

The Difficulties Encountered in the Use of English Prepositions by English as Second Language (ESL) students: A Study of University of Delta, Agbor, Nigeria Students

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Abstract

This study deals with the nature of difficulties of English prepositions encountered by the English as second language (ESL) students and the causes of such difficulties. The types of difficulties encountered by ESL students represented by University of Delta, Agbor, Nigeria students, are investigated and discovered. The research instrument used is survey, followed by a report. Questionnaires were distributed to 191-203 students. Depending on the questions, the survey x-rayed the forms of difficulties. The survey tested various hypotheses, the responses were analyzed. Among the major findings are:

- *The multiple functions of some of the prepositions confuse ELS students as this is not the case in their mother tongues (MTs),*
- *Some of the problems arise as a result of differences in the structure of English language and their first languages (L₁s), and*
- *The society of the ESL students does not help matters by contributing to the ugly situation etc.*

The most important consequence of this study is that the research recommends that English language teachers at all levels of education should devote more time to teaching prepositions, examine their students, understand the best method of teaching and apply it. Relevant authorities should also play their roles towards making teaching effective as English is now a world language and nobody wants to be left behind in any world affairs. The researchers hope that the findings of

this study will assist English language teachers in order to do their jobs effectively and improve the ESL students' use of English prepositions.

Keywords: *Prepositions; Complexities; Language Application; Interference and Appropriate Application.*

Introduction

Going by the status of the native speakers of English, its population of speakers and the geographical spread, English can be termed a global language, which people from every nook and cranny of the world should master. ESL students desire to have a grasp of English language. Hence, in Nigeria, just as all other countries where we have English as second language, the teaching of English is one of the topmost priorities of every school. Before anybody gains admission to any tertiary institution of learning in Nigeria, such a person, must have passed English language at the Ordinary Level of Education. ESL students find it difficult to apply English prepositions appropriately, 'preposition' is one of the eight-word classes which make up the words used in English.

As Ogbulogo (2004) notes "preposition is derived from a Latin word "praepositio" meaning "place before". (99). As the authority in question further notes, "prepositions are function words which indicate various relationships between words and phrases in sentences". (99) The relationships referred to here, include those of time and space. Space can be point, position or direction and different degrees of emotional or mental attitudes. Ogbulogo in another work (2004) also notes that "prepositions are classified into: simple prepositions, double prepositions, complex prepositions and disguised prepositions".(38)

The appropriate application of English prepositions in context is one of the most difficult aspects of English language. In fact, Gass and Selinker (1983) observe that "English prepositions have always been a source of trouble for English language learners irrespective of their mother tongue".

Eckersley and Eckersley give credence to the above fact when they observe in Omenogor (1992) that:

Little guidance can be given in any grammar book which preposition is the right one to use for there is no logical reason why one is right in certain contexts and another one is wrong. Idioms - in which preposition is frequently concerned are peculiarities of languages whose rightness or wrongness is based on usage not on logic or etymology (37).

In line with the above facts, different types of errors ranging from wrong substitution, addition, and omission of prepositions are made by University of Delta, Agbor, Nigerian students and by implication, all ESL students using prepositions and the fact that prepositions are taught

individually, context by context with no room for predictability of other prepositions in other contexts does not help matters.

Examples of the misuses are displayed in the following sentences.

- a. John was instrumental to my success.
- b. I requested for a plate of food in the restaurant.
- c. Make sure you reply me.

Sentence (a) is a case of wrong substitution. The right preposition is 'in'. Hence, the sentence should read: John was instrumental in my success. Sentence 'b' might be termed: redundant use of a preposition where the structure does not require one. If 'request' is used as a verb, it means to 'ask for', so, there is no need of repeating 'for' in the sentence. Therefore, the sentence should read: 'I requested a plate of food in the restaurant'. Sentence 'c' is a case of omission of a necessary preposition where one is required. Research shows that if the word 'reply' is used as a verb, it takes the preposition 'to' in sentences. The sentence should then read: Make sure, you reply to me.

The above types of mistakes with the causes of the difficulties and solutions are addressed by this paper.

