

An Analysis of Prepositional Errors Committed by Undergraduate ESL Learners of Pakistan

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Abstract

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) phenomena are very important for social, practical and academic reasons. About 6000 languages are spoken in the world and almost all of them have been learned by second languages by some portion of their speaker. There are four most commonly-used languages and English is one of them that is acquired as L1 by 427 million people and as L2 by 950 million speakers. In Pakistan, English has become most important language for communication and also a symbol of prestige in the society. It has turned into a great asset for Pakistani students; they learn it as their second language from basic to advance level. Moreover, English enjoys the status of official language in Pakistan. However, Pakistani learners face many difficulties and problems in using English in their writings and during speaking. Committing errors in the use of prepositions is one of such difficulties. This research examines the misuse of English prepositions by Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners. The purpose of the study is to find out whether male learners commit more prepositional errors or female. Other than this, following study also focuses on the types of prepositional errors found in tests of MCQs and word deletion. For this purpose, thirty (30) students of Government college university of Faisalabad (fifteen participants from each gender) were selected randomly for quantitative research. The data was collected through two tests; first test was based on gap filling exercise and second was based on MCQs. These tests were then analyzed through tables and graphics by using Microsoft excel software. Researcher used *Hot Potatoes* as a tool for making test and used statistical methods to find the frequencies and percentage of errors. The study found out various types of prepositional errors in both type of tests. Resultantly, the ratio of errors committed by female ESL learners is higher than male ESL learners.

Keywords: Prepositions, gender analysis, error analysis, influence of L1 on L2

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1. Introduction

According to Saeed (1998), language is the most powerful source of communication and self-expression through which we express our feelings, emotions and share ideas. Through language, we can get and additionally transmit information to other individuals. A large portion of the exercises on the world is brought out through or by it. Discussing languages, we can't disregard English, which is broadly and quickly spreading into every part of present world. Because of it, English can't be kept limited to dialects or maybe numerous varieties have been investigated and included. In this respect, Kuchru (1992) outlined a model in which English has been characterized into three circles i.e., inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle. This model has included dialects and varieties. As indicated by it, Pakistani English is checked in outer circle since it is considered as second language in our educational framework. English is taught in Pakistan from basic level to advance level. The Student who is capable in English language is considered to be keen with high status and glory. That is the reason English functions as an International Language almost in all professions like marketing, bureaucracy, judiciary, medical departments and media. So, students with weak English are thought be less intelligent. That is the reason, in Pakistan, there is an overwhelming need and interest for having a sound handle over English language. Subsequently it is observed that each individual tries to communicate in English even in spite of the fact that s/he may confer blunders and oversights in the zones of language, spelling, structure, grammar and pronunciation. However, According to Rehman (2008) it is noticed that mostly students commit errors in English grammar i.e. written and spoken forms.

While discussing grammar, both of its classes should be talked about. They are: (a) primary classification and (b) secondary classification. The former one comprises of parts of speech while (b) contains tense, person and gender. This study only focused on prepositions and errors commit by ESL learners in their writings. According to Wren and Martin (2006), "a preposition is a word placed before a noun or a pronoun to show in what relation the thing denoted by it stands in regard to something else". Lindstromberg (1998) classified prepositions into three parts: preposition of place, preposition of time, and preposition of direction. Swan (2003) said, "The examination of literature reveals that syntax and practice of a language are essential factors for grasping of a language including English". The above discussion shows that only by understanding the components of language the structure of language can be understood. To gain proficiency in English language, a student needs to know how to use the components of language perfectly. But when we see Pakistani students who learn English as their second language we can notice that they commit many errors related to all parts of speech especially in Prepositions (Rehman, 2006). The reason behind these errors is the difference or variation

between the nature of L1 and L2. A learner may commit fewer errors and perform better with least hesitation in their mother tongue than English. For such situations, different social, linguistics and intellectual variables might be viewed as dependable which make leap for Pakistani ESL students' English writing. Keeping these distinctions at the top of the priority list, Silva (1993) claimed second and foreign language writing tend to be more constrained, difficult and less effective than writing in a first language.

1.1: Purpose of study:

The purpose of our study is to find out why learners commit errors in using prepositions and also the types of preposition errors they commit the most.

