakers of English as a second or foreign language encounter three problems with prepositions:

- using the incorrect preposition
- deleting necessary prepositions
- using additional (unnecessary) preposition.

The learner's plight is compounded by the fact that most teachers do not pay much attention to these set of words especially in a second language setting (Delija *et.al.* 2013), because English preposition is just as hard to teach as it is to learn! According to Boquist (2009:5) "one cannot really explain a preposition without using one or two more prepositions in the definition ... soon both the teacher and student are caught in a spiral whirlwind of prepositions and their still vague meaning".

Other than the traditional method of rote learning which had been much criticized for giving out grammatical instructions with focus on learning prepositions individually within certain context (Lam 2009), various teaching approaches have been proposed to remedy the deficiencies in preposition use. The traditional method is said to have created the erroneous belief that there is no predictability in the use of English prepositions. Lam (2009) calls for innovation in language teaching whereby the teacher explores more explanatory methods of teaching prepositions.

The Collocation Approach, which involves teaching prepositions in collocations rather than as single entities, was also proposed. This suggested teaching phrasal verbs such as 'to rely on', 'to wait on', and 'to pick on' ... (Mueller 2011: 484) to English learners. This method, referred to as

the frequency-based learning, is hinged on the fact that humans naturally process groups of words as single unit. This method has been criticized in that it brings to occlusion the relationship among the different uses of a particular preposition.

Another method proposed is the Proto-Type Approach which involves teaching words in an explanatory and semantically-based manner. It explains that in the case of prepositions, the spatial, physical meaning is considered to be the prototype. For example, the preposition *on* is said to have multiple meanings, but the prototypical definition is ‘contact of an object with a line of surface’. This concept is said to allow for deeper learning, increased learner confidence, and longer rates of retention (Lakoff 1987, Lindstromberg 1996, Lam 2009). Furthermore, the theory ‘contends that the polysemous nature of prepositions can be explained through analysis of the prototypical meaning; all non-prototypical meanings are thought to be related to the prototype, often through metaphorical extension’ (Lindstromberg 1996:228). Adopting this approach, the language teacher must first teach the proto-typical meaning and then branch out to more abstract meaning and uses of the preposition.

Evans *et.al.* (2006) offers an alternative perspective in Cognitive Approach based on Lakoff (1987)’s Cognitive Linguistics (CL) Theory. This approach suggests that the differences in expressing spatial relations found across different languages can be accounted for in non-arbitrary ways and that the distinct meanings associated with a particular preposition are related in systematic and principled ways. The approach helps learners see the primary meanings of prepositions, the spatial uses and their relations to the metaphorized ones. Xin Song (2013) carried out a study using the Cognitive Linguistics approach to teach preposition to an experimental group, and the traditional method to the control group. This involved the use of images and pictures to depict the different prepositional concepts. The research revealed that the experimental group performed better in the use of prepositions. It arrived at the following conclusion:

...In contrast, the use of domain, the notions of image schema and the conceptual metaphor theory in the field of CL can have remarkable effects on the performance of learners in the higher track and lower effects on the performance of learners from the medium track. The CL-inspired approach of teaching prepositions can be rather effective under the condition that students possess sufficient cognitive prerequisites. The results supported the hypothesis that teaching prepositions on the basis of concepts from CL is more efficient than traditional rote learning if these requirements are met.

The question is, how applicable are these new approaches to English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom? Apart from the fact that they all require large quantity of input, the teaching of prepositions in its spatial, temporal, abstract forms, and in its literal and idiomatic or metaphorical uses poses a great challenge. Does the teacher have the luxury of time to do this bearing in mind that preposition is only one of the several topics to teach in an ESL situation?

This paper is a preliminary report on an on-going project which is seeking strategies that can be employed to improve teaching, and learner's acquisition and development of his usage ability of English preposition. To assess students' performance in preposition use, a test was conducted in the 2013/14 session of the Olabisi Onabanjo University using two hundred (200) second-year students of the Department of English. Based on the Nigerian National Policy on Education (FGN, 2004), the students have had at least ten (10) years of tutelage in the English language - three years in the senior primary school as medium of instruction through six years of higher school, and a year as subject of study in the tertiary institution.

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this paper are to:

- assess the ability of undergraduate students' use of prepositions as ESL learners;
- determine the likely sources of the challenges, if there are any; and
- suggest remedies to the challenges.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the ability of undergraduate students in the use of English prepositions as Second Language learners?
- What are the likely challenges, and the sources of such, faced by undergraduate students in the use of English prepositions as Second Language learners?
- Are there remedies for the challenges?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The instrument used for data generation was an English language test containing fifty questions on preposition use. The instruction required that the students fill in the gap in the sentences supplied with the appropriate preposition. The test was administered, and students' level of performance was subjected to analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One hundred and ninety-eight test scripts were retrieved and marked. Find below a table showing the performance level in the ranges of five (5):