Method

This is a fact finding or an investigative research in which the researchers research in order to find out the nature and causes of difficulties encountered by the students of University of Delta, Agbor, Nigeria. The researchers studied intensively and extensively on the use of English prepositions and interacted with some well-placed members of the society on the topic. The researchers also went through earlier studies related to the topic of being treated. Such studies are: Habash (1982) who acknowledges the fact that one of the hardest area of learning is foreign language acquisition. Hendricks (2010) also demonstrates that the difficulties in the use of prepositions is caused by the different meaning of some of the prepositions. Bond (2007) and Omenogor (1992) support this fact in the studies of prepositions. Based on the knowledge of the previous studies, other materials consulted and the interactions with well-placed members of the society, the researchers developed some hypotheses. Questionnaires were prepared to test the validity of the hypotheses. 203 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to 203 students of the university being studied. The students were randomly selected and they fall into different levels, 200 level, 300 level and 400 level. 190 copies of the questionnaire were returned and they constitute the data of this study. The random sampling technique was employed in choosing the respondents in the study. Inferential statistics method was used in this study. Inferences were drawn from a sample of the entire population.

This study achieves validity of instrument because only the students who have spent at least a year in the school were respondents, from 200 level to 400 level. Similarly, University of Delta is a standard University. The books and journals consulted are of high quality. The research instrument used in this study was reliable based on the reason given for the validity of instrument.

Method of Analysis: This study adopted a statistical analysis of the responses gathered from the questionnaire. It showed in percentage form the positive and negative responses to the questions put forward before the respondents.

Statement of Problem

The problem this study dealt with is explaining the difficulties ESL students experience while using English prepositions, and proffering solutions to the difficulties.

Research Questions

1. What are the complexities (and their types) ESL students encounter in the course of using English prepositions?
2. What are the solutions to such complexities?
3. Why do the ESL students have such complexities or difficulties?

Significance of the Study

This study explained the difficulties of ESL students when using English prepositions and made suggestions on how such difficulties can be overcome. It suggested strategies that teachers and students can use to ensure a more rewarding teaching and learning activities occur. Besides the above facts, it is an addition to the available literature on the studies of English prepositions.

Hypotheses of the Study

1. ESL students spend great time studying the structures of English similar to their mother tongues instead of studying those structures different from their mother tongues.
2. The applications of prepositions in contexts differs from language to language.
3. Many English prepositions are polysemous (that is have different meanings depending on contexts).
4. Different languages have different rules for the application of prepositions.
5. Some of the words borrowed by English retained their syntactic and other features. This makes the rule about the usage of English inconsistent and difficult.
6. Some English verbs take different prepositions to express different meanings.
7. Little guidance can be given in any grammar book on usage of prepositions, there is no logical reason why one preposition is right in one context and another is wrong in the same context.
8. Teachers teach English prepositions with the traditional method of teaching prepositions individually within a context with no further explanation and with no means of predicting other prepositions. This makes the use of prepositions difficult.
9. The use of prepositions in context differs from language to language.
10. The differences in British and American English also contribute to the difficulties.
11. Many persons in the society who are supposedly models to ESL students such as journalist, literary artists, university administrators, teachers etc., also misuse English prepositions from time to time.
12. Some usage of English prepositions are idiomatic and idioms are not easy to understand.

Literature Review

Learning a second language is a difficult task. This is probably why Mubarak (2017) says that it is considered to be a complicated process with its related challenges.

Case Study 1

Furthermore, Habash (1982) acknowledges the fact that 'one of the hardest areas of learning is foreign language acquisition.' The primary objective of her study was to find out the causes of errors in using English prepositions that often occurred in the Arabic students English. She discovered that mother tongue interference is among the factors that occasion difficulties in the acquisition of foreign language.

She found out that the difficulty is brought about because the students great efforts are in learning the structures of English that are similar to their own first language instead of learning those that are different from their first language. Her research was based on Arabian students but there could be every tendency that her discovery could be true for ESL students also. Prepositions are difficult to learn and master, one of the reasons is that they are polysemous. Words are polysemous if they have different but related meanings. This will cause difficulty in their application by students. As a matter of fact, many prepositions in English have diversity of meaning depending on their contexts. The mother tongues of the ESL students do not have exact numbers of prepositions with English and this will definitely occasion application errors.

Case Study 2

Hendricks (2010) demonstrates the difficulty occasioned by different meanings of some prepositions by displaying how the same prepositions are used to explain two different situations. For instance, 'on', 'at', 'in' are used to express time while they are also used to represent a place.