1.2: Objectives of Research:

The aim of this study was to find out the prepositional errors committed by undergraduate ESL learners. Another important aim of the study was to analyze whether male or female learners commit more errors.

1.3: Research Question:

Whether male ESL learners commit more preposition errors or female ESL learners?

1.4: Research Hypothesis:

Female ESL learners commit more errors than male ELS learners.

1.5: Research Instrument:

Two types of tests were used as instruments to collect data from the undergraduate ESL learners. The first test was based on gap filling exercise used to access their overall ability to fill the blanks appropriately. The second test was based on MCQ's in which learners were asked to choose the correct preposition.

1.6: Significance of the study:

As this study has focused on incorrect use of prepositions by ESL learners, it may be beneficial for English teachers to make strategies for students and guide them to enable themselves for solving these problems. Moreover, the research may help the teachers to realize to change the existing teaching strategies according to the needs of students. Besides this, the study may make the students eligible to correct their prepositional mistakes.

2. Literature Review

In the field of linguistics, the term preposition has been defined by many authors; some defined it as "prepositions are known to be challenging for second language learners since the subject possesses an idiosyncratic behavior that is not subjected to predictable pattern even across nearly identical contexts" (De Felice and Pulman (2008). Matula (2007) also defined preposition, according to him "prepositions can be some of the hardest words to acquire although they might appear easy and straightforward to learn". Wren and Martin, (2006) defined preposition as "A preposition is a word placed before a noun or a pronoun to show in what relation the thing denoted by it stands in regard to something else. Prepositions are traditionally classified into three categories: preposition of place, of direction, of time (Lindstromberg, 1998). According to Kofi (2010), English has 60 to 70 preposition, a higher number than most other languages. Prepositions are subtlest and a set of small words that are a closed class in English Language (Huddelston (1984).

Linguistics features are interests of the researcher on which they conduct their research. In this study, the linguistic feature "prepositional errors" was researched by Hafiz Ahmad Bilal (2013), Abdul Saeed (2015), Sumaira Akhtar (2017), Dr. J Saravana (2015), and Fazlinda Hamza (2017). The current study has also worked on prepositional errors commit by those learners who learn English as their second language.

For this research Hafiz Ahmad Bilal (2013), worked on contrastive analysis of prepositional errors in the writings of Pakistani ESL students. This was a quantitative based research. For this purpose, the researcher collected 100 compositions from the students of secondary schools of Sargodha. For data analysis, the researcher practiced a model proposed by Richards (1974) and James (1998). The researcher employed research tool for data analysis such as written compositions. The study resulted that 89% prepositional errors found in written compositions. The study also concluded that it is difficult to recognize whether the errors are interlingual or interlanguage.

Studies by Abdul Saeed (2015), the researcher also worked on Pakistani ESL students to find prepositional errors in their writings. The researcher conducted a quantitative research. For this research, data collected from private schools of Gilgit and population of data was 93 students. From total population of class 10th only 26 students were selected (13 males and 13 females). The researcher employed research tool for data analysis such as compositions and essay writings. The researcher found frequencies through graphs and tables. The study

resulted that female students made more errors than male students.

According to Sumaira Akhtar (2017), the researcher worked on prepositional errors in the writings of graduate ESL learners of Pakistan. The research was based on quantitative research. For this purpose, data collected from two hundred and fifty graduate ESL learners of four colleges and one university. Students belonged to from both rural and urban areas. The researcher employed two types of research tool for data analysis, one was fifth word deletion exercise and the second was written composition on terrorism. The study resulted that students made more prepositional errors in fifth word deletion exercise and they used unnecessary prepositions in their writings.

Dr. J Saravana (2015), was also interested in finding prepositional errors. The researcher worked on use of English prepositions by undergraduate students of English Literature in India. The researcher conducted a quantitative research. For this research, the researcher collected data from the students of English literature of two Arts and Science colleges. One hundred undergraduate students were selected (33 males and 67 females). The researcher employed research tool for data analysis such as close test. Students are required to fill the gaps with prepositions. The study resulted that male students faced more difficulties in using prepositions and committed more errors than female students.