**Table 1 Summary of Students' Scores in Ranges of 5**

S/N	Score	Number of Students	Percentage %
1	0 - 4	1	0.5
2	5 - 9	12	6
3	10 - 14	25	12.6
4	15 - 19	39	19.6
5	20 - 24	34	17.1
6	25 - 29	30	15.1
7	30 - 34	37	18.6
8	35 - 39	18	9
9	40 - 44	2	1
10	45 - 50	0	0

Only eighty-seven (87) students scored between 25 and 50 which is 50% and above, with thirty-four other students scoring between 20 and 24 which is just the pass mark amounting to 40 – 49%. Seventy-seven students (38.8%) scored less than 40%. The implication of this is that only 43.7% of the students had an average mastery of preposition use, 17.1% just a bit comfortable in its use while 38.7% was outright failure!

This poor performance could be attributable to L1 interference but the intrinsic confusion posed by the nature of English Preposition itself cannot be ruled out. Three of such examples will suffice for space constraint, as explained in the following sections.

### ***Polysemous Nature of English Prepositions***

Prepositions have been one of the most difficult areas of acquisition for learners of English largely due to their polysemous nature as indicated by their uses in describing interaction with objects in physical as well as abstract space (Wijana 2014). Here is a demonstration of the use of preposition 'on' in the study.

The preposition 'on' is the answer in the sentences in Table 2. Many students, however, missed this, substituting 'on' with other prepositions with seemingly similar or likely meaning.

**Table 2 The MANY faces of ‘on’!**

S/N	‘on’ in use	Meaning	Number of Students with Correct Answers	Wrong Preposition(s) Used
1	There needs to be a change in the delivery of education <b>on</b> most university campuses	<i>Inside/within a location</i>	19 (9.5%)	<i>in, for</i>
2	I have focused my attention <b>on</b> working on good environment	<i>Focus</i>	66 (33.3%)	<i>in, at, to</i>
3	We want protection <b>on</b> our work	<i>Focus</i>	97 (48.9%)	<i>in, at</i>
4	We will be taking you <b>on</b> a ride to all the states of the nation	<i>Activity</i>	91 (45.9%)	<i>for</i>
5	Peter had been ill, but he is back <b>on</b> his feet now	<i>Activity</i>	80 (40.4%)	<i>to, at</i>
6	I sent a prayer request <b>on</b> my 8 months old baby	<i>because of</i>	20 (10.1%)	<i>for, to</i>
7	Products advertised <b>on</b> billboards enjoy more patronage	<i>Means of conveyance</i>	143 (72.2%)	<i>in, by, with</i>
8	Congratulations <b>on</b> your achievements	<i>at the time/instance of</i>	161 (81.3%)	<i>for</i>
9	The students expressed their dissatisfaction <b>on</b> the court’s decision	<i>in relation to</i>	84 (42.4%)	<i>in, at, over</i>
10	My brother is coming <b>on</b> Monday	<i>Time</i>	169 (85.3%)	<i>by, for</i>
11	I heard it <b>on</b> radio	<i>means of conveyance</i>	161 (81.3%)	<i>in, at</i>
12	Her house is <b>on</b> Peace Road	<i>Location</i>	71 (35.8%)	<i>at, in</i>
13	Students are normally given a certificate <b>on</b> completion of the course	<i>at the end</i>	30 (15.1%)	<i>for, at, in</i>
14	There was a big picture <b>on</b> the wall	<i>attached to</i>	108 (54.5%)	<i>at</i>
15	They congratulated him <b>on</b> winning the award	<i>at the time of</i>	107 (54%)	<i>nil</i>
16	We will be leaving <b>on</b> July 30 <sup>th</sup>	<i>at a date</i>	59 (29.7%)	<i>by, for</i>
17	My mother was standing <b>on</b> top of the stairs	<i>Location</i>	43 (21.7%)	<i>nil</i>
18	My attention is <b>on</b> the last two points raised	<i>Focus</i>	61 (30.8%)	<i>in, about</i>
19	He went straight to the church <b>on</b> arrival from London	<i>time frame</i>	161 (81.3%)	<i>at</i>

There are almost as many meanings as the number of times the preposition ‘on’ occurred in the sentences above making it a bit problematic for the learner whose L1 may not have such a chameleonic use of the preposition! This polysemous nature of the preposition affects English learners in other climes too (Arabic, Persian, Malaysian etc.). Table 2 suggests that majority of the students in the study feel at ease using ‘on’ as indicator of time rather than being an indicator for ‘inside’/ ‘within’ or ‘reason’.

### ***Prepositions in Idiomatic Expressions***

Other evidences that show the troublesome nature of the English preposition are the changes posed by change in meaning of preposition in special usage. The learner has to contend with plain (literal) meanings of prepositions as against when used in idiomatic expressions. The choice of the correct preposition(s) in the following pairs of sentences got the students confused:

#### ***‘to’ and ‘at’***

**20** I will get back **to** you when I finish working on the car

**21** He vowed to get back **at** her for the wrong she had done

It seems normal to ‘*get back to*’, and so, one hundred and sixty-three (82.3%) of the students got sentence **20** right but the majority missed out on **21** using the same preposition ‘*get back to*’ when the meaning is no more literally to ‘*get to someone*’ but ‘*to revenge*’. Only 17.7% got it right!

#### ***‘on’ and ‘for’***

**22** We will be taking you **on** a ride to all the states of the nation

Only 91 (45.9%) students filled in ‘on’ as the correct preposition for **22**. Most of the others filled in ‘for’ taking a cue from a normal sentence like ‘We will go **for** a ride in your car’ resulting in an erroneous sentence as in **23**

**23** We will be taking you for a ride to all the states of the nation (incorrect)

### ***Substitution with L1 Preposition System***

The second language learner is prone to transfer elements of his language into the target language. This is no exception even with learning English prepositions. An example in support of this claim is found in the subjects' performance in relation to the following sentence

**24** My mother was standing **at** the top of the stairs

Only forty-three (21.7%) of the respondents chose 'at' as opposed to one hundred and eighteen (59.9%) who chose 'on'. This is attributable to the transfer of the L1 system which does not indicate article 'the' which, in the English language, is a pointer to an exact point of location thereby requiring the use of 'at' as against

**25** My mother was standing **on** top of the stairs

A consideration of the translation of the above sentences in Yoruba language (the predominant language in the study area) will make this clearer as L1 interference has resulted into incorrect use of preposition.

**26 (i)** My mother was standing **on** top of the stairs  
 ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓  
**(ii)** mi iya ∅ n duro ni ori ∅ ∅ ategun\*  
*Iya mi duro ni ori ategun*

**27 (i)** My mother was standing **at** the top of the stairs  
 ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓  
**(ii)** mi iya ∅ n duro ni ∅ tente ori ∅ ∅ ategun  
*Iya mi duro ni tente ori ategun*

In the data, both 'on' and 'at' are rendered as *ni*. While the preposition 'at' takes care of the exact location point in the English sentence, the L1 system here requires the introduction of a descriptive word (adjective) *tente* to indicate the exact location or position on the stairs. Both **26 (i)** and **27 (i)** can be rendered the same way in the Yoruba language without any far reaching effect on meaning. In other words, the 59.9% of the respondents who chose **on** instead of **at** have been influenced by L1 interference.

It is worthy of note that the Yoruba preposition *ni* seems to be very 'versatile' as revealed in the translations of the English prepositions in the sentences below:

**28** He lives **on** the street next to ours (indicating place)  
 O n gbe **ni** adugbo ti o wa ni egbe tiwa

**29** He lives **at** No.2 Mosafejo Street (indicating location)

- O n gbe **ni** ojule keji adugbo Mosafejo
- 30** I will leave **at** 2pm (indicating time)  
Mo ma a kuro **ni** agogo meji
- 31** He lives **in** London (indicating place)  
O n gbe **ni** ilu oyinbo
- 32** He was **behind** the door (indicating location)  
O wa **ni** eyin ilekun

The implication of this is that, the Yoruba-English bilingual has a limited range of prepositions in his mother-tongue, and this could affect his perception and learning of English prepositions.

This study has established that Nigerian learners of the English language, just like learners from some other climes have problems with the use of English Prepositions due to the intrinsic difficult nature of the part of speech, lack of semantic equivalence between the first and target languages, transfer of prior or mother tongue knowledge, and lack of good teaching approach and materials.

Seeking a way out of the dilemma encountered by the second language learner's usage of English prepositions, another dimension to teaching English prepositions through a comparative and contrastive study of the prepositional systems of the languages involved has been suggested. This will help the language teacher identify common features which the learner must harness and build upon, as opposed to areas of contrast which require greater focus. Learners must also be encouraged to look up prepositions and their uses in the dictionary, read a lot in English especially literature, and learn useful phrases off by heart.

### CONCLUSION

The performance of the respondents, who are studying English as a course in the university, clearly supports earlier researches that the English preposition is a great force to be contended with in an ESL situation. However, as burdensome as it may seem, it must be learnt, as lack of good performance in English may be attributed to the misuse of prepositions. Learners of English must master the intricacies in the use of prepositions through practice, reading wide, taking note of its uses, and keeping a good dictionary close by for a quick check. This is made easy by the availability of e-learning modules and facilities with the online dictionaries and thesaurus on the mobile phones in learners' pockets. Some teaching strategies such as Collocation Approach, Proto-type Approach, and Cognitive Approach have been developed to help the learner out of this dilemma. Though these new methods are not bereft of shortcomings, it would be interesting to use pictures to define and teach the various concepts in prepositions. Apart from a deliberate and focused teaching of the preposition and its associated characteristics in usage and meaning, a comparative analysis of the prepositions of the languages with which English has contact may assuage the learner's trouble.

\* Note the nullity (∅) of the article 'the' and the preposition 'of' in the sentences

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