Consequently, students select their prepositions through a guess work and they are unsure of their choice. Hendricks (2010) equally opines that the difficulty of using English prepositions is made worse by some syntactic difference between American English and British English. In British English, we say: 'Fill in a form' while American English, we say: 'Fill out a form'. Some learners may be confused as they may not know which should be applied at any given time. Hendricks's suggestion is that learners of English language should depend on extensive reading, that is wide reading, memorization so that they will master the usage of prepositions in English.

Case Study 3

Bond 2007, agrees that English prepositions is difficult to apply because of their multiple functions. He suggests that students should be immersed in a completely English-speaking place. In line with other positions already discussed, F. T. Wood in Omenogor, (1992) suggest two factors that are responsible for the difficulty in mastering the correct usage of English prepositions. They are:

Many prepositions (perhaps even most of them) are used in so many different ways that they often have no clearly defined meanings, apart from the phrases or constructions in which they occur.

E.g. The commonest sense attached to 'on', is that expressed when we speak of sitting 'on a chair' or of 'placing something on a table' but what relevance has this to the use of the word in such constructions as: 'On probation,' 'On pension,' 'On duty,' 'On trial' etc.

We have four various meanings of 'in', exemplified, when we use expressions such as: 'Being in a car', 'in sorrow', 'in temper' etc.

English prepositions are also difficult to use because English has borrowed words from other languages and some of the borrowed words still retain the features of their original languages. For instance, 'than' is usually used for most comparison in English. Thus, we say:

My father is taller than your father.

My car is better than your car.

But we say:

My wrist-watch is superior to yours.

Research shows that 'superior', a borrowed word from Latin takes the preposition 'to' (Ogbulogo 2004) because of its Latin origin.

Data Analysis

Number of Agreed	% of Agreed	Number of Disagreed	% of Disagreed	Total Number of Respondents	Remark
148	72.9	55	27.1	203	Hypothesis Accepted

Table I: Respondents Responses to the hypothesis that ESL¹ Students Apply Great Effort Studying the Structures of English Language Similar to their Mother Tongues Instead of Studying those Different from their Mother Tongues.

Number of Agreed	% of Agreed	Number of Disagreed	% of Disagreed	Total Number of Respondents	Remark
148	72.9	55	27.1	203	Hypothesis Accepted

¹ ESL-English as Second Language

158	77.8	45	22.2	203	Hypothesis Accepted
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Table II: The Application of Prepositions in Contexts Differs from Language to Language.

Number of Agreed	% of Agreed	Number of Disagreed	% of Disagreed	Total Number of Respondents	Remark
194	95.6	09	4.14	203	Hypothesis Accepted

Table III: Many English Prepositions are Polysemous, this often Confuses ESL² Students.

Number of Agreed	% of Agreed	Number of Disagreed	% of Disagreed	Total Number of Respondents	Remark
179	93.7	12	6.3	191	Hypothesis Accepted

Table IV: Different Languages have Different Rules on the Usage of Preposition. This also Confuses the ESL³ Students.

Number of Agreed	% of Agreed	Number of Disagreed	% of Disagreed	Total Number of Respondents	Remark
152	78.8	41	21.2	193	Hypothesis Accepted

Table V: Some of the Words Borrowed by English Retained their Syntactic and Other Features. This makes the Rules about the Usage of English Prepositions Inconsistent and Difficult.

² ESL-English as Second Language

³ ESL-English as Second Language

Number of Agreed	% of Agreed	Number of Disagreed	% of Disagreed	Total Number of Respondents	Remark
166	81.8	37	18.2	203	Hypothesis Accepted

Table VI: Some English Verbs Take Different Prepositions to Express Different Meanings. This Makes the Use of Prepositions Difficult.

Number of Agreed	% of Agreed	Number of Disagreed	% of Disagreed	Total Number of Respondents	Remark
82	44.8	101	55.2	183	Hypothesis Rejected

Table VII: Little Guidance can be Given in any Grammar Book on Usage of Prepositions, there is no Logical Reason Why One Preposition is Right in a Context and Another is Wrong in the same Context. This Fact also Makes ESL⁴ Students Confused.

Number of Agreed	% of Agreed	Number of Disagreed	% of Disagreed	Total Number of Respondents	Remark
117	57.6	86	42.4	203	Hypothesis Accepted

Table VIII: Teachers Teach English Prepositions with the Traditional Method of Teaching Prepositions Individually within a Context with No Further Explanation and with No Means of Predicting Other Prepositions. This Makes the Use of Prepositions Difficult.

Number of Agreed	% of Agreed	Number of Disagreed	% of Disagreed	Total Number of Respondents	Remark
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⁴ ESL-English as Second Language

177	87.2	26	12.8	203	Hypothesis Accepted
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Table IX: The Use of English Prepositions in Context Differs from Language to Language. This Makes Its Usage Difficult

Number of Agreed	% of Agreed	Number of Disagreed	% of Disagreed	Total Number of Respondents	Remark
186	91.6	17	8.4	203	Hypothesis Accepted

Table X: The Differences in British and American English also Contribute to the Difficulties in the Usage of English Prepositions.

Number of Agreed	% of Agreed	Number of Disagreed	% of Disagreed	Total Number of Respondents	Remark
185	91.1	18	8.9	203	Hypothesis Accepted

Table XI: Many Persons in the Society Who are Supposed to be Models to ESL⁵ Students Misuse English Prepositions From Time to Time. This Also Confuses ESL⁶ Students about the Use of English Prepositions.

Number of Agreed	% of Agreed	Number of Disagreed	% of Disagreed	Total Number of Respondents	Remark
181	89.2	22	10.8	203	Hypothesis Accepted

⁵ ESL-English as Second Language

⁶ ESL-English as Second Language

Table XII: Some Usage of English Preposition are Idiomatic and Idioms are Not Easy to Understand. This Makes Their Usage Difficult.

Discussion of Results from Data

The responses obtained from table 1 show that 148 respondents which represents 72.9% of the total number of respondents on the hypothesis agree that ESL students apply great energy studying the structures of English similar to those of their mother tongues instead of the other way round and this is partly responsible for the difficulty in the usage of English prepositions, while 55 students standing for 27.1% of the total respondents disagree with the hypothesis. The hypothesis is therefore accepted. Table 2 shows that 158 students (77.8%) agree with hypothesis 2 while 45 students (22.2%) disagreed. This hypothesis is therefore also accepted. Table 3 shows that 194 (95.6%) agreed with hypothesis 3 while only 9 (4.4%) disagreed. Hypothesis 3 is therefore accepted. The result from table 4 indicates that 179 (93%) respondents agreed to the proposition of the hypothesis while only 12 respondents (6.3%) did not agree with the hypothesis proposition. This hypothesis is also accepted. In table 5, 152 (78.8%) respondents believe that borrowed words in English are part of the causes of difficulties of using English prepositions while 41 respondents hypotheses representing 21,2% did not believe. This hypothesis is then accepted. Table 6 shows that 166 (81.8%) supports the hypothesis while 37 respondents (18.2%) do not support the hypothesis. This hypothesis is then accepted. From table 7, 82 (44.8%) of the respondents agreed with the hypothesis whereas 101 (55.2%) of the respondents disagreed. This particular hypothesis is therefore rejected. In table 8, 117 (51.6%) respondents agreed to what the hypothesis proposes while 86 (42.4%) respondents rejected the hypothesis, this hypothesis is therefore accepted. Table 9 shows that 177 (87.2%) respondents accepted the hypothesis while 26 (12.8%) rejected it. This hypothesis is therefore accepted. Table 10 indicates that 186 (91.6%) of the respondents agreed to the hypothesis while 17 (8.4%) disagreed. This hypothesis is therefore accepted. From table 11, we observed that 185 (91.1%) opine that the hypothesis is a fact whereas 18 (8.9%) of the respondents believed the contrary. Consequently, the hypothesis is accepted. Finally, on the discussion of the response from the hypothesis, table 12 shows that 181 (89.2%) respondents agreed to the hypothesis while 22 (10.8%) of the respondents have a contrary view. This very hypothesis is therefore accepted. All but hypothesis 7 above are accepted, this is in line with the expectation of the researcher. An evidence that supports the above view is the transfer theory which states that linguistic skills already acquired in the first language are often transferred when a learner tries to acquire a second language.

Findings, Conclusion and Recommendations

Findings

The findings in this study show that all but one of the hypothesis are the cause of difficulties in the usage of English prepositions by English as second language students. The hypothesis (7) which stipulates that little guidance can be given on the usage of any preposition on any grammar book

and this is responsible for the difficulty in using them was rejected. Also rejected was the claim that no logical reason can be given why a particular preposition is wrong and another preposition is right on the same context. All other hypotheses were accepted to be responsible for the difficulties.

Conclusion

We conclude in this paper that the propositions made in hypotheses 1 to 6 and hypotheses 8 to 12 are responsible for the difficulties encountered by English as second language students when using English prepositions in various sentences.

Recommendations: The researchers recommend constant research on the correct usage of English prepositions as there are no rigid rules for their usage. There are no rules with which the usage of a preposition one has not come across can be predicted. This aspect of English in a way resembles the articulation of some words in the phonology of English where there is no basic rules to guide the user. The researchers also recommend wide reading, memorization and listening to models on Standard British English in order to master the correct and appropriate usage of English prepositions

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Appendix

A Sample of the Questionnaire Used:

Name of University:.....

Name of Student:.....

Level of Study:.....

Age of Student:.....

Mastering the correct and appropriate use of English prepositions is difficult for the following reasons.

1. ESL students spend great time studying the structures of English similar to their mother tongues instead of studying those structures different from their mother tongues.
Agreed () Disagreed ()
2. The applications of prepositions in contexts differs from language to language.
Agreed () Disagreed ()
3. Many English prepositions are polysemous (that is have different meanings depending on contexts). Agreed () Disagreed ()
4. Different languages have different rules for the application of prepositions.
Agreed () Disagreed ()
5. Some of the words borrowed by English retained their syntactic and other features. This makes the rule about the usage of English inconsistent and difficult.
Agreed () Disagreed ()
6. Some English verbs take different prepositions to express different meanings. Agreed () Disagreed ()
7. Little guidance can be given in any grammar book on usage of prepositions, there is no logical reason why one preposition is right in a context and another is wrong in the same context. Agreed () Disagreed ()
8. Teachers teach English prepositions with the traditional method of teaching preposition individually within a context with no further explanation and with no means of predicting other prepositions. This makes the use of prepositions difficult. Agreed () Disagreed ()
9. The use of prepositions in context differs from language to language.
Agreed () Disagreed ()
10. The differences in British and American English also contribute to the difficulties.
Agreed () Disagreed ()
11. Many persons in the society who are supposedly models to ESL students such as journalist, literary artists university administrators, teachers etc. also misuse English prepositions from time to time. Agreed () Disagreed ()
12. Some usage of English prepositions are idiomatic and idioms are not easy to understand.
Agreed () Disagreed ()

List of Persons that the Researchers Interacted with on the Use of English Prepositions in the Society

1. Dr. Mrs. Charity Nwamaka Atoma, Senior Lecturer in Agricultural Science, Faculty of Agricultural Science, Delta State University of Science and Technology, Ozoro, Delta State, Nigeria.
2. Dr. O. Ugboh, Senior Lecturer in Agricultural Science, Director of Interim Joint Matriculation Board (IJMB), University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria.
3. Dr. Mrs. Juliana .N. Diabua, Chief lecturer, College of Education (Technical) Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria
4. Dr. Richard, Maledo, Senior Lecturer, H.O.D, Department of English and Literary Studies, Delta State University, Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria.
5. Dr. J. O. Oji, Senior Lecturer, H.O.D, Department of Science Education, Faculty of Education, University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria.
6. Pastor Basil Ifeanyi Omenogor, Information Officer, Ministry of Information, Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria.
7. Engr. Fred Ogwu Osasa, Deputy Director, Directorate of Transport, Ministry of Transport, Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria.
8. Mr. Awhareno Uyoyo Sydney, Lecturer 2 in Agricultural Science, Faculty of Agricultural Science, Delta State University of Science and Technology, Ozoro, Delta State, Nigeria.

Abbreviations Used

1. I.J.M.B- Interim Joint Matriculation Board
2. L_1 - First Language
3. L_2 - Second Language
4. MT- Mother Tongue
5. Jhsp- Journal of Humanity and Social Policy
6. ESL- English as Second Language
7. EFL- English as Foreign Language
8. H.O.D- Head of Department