In recent experimental research Fazlinda Hamzah (2017), also worked on the area of preposition. The researcher worked on the use and miss-use of prepositions by ESL university learners in their written assignments. It was quantitative based research. For this purpose, data collected from the Malay ESL learners of International Islamic College Malaysia. They were fifty first year students 25 from each gender. The researcher employed research tool for data analysis such as written assignments of ESL learners. For analyzing data, research used the method proposed by Norish (1983). The study resulted that the students made more errors in the use of preposition "in" which is 50%.

3. Methodology

The researchers employed a quantitative based research in order to find the frequencies of prepositional errors committed by undergraduate ESL learners. For this purpose, the researchers selected one of the government universities in Pakistan as research site where fifty seven (57) students (25 males and 32 females) were enrolled in 2nd semester of BS (HONS). Out of total population, 30 students were selected randomly. During selection phase, 15 students were selected from each gender by using systematic random sampling. Students were selected by systematic randomly and after selecting sample members, they were informed and guided to attempt the paper.

3.1: Population and Sampling:

In order to check whether male learners commit more errors or female learners commit more errors, the researchers selected 30 participants of BS (HONS) from applied linguistics department of government college university Faisalabad. The researchers selected 15 participants from each randomly. The ages of participants were about 18 to 20 years. As far as the area of these learners was concerned, they belonged to both rural and urban areas. Moreover, they were from Urdu as well as English medium background who had studied English as a compulsory subject from school level. It was expected from them that they had acquired necessary knowledge required for communicating ideas creatively in English language writing skills. It is essential to reveal here that in government colleges and universities of Pakistan, the majority of undergraduate and graduate students face difficulties while writing.

3.2: Research Instruments:

Two types of tests were used as instrument to check the prepositional errors committed by undergraduate students who learn English as their second language. These two tests used by the researcher were considered to be more reliable tool for analyzing errors in prepositions.

First test was based on gap filling exercise in which students were asked to fill the gaps with appropriate preposition. 15 minutes were allocated for solving the test. The researchers used *Hot Potatoes* software for making gap filling exercise. Second test was based on multiple choice questions (MCQs); each question had four options and students were asked to choose the appropriate one. For this test, researchers gave 20 minutes to the students.

3.3: Data collection Procedure:

The researchers collected data from 30 undergraduate students who learn English as their second language to check prepositional errors. The students were provided instructions to attempt both tests. These tests allowed learners 35 minutes in total (15 minutes for gap filling exercise and 20 minutes for MCQs). During this process, the researchers noted the completion time of both tests just to know how far the students respond quickly. As far as the gap filling exercise is concerned, the students were also given a list of some mixed prepositions (time, place, direction) to fill the gaps.

4. Data Analysis

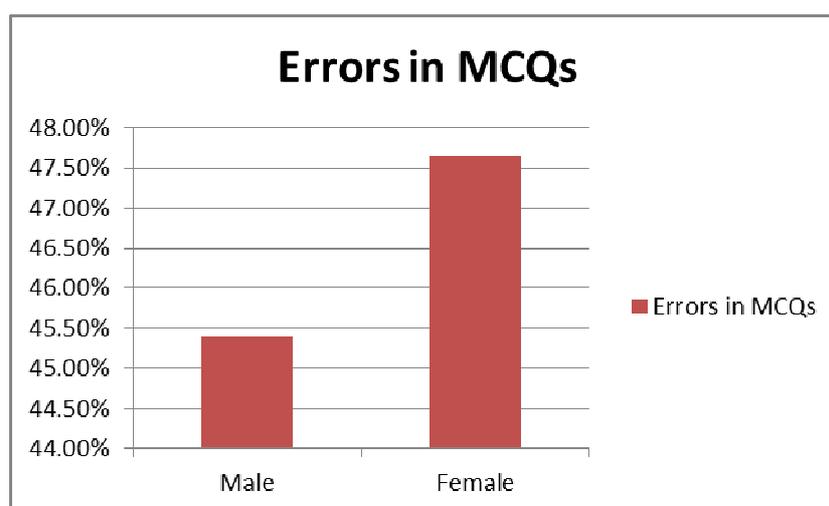
After collecting data, the researchers separated data of males and females. All the 30 tests of both male and female were given numbers. For male students the numbers started from M1 to M15 and for female students, the numbers started from F1 to F15. The researchers used *Microsoft Excel* for identifying the ratio of prepositional errors. Before computerizing data, the researchers used some statistical formula manually for finding the frequencies of prepositional errors. After that, data were fed in Microsoft Excel to calculate the means, average and standard deviation in order to calculate results. Moreover, the errors found in the data were counted into two phases. In first phase tests analyzed separately to find frequencies and in second phase both tests analyzed together. The researchers analyzed data through table and graphics.

4.1: Errors in MCQs:

During the process of analysis, the researchers observed that in MCQs both male and female learners committed errors. These errors related to preposition of time, place, and direction. The result showed that students did not have appropriate knowledge of the use of prepositions. The influence of L1 may be the reason behind these errors or may be the students' lack of English writing competence. However, it is important to mention here that female learners committed these types of errors more than male learners.

Table1. Prepositional errors found through MCQs:

Male participants		Female participants	
Test no.	No. of errors	Test no.	No. of errors
M1	16	F1	12
M2	14	F2	15
M3	10	F3	9
M4	15	F4	13
M5	13	F5	16
M6	14	F6	12
M7	10	F7	15
M8	9	F8	13
M9	13	F9	15
M10	14	F10	18
M11	10	F11	10
M12	8	F12	12
M13	9	F13	11
M14	15	F14	9
M15	13	F15	11
Total	182	Total	191
Male errors is %	45.39 %	Female errors in %	47.64 %



Graph 1

The above table and graph show that the both participants male and female committed errors. Here, male participants have been shown with 182 errors with percentage of 45.39% and female participants have been shown with 191 errors with percentage of 47.64%. The minimum number of errors of male participants was 8 and of female participants were 9. As far as the average is concerned, the average of male participants was 12.13

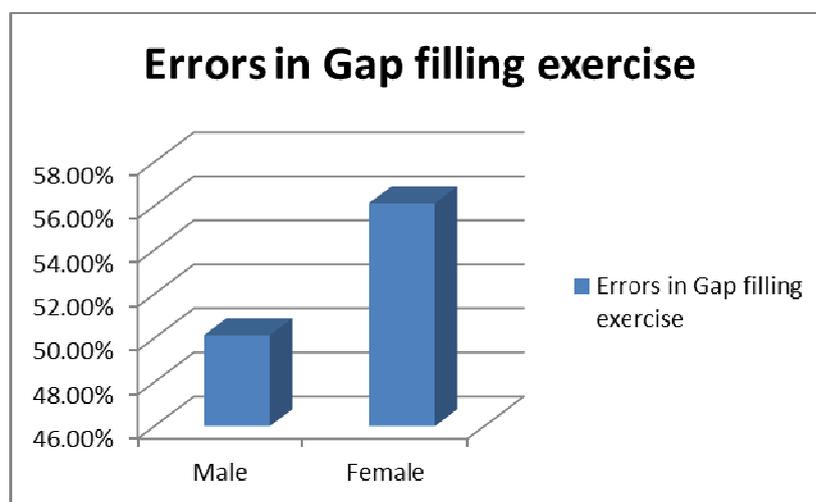
whereas the average of female participants was 12.73.

4.2: Errors in gap filling exercise:

During the analysis, the researchers found more prepositional errors. These errors were mostly related with preposition of time, place, and direction. The researchers observed that the students did not have knowledge to use these types of prepositions. Majority of the students was confused in the use of place and direction preposition; they filled the gaps with inappropriate prepositions.

Table2. Prepositional errors found through gap filling exercise

Male participants		Female participants	
Test no.	No. of errors	Test no.	No. of errors
M1	13	F1	25
M2	8	F2	21
M3	15	F3	10
M4	20	F4	16
M5	8	F5	23
M6	16	F6	12
M7	11	F7	15
M8	7	F8	12
M9	20	F9	14
M10	16	F10	13
M11	20	F11	13
M12	18	F12	8
M13	23	F13	8
M14	1	F14	16
M15	5	F15	19
Total	201	Total	225
Male errors is %	50.13 %	Female errors in %	56.12 %



