



Error Analysis: A Study of Prepositional Errors at Advanced and Intermediate Level in Pakistan

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Liaqat Iqbal*

Irfan Ullah†

Ayaz Ahmad‡

Abstract *The main purpose of this study was to contribute to a better understanding of the temporal preposition errors in order to have a positive impact on the teaching and learning process. The study investigated temporal preposition in the form of a test and questionnaire for the purpose of knowing the frequency and causes of these errors. The population consisted of intermediate and advanced level students at International Islamic University, Islamabad. Out of these, fifteen students were chosen from each level. Here the frequency of errors of both the groups is 58.89 % and the most problematic temporal prepositions were since, ago, between, over and throughout. The causes of error discovered were mostly overgeneralization and L1 interference.*

Key Words: Error, mistake, error analysis, contrastive analysis, EFL

Introduction

Error and mistakes are a very important aspect of learners' lives, where the first refers to incomplete learning while the second refers to poor performance. The language learning process unfolds in diverse forms related to a wide array of underlying causes. Historically, the causes were attributed to the concept of separation of language systems in the minds of the learners. Therefore, no middle ground was allowed to exist between full competence and no competence. Partial knowledge of the language was attributed to the influence of the first language on the process and product of second language learning (Corder, 1967, 1971 & 1974). Many people have worked in the field of error analysis (Richards, 1974; Norrish, 1983; Ellis, 1995; Keshavarz, 2003; Şanal, 2007; Darus, 2009). They have identified different reasons for errors which include first language interference, overgeneralization of rules, fossilization, and underuse etc. First language is supposed to permanently imprint on the psychological and neurological constitution of a person, therefore, learning of subsequent languages is affected by this imprint of the first language. First language learning might positively or negatively affect the second language learning. In negative interference implies first language features that are absent in the second language while the positive interference means the first language features' presence in the second language leads to confusion of the learner. Overgeneralization means the application of a particular rule of the second language everywhere for instance the use of regular plural and tense formation rules for inflexion of the irregular nouns and verbs. Fossilization in the biological maturation and behaviorist tradition means the loss of mental, neurological, psychological and biological plasticity with growth. It is believed that a child is capable of learning any language at birth, however, this ability deteriorates as the child grows up and in adolescence, this ability becomes significantly restricted. Moreover, the theory proposes that language competence depends on practice, the competence in a second language decreases due to lack of use. The period of childhood is therefore proposed to optimum for gaining the highest competence in the second language and adults' mastery of the second language remains restricted. Moreover, an adult relies on the inefficient mechanism of learning the second language through rationalization and conceptualization of grammar, while children have an edge over adults as the acquire language in a natural way and remain the optimal users of grammar.

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, KP, Pakistan.
Email: liaqatiqbal@gmail.com

†Assistant Professor, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

‡Lecturer, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

In Pakistan, English, being a second language, is taught as a compulsory subject from the very beginning in schools and colleges. Here, different methods of teaching English are used depending on the background of the students and school status but still, it is a problematic area ranging from orthographic to morphological and syntactic systems. That is why learners of English language seek admissions in different language institutes and universities to build on their existing knowledge of English and have some improvements. In this study, we have worked on such learners of two different proficiency levels, i.e., advanced and intermediate levels. In Pakistan, which is a multilingual society and English being a second language, they face different problems in different areas of English. These problematic areas lead to errors and mistakes. Though errors are the part and parcels of learners' lives, still either being unaware of such problems or not having the common understanding of such problems, they make errors knowingly or unknowingly, which in some cases, if not remedied on proper time, may lead to fossilization and hence, not easy to be quitted later. One type of such problematic area is the proper use of preposition and more specifically, which this study focuses on, is of temporal prepositions. The reason for choosing temporal preposition is that they constitute the smallest group of prepositions, which are almost 18 in number and hence easy to test. The prepositions considered in this study are "before, after, since, until, by, at, for, in, within, on, during, through, throughout, over, from, to, between, and ago".

It is a fact that being unaware of the particular point of time or interval in time, i.e., absolute function, e.g., since, on, by, until, etc., and relative functions e.g. ago, before, in, for, within, and after, etc. or some other grey areas, learners' lack in the proper use of preposition of time. This can either be because of the inappropriate teaching method where rules about the use of prepositions are not made clear, interference from the source language into the target language, a generalization of rules or some other reasons.

Usually, the purpose of error analysis is to investigate those problematic areas, which result in errors. Though correcting errors by teachers in written work is a common practice but still, students are disheartened by such practices when they see a red line on their work. Despite the fact that errors are corrected but still no attention is given to error analysis where systematic analysis is carried out and students are helped out. As errors are meaningful and that is why different errors are to be categorized and patterns of errors are to be observed. Based on those patterns of errors, remedial work is to be sought out.

Now, the objective of the present study is not categorizing different types of errors but just to focus on temporal prepositions and observe the trouble spots. Secondly, two different proficiency levels of learners, i.e., advanced and intermediate level, are chosen for the purpose of investigating the differences in terms of the causes of errors that whether this is because of teaching or some other reasons. Thirdly, instead of oral work, the written test was used for the analysis in order to be more precise to test specific temporal prepositions, which are mentioned above and also to be at ease and have something concrete for the analysis. Finally, this study also aims to present some guidelines for teachers when they teach temporal prepositions in English and it is hoped to change their stigmatized beliefs about error correction and error analysis and hence, it would contribute to the field of education and educational research.

Methodology

Two groups of intermediate and advanced level students of the Department of English Languages and Literature of the International Islamic University, Islamabad were the subjects of this study. As the exam was about to come and learners were preparing for it, so the majority of the students were not available. In order to collect data, convenience sampling was used, and fifteen out of forty learners at each level were selected.

The research instruments used in this study consisted of a questionnaire and temporal preposition test where blanks were provided in order to get students' focus more specific to the use of temporal prepositions. The purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate the causes of learners' errors from the learners by themselves for substantiating the researchers' arguments.

The data collected by the test and questionnaire were analyzed in two steps. In the first step, the learners' test was analyzed to have an understanding of the temporal prepositional errors. In the second step, the questionnaire was analyzed for knowing the causes and possible sources of errