

## Difficulties in the Use of Prepositions among EFL Libyan University Students

Ali Ahmed Rahima \*

English Department, Collage of Arts, Gharian University Assaba, Assaba, Libya

صعوبات استخدام حروف الجر لدى طلاب الجامعات الليبية الذين يتعلمون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

علي أحمد رحيمه \*

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة غريان، الأصابعة، الأصابعة، ليبيا

\*Corresponding author: [alirahmedrahima@gmail.com](mailto:alirahmedrahima@gmail.com)

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### Abstract:

This study aims to investigate the difficulties that university students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) face in using prepositions correctly. Prepositions are an essential part of English grammar, yet they often present challenges due to their complexity and variability. This study aims to identify common errors made by students and analyses the reasons behind these difficulties. A test was administered to a group of university students at the English Department, Faculty of Arts, (Assaba), to evaluate their performance in using prepositions. The findings reveal that student frequently misuse prepositions due to interference from their native language and insufficient practice. The study concludes with recommendations to improve students' mastery of prepositions. Chapter one gives general introduction to the study, and highlights the method of research which is used throughout the research. In chapter two I start by an overview of some of the English prepositions, their types and usage. Chapter three deals with the tools by which I gathered data and consequently be analyzed. It includes the process through which I collected data as well as the results and the interpretations of the data collected. Finally, chapter four deals with the conclusion which has been extracted from this study and followed by some recommendations which I think important in teaching English prepositions at university levels.

**Keywords:** Investigate the Difficulties, University Students, Learning English, Foreign Language, Assaba.

### المخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الي بحث الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب الجامعات الذين يتعلمون اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية في استخدام حروف الجر استخداما صحيحا. تعد حروف الجر جزءا اساسيا من قواعد اللغة الانجليزية الا انها غالبا ما تشكل تحديا نظرا لتعقيدها وتنوعها. تسعى هذه الدراسة الي تحديد الأخطاء التي يرتكبها الطلاب وتحليل الصعوبات. تم اجري اختبار علي مجموعة من الطلاب في قسم اللغة الانجليزية بكلية الآداب الأصابعة لتقييم أدائهم في استخدام حروف الجر حيث أظهرت النتائج ان الطلاب يخطؤون في استخدام حروف الجر بشكل متكرر نتيجة لتأثير لغتهم الام وعدم كفاية التدريب. تختتم الدراسة بتوصيات لتحسين اتقان الطلاب لهذه الحروف. يقدم الفصل الاول مقدمة عامة للدراسة ويسلط الضوء على منهجية البحث المستخدم فيها. الفصل الثاني بدءا بنظرة عامة علي بعض حروف الجر الانجليزية وانواعها واستخداماتها، ويتناول الفصل الثالث الادوات التي جمعت من خلالها البيانات وبالتالي تحليلها ويشمل عملية جمع البيانات بالإضافة الي النتائج وتفسيراتها. واخيرا يتناول الفصل الرابع الاستنتاجات التي تم استخلاصه من هذه الدراسة بالإضافة الي بعض التوصيات التي اعتبرها مهمة في تدريس حروف الجر الانجليزية في المستويات الجامعية.

## Introduction

English is one of the most commonly used languages in the world and plays a significant role in education, communication, and professional fields. For students learning English as a foreign language, mastering grammar is essential for effective communication. Among the various aspects of grammar, prepositions are considered one of the most challenging areas as they are one of the main parts of speech in English. They are small words, but they carry important meanings and are used in various contexts. Their usage often depends on fixed expressions and idiomatic combinations, which makes them difficult for learners to master. Many EFL learners struggle with choosing the correct preposition, leading to frequent errors in both written and spoken due to the fact that they represent one of the most problematic areas (Lindstromberg, 1991, and Capal 1993). These difficulties faced by students may stem from overgeneralization and the influence of the mother tongue Richards, (1974). This research focuses on identifying the common problems faced by our university students in using prepositions and aims to suggest possible solutions to overcome these difficulties.

### 1.2.Resear problem

Many university students face difficulties in using English prepositions correctly. These difficulties can negatively affect their writing and speaking skills. The problem lies in the complexity of prepositions and the differences between English and Arabic.

### 1.3. Hypothesis of the study.

This study is based on the hypothesis that university students encounter significant difficulties in using English prepositions accurately. It is also based on the assumption that the influence of L1 has a direct effect on the use of prepositions in the second language as well as insufficient exposure to authentic material. This paper is meant to shed light on the errors committed by first and second semester English university students at Faculty of Arts, Assaba, Gharian University.

### 1.4.Methodolgy:

This research adopts a descriptive analytical approach. A test consisting of multiple-choice questions was administered to a sample of our university students from the English department. The sample included a number of students in the first and second semester. The test was designed to assess students' ability to use common English prepositions such as (in, on, at, to, for, with, about). The collected data were analyzed to identify the most frequent types of errors.

### 1.5.objectives of the study;

- To identify the common errors made by students in using prepositions.
  - To analyses the causes of these errors.
  - To suggest practical solutions to improve students' use of preposions.
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## 2. Literature Review.

Many researchers have studied the difficulties associated with learning English prepositions. Prepositions are among the most problematic areas for learners because their usage often does not follow clear rules Swan (2005). Similarly, Chalker and Weiner (1994) note that prepositions are idiomatic and should often be learned through practice and exposure rather than memorization of rules. Celce . etal.(1999), Insist that prepositions are acquired late due to their abstract meaning and multiple uses.

Previous studies have also shown that learners try to transfer rules from their native language when using prepositions, which leads to errors (Ellis,1997). Kharma and Hajaj (1997) found that Arab learners frequently exhibit grammatical and lexical errors due to direct translation from Arabic. Similarly, Ellis (1997) notes that language transfer plays a central role in shaping learner interlanguage, while Brown(2000) argues that such errors are part of the natural process of second language development and overgeneralization, therefore it should be viewed as evidence of active learning rather than mere failure.

### 2.1. What is a preposition?

The (New Webster Dictionary) says that the word preposition is a laten origin. It has the noun from " praepositier" from the verb "praeponere" which means to place before. Back from the early stages of grammatical study, prepositions have been classified as the fifth part of the word classes > nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, **prepositions**, conjunctions, adverbs, interjections (the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Languages). A preposition

is a word or group of words {in, on, at, over, into, out of, etc.) which is usually positioned before the noun or a pronoun. They help us say where something is or when we do something .

**Examples:**

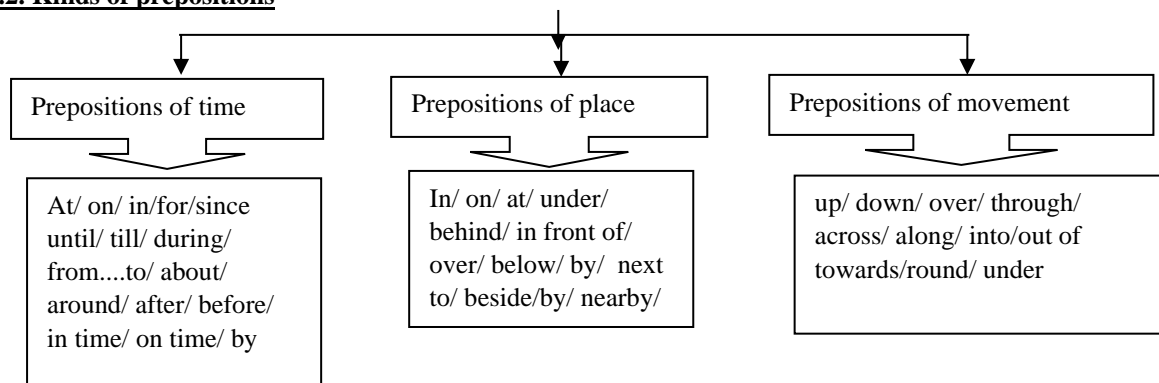
He lives *in* a flat. (*In* is a preposition of place) It tells us where he lives.

My birthday is *in* August. (*In* is a preposition of time) It tells us when my birthday is.

The function of prepositions is to connect a noun or a pronoun called the object of the preposition to another word. Abandonware, et al. ( 1998, 85) define a preposition as "a word or a group of words often placed before the noun or a pronoun to show place time and manner. It shows a relationship between the noun that follows it and other elements in a sentence".

Chalker (1992) says that" prepositions are not inflected and are not distinguished from other word classes by any characteristic form". Yule, (2010) defines preposition as" a word that shows the relationship of a noun or pronoun to another word in the sentence .... single words such as *at, from, in* or phrases such as *in front of, next to* and *out of*". We can use prepositions with noun phrases when we describe people and things or when we provide additional information about an action or situation such as the time or place". Prepositions clearly play an important role in clarifying the meaning of sentences as they specify the positions, time and movements of objects.

**2.2. Kinds of prepositions**



**Figure 1:** kinds of prepositions

**2.2.1. prepositions of time:**

The following are prepositions of time which tell when something happens and answer the question when.

**In: Examples**

- With parts of the day.                      *in* the morning/ *in* the afternoon/ *in* the evening.
- With months.                                I was born *in* March.
- With years.                                    I was born in March in 1999.
- With seasons                                 It usually rains *in* winter.
- With centuries.                              My grandfather was born *in* the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- To say how soon something will happen. I'll see you *in* two days.

**At: Examples**

- With exact times.                            I get up *at* six O'clock.
- With holidays.                                I usually visit my parents *at* Ayid Alfter.
- With ( the weekend)                         What did you do *at* the weekend?
- With" the begining/ end".                 I arrived *at* the beginning of the lecture.
- With mealtimes.                              See you at lunch time.
- With points of time.                         At the moment/ at dawn/ at night.
- With age.                                        Children go to school at the age of six.

**On: Examples**

- With days.                                     I'll see you *on* Friday.
- With dates                                     I was born *on* the first of May.

### Until/ till: Examples

- To mean up to a certain time. I slept **until / till** 9:30.  
We waited **until/ till** they left.

#### By:

- To mean before or not later than.

**Examples :** This cheese has to be used **by** June

I have to be home **by** 4 o'clock.

### During:

- Use **during** + noun to say when something happens.

**Examples:** I woke up twice **during** the night.

I fell a sleep **during** the lecture.

### For:

- Use **for** + a period to say how long something goes on.  
It answers the question " **how long**" .

**Example :** I have studied English **for** six years.

Are you going away for the weekend?

### Since:

- Use **since** with a period in time (definite time)

**Example:** I've been here **since** the morning.

### 2.2.2. Prepositions of place:

**On**

a train  
a bus  
the way  
the radio  
the page  
the menu  
the T.V  
The floor  
the roof  
the table  
the right/left  
the website  
a plane  
a ship  
a horse

**In**

a taxi  
a car  
a garden  
a book  
a picture  
the class room  
the newspaper  
the building  
a traffic jam  
my pocket  
the sea  
the sky  
the world  
Libya

**At**

home  
work  
school  
college/ university  
reception  
the top  
the bottom  
the mosque  
the concert  
the party  
the cross road  
the traffic lights

### In front of :

- It refers to a position or a place close to somebody or something.

**Example :** She stood **in front of** the mirror.

### Beside:

- It means alongside or next to.

**Example:** There is a restaurant **beside** the cafe.

### Between:

- Refers to two people or things.

**Example:** Sana is sitting *between* Salma and Raja.

**Among:**

- It is associated with plural nouns and it refers to a group of people or things.  
**Example:** It stands *among* a lot of trees.  
 She hid among the bushes.

**Above/ over:**

- Both can be used when they refer to a position higher than somebody or something.  
**Examples:** The plane flew *over* the bridge.

He lives in a flat *above/ over* the shop.

However, only *over* is used when touching or covering something partly or completely and when the action implies movement.

**Examples:** The mother put a blanket *over* her sleeping baby. The bridge is *over* the river.

**Under/ below:**

Both mean lower than. '*Under*' shows that something is covered by something while '*below*' suggests that there is a space between the two surfaces.

**Examples:** He put the wallet *under* the suitcase. She lives on the second floor *below* us.

**2.2.3. Prepositions of movement:**

Some prepositions describe the movement or action which take place. They always follow a verb of movement like: *go/ walk/ run/ drive/ sail/ jump*.

**Examples:**

- We walked *up* the hill and *down* the other side.
- He climbed *over* the wall and got *into* the room *through* the window.
- We drove *across* the bridge.
- She walked *along* the road *past* the hospital.
- He looked *out of* the window.
- She swam *under* the bridge .
- He got *into* his car and drove away.
- The police asked the driver to get *out of* the car.

**3. Data collection and analysis**

The test is divided into three sections: prepositions of time, prepositions of place and prepositions of movement. It consists of 40 multiple choice questions. The table below shows the result of the test.

**3.1. Prepositions of time**

Table (1): Results of prepositions of time.

	<i>Item</i>	<i>Correct answers</i>	<i>Incorrect answers</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	I always get up .....6 O'clock.	19	5	79%
2	They arrived.....Friday.	14	10	58.3%
3	She was born .....March.	17	7	70.8%
4	I'll see you .....lunch time	5	19	20.8%
5	I don't like going out .....night.	16	8	66.6%
6	The bus will be leaving .....a few minutes	10	14	41.6%
7	He works.....7 o'clock..... 2 o'clock.	7	17	29%
8	The school will be closed.....August.	9	15	37.5%
9	We sat there .....the end of the film.	10	14	41.6%
10	He is .....work now.	6	18	25%

11	I usually go running .....breakfast.	20	4	83%
12	She has studied English.....six years.	7	17	29%
13	I have been learning English.....1990.	15	8	62.5%
14	My brother is.....holiday.	5	19	20.8%
15	Our English teacher 's usually ..... time.	9	15	37.5%
16	She was born.....the morning.	17	7	70.8%

The result of item 1 shows that 79% of the students answered the question correctly. Only 5 samples failed to use the preposition "at" with the clock. The average score of question 2 indicates that only 58% got the right answer. About 42% of our students do not know how to use the preposition "on" with days of the week. In question three the score is encouraging where 17 samples (70%) managed to answer it correctly. However, the result dropped to 20.8% in question four which shows that 79.2% of the students do not know how to use the preposition "at" with meals. The answers to items 5, 11 and 16 were also encouraging, about 70% obtained a satisfactory score. The responses to questions 6,7,8,9,10, 12, 14 and 15 are all below standard. The average score varies from 20% to 41%. Most learners face difficulties in using the prepositions *till, through, in, for, since* with time. The total result of prepositions of time test indicates that 63% passed the test.

### 3.2. Prepositions of place:

Table (2) results of prepositions of place.

Item		Correct answers	Incorrect answers	Percentage
17	My older brother lives.....Tripoli.	20	4	70.8%
18	He 'll be .....school all day.	16	6	66.6%
19	There were too many students.....the bus	1	23	4%
20	She was sitting .....the sun.	6	16	25%
21	I left my keys.....the table.	11	13	45.8%
22	Her father is sick.....hospital.	15	9	62.5%
23	I spoke to her .....the telephone.	2	22	8%
24	I live .....a small house.	17	7	70.8%
25	please, meet me .....the station.	4	20	16.6%
26	There are some pictures.....the wall.	6	18	25%
27	We'll meet.....the bus stop.	8	16	33.3%
28	They have built a bridge .....the river.	9	15	37.5%
29	I like to stay.....home.	16	8	66.6%
30	Libya lies .....Egypt and Algeria.	11	13	45.8%

The responses to questions 17, 18, 22, 24 and 29 are quite satisfactory. It seems that the students are familiar with the use of the prepositions *in* with places, *at* with school and home. However, the problem of using prepositions is clearly expressed in items no. 19, 20, 23, 25, 26, 27, and 28 where the results vary from 4% to 37%. The table above reveals that the average score obtained in prepositions of place is 61%. This means that 39% of the learners have difficulties with prepositions of place which is similar to the result of prepositions of time.

### 3.3. Prepositions of movement:

Table (3) results of prepositions of movement.

Item		Correct answers	Incorrect answers	percentage
31	The boy jumped .....the swimming pool.	9	15	37.5%
32	The thief ran .....the window.	5	19	20.8%
33	We spent a month travelling.....Libya.	6	18	25%
34	The dog ran.....the hill.	11	13	45.8%
35	I like walking.....the country roads.	5	19	20.8%
36	The gate was closed, so I climbed....the wall.	7	17	29%
37	I suddenly saw a cow running.....me.	6	18	25%
38	You have to go....the kitchen to get to the bath room	4	20	16.6%
39	The police asked the driver to get.....the car.	7	17	29%
40	There is a cafe just.... the bank.	11	13	45.8%

The results in table three are sheer indicators of the difficulties facing our university students in using prepositions of movements. As it can be seen from the table above most answers are below the standard. The total result is about 25% passed the test.

### 3.4. Results and discussion

The analysis of students' responses reveals systematic patterns of error rather than random mistakes. First, the highest error rate was observed in the use of place and movement prepositions, particularly the distinction between "in, on, at, along, through, out of, into". From a quantitative perspective, the distribution of errors suggests that nearly half of the participants struggled with at least two categories simultaneously, indicating that the problem is not isolated but systemic. This reinforces the hypothesis that insufficient exposure and L1 interference are primary contributing factors.

Pedagogically, these findings imply that traditional grammar instruction focusing on rules is insufficient. Instead, repeated exposure to authentic language, task-based learning techniques may also help learners notice and retain correct prepositional usage.

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## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1. Conclusion

By and large, I have, in this research, presented definitions of prepositions and their main usage in different situations. This study has shown that university students face significant difficulties in using English prepositions. These difficulties are mainly caused by the complexity of prepositions and the influence of Arabic such as (at, on, in). Incorrect use of prepositions can affect both grammatical accuracy and clarity of communication. Therefore, teachers should give special attention to teaching prepositions through context, practice and corrective feedback. With effective instruction and continuous exposure, learners can gradually reduce preposition errors and improve their overall language proficiency.

### 4.2 . Recommendations:

- Use real-life contexts:  
Teach prepositions through daily situations, classroom objects and familiar places. Emphasis should be placed on learning prepositions in context rather than in isolation
- Incorporate visual aids:  
Pictures, flash cards, maps and objects are useful for showing relationships of places, time, and movement, visual support makes abstract grammar clearer.
- Use communicative activities:  
Role-plays, pair work and games encourage students to use prepositions in speaking.
- Contrast with native language:  
Teachers should explain differences between English prepositions and Arabic especially when language transfer causes errors.
- Provide frequent practice:  
Use gap filling exercises, sentence writing, matching tasks and speaking activities regularly.
- Use technology-based resources:  
Authentic materials such as books, articles, interactive apps, videos and on-line grammar games can make learning prepositions more interesting.
- Prepositions should be given more space in the content of the course book at school levels.

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## Appendix

### Prepositions of time:

Choose a/ b/ or c.

1. I always get up .....six O'clock.  
a) In b) at c) on
2. They arrived .....Friday.  
a) on b) in c) at
3. She was born .....March.  
a) of b) in c) on

4. I'll see you.....lunch time.  
a) for b) on c) at
5. I don't like going out .....night.  
a) at b) in c) of
6. The bus will be leaving .....a few minutes.  
a) on b) at c) in
7. He works .....7 o'clock .....2 o'clock.  
a) from .. until b) to.. by c) at.. during
8. The school will be closed .....August.  
a) during b) at c) on
9. We sat there .....the end of the film.  
a) till b) on c) from
10. He is ..... work now.  
a) for b) in c) at
11. I usually go running .....breakfast.  
a) in b) before c) on
12. She has studied English .....six years.  
a) since b) in c) for
13. I have been learning English .....1999.  
a) for b) in c) since
14. My brother is .....holiday .  
a) in b) on c) at
15. Our English teacher is usually.....time.  
a) at b) till c) on
16. She was born .....the morning.  
a) in b) at c) on

**Prepositions of place:**

17. My older brother lives .....Tripoli.  
a) in b) at c) on
18. I'll be .....school all day.  
a) at b) in c) for
19. There were too many students .....the bus.  
a) at b) in c) on
20. She was sitting .....the sun .  
a) under b) in c) at
21. I left my keys .....the table.  
a) on b) at c) over
22. Her father is sick ..... hospital  
a) in b) on c) at

23. I spoke to her .....the telephone.  
a) by b) on c) in
24. I live .....a small house.  
a) on b) at c) in
25. Please, meet me .....the station.  
a) at b) along c) in
26. There are some pictures.....the wall.  
a) in b) above c) on
27. We will meet .....the bus stop.  
a) in b) on c) at
28. They built a bridge .....the river.  
a) over b) below c) under
29. I like to stay.....home.  
a) in b) at c) for
30. Libya lies .....Egypt and Algeria.  
a) after b) by c) between

**Prepositions of movement:**

31. The boy jumped.....the swimming pool.  
a) on b) over c) into
32. The thief jumped .....the window.  
a) out of b) into c) at
33. We spent a month travelling .....Libya.  
a) along b) across c) towards
34. The dog ran ..... the hill.  
a) over b) out of c) up
35. I like walking .....country roads.  
a) a long b) though c) to
36. The gate was closed so I climbed .....the wall.  
a) across b) along c) over
37. I suddenly saw a cow running .....me.  
a) at b) for c) towards
38. You have to go .....the kitchen to get to the bathroom.  
a) through b) across c) at
39. The police asked the driver to get .....the car.  
a) on b) in c) out of
40. There is a cafe just .....the bank.  
a) through b) at c) past

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