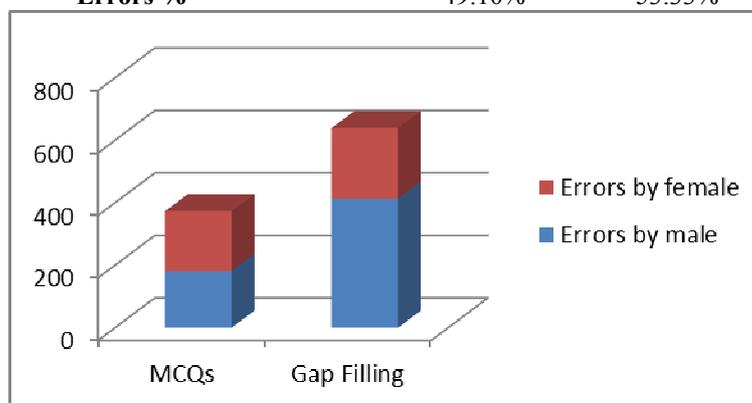
Graph 2

The above table and graph show that the both participants male and female committed errors. Here, male participants have been shown with 201 errors with percentage of 50.13% and female participants have been shown with 225 errors with percentage of 56.12%. The minimum number of errors of male participants was 1 and of female participants were 8. As far as the average is concerned, the average of male participants was 13.4 whereas the average of female participants was 15.

4.5: Errors committed in both tests:

During the analysis of second phase, the researchers analyze the results of both tests together. The following table shows the errors committed by both genders. Male students committed 182 errors in MCQs and 201 errors in world deletion exercise with total errors 383 whereas female students committed 191 errors in MCQs and 225 errors in world deletion exercise with total errors 416.

Category of errors	Male	Female
MCQS	182	191
Gap filling exercise	201	225
Total errors	383	416
Errors %	49.10%	53.33%



Graph 3

The above table and graph show the errors committed by both genders. In graph, numbers of errors made by male and female learners show horizontally (0-800) while types of tests show vertically. Besides, the table also highlighted the percentage of errors.

5. Results and Discussion

As stated earlier, the present study analyzed the prepositional errors of undergraduate students who learn English as their second language. The study was quantitative. The researchers collected 30 students (fifteen from both gender) randomly for finding errors. The ratio of errors is different in both ESL learners. According to the types of tests both male and female learners committed errors. Male students committed 182 errors in first test based on MCQs and female students committed 191 errors. In second test which was based on gap filling exercise males committed 201 errors while female committed 225 errors.

After analyzed data, researchers found error ratio of female learners was higher than male learners. The researchers observed one thing more that the errors committed by both genders were mostly related to the preposition of place and direction. The students did not have enough knowledge about these types of prepositions. As Abdul Saeed (2015) found the same findings in his study on prepositional errors in the writings of Pakistani ESL learners. He found that students faced most difficulty in the use of place, direction and time preposition. It was also observed that students faced committed more errors in the use of (in, on, at, from). In this study, the researchers also found the ratio of errors of these types of prepositions. In MCQs both learners chose inappropriate options for preposition of place and direction and in gap filling exercise they filled the gaps with incorrect preposition. The results show that male learners committed 38 errors in preposition of direction with the percentage of 38% and female learners committed 33 errors with the percentage of 35.48%. In place prepositions males committed 27% errors while females committed 31.18% errors.

5.1: Hypothesis testing:

Hypothesis 1: Female ESL learners commit more errors than male ELS learners.

The result of the study testified the hypothesis that female learners committed more prepositional errors than male learners. The above tables and graphs show the errors committed by both genders. The frequency of errors committed by female learners was higher than male learners. According to the result, the hypothesis was testified as a valid hypothesis.

Furthermore, it was observed that female learners committed more errors in place preposition than male learners, particularly in case of “time and direction” preposition male learners committed more errors than female. But the overall result of mistakes and errors shows that female ESL learners committed more prepositional errors than male ESL learners.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this is to find the prepositional errors committed by undergraduate ESL learners. The researchers’ findings revealed that the undergraduate students of Linguistics department faced difficulties in the use of prepositions. The reason behind these errors was lack of knowledge in using correct preposition. The errors committed by the learners were related to preposition of place and direction due to the lack of knowledge and influence of L1. Results show that female students committed more errors in prepositions than male students.

Both committed errors but the ratio of female errors is higher as compare to male and it clearly shows that they have low level of proficiency in L2 writings. Hence, the given hypothesis proved that female ESL learners committed more errors. The present study corroborate with Abdul Saeed (2015) findings of preposition, whereas he says students find difficulties in the use of preposition of place and direction and his study also shows that female learners committed more errors as compare to male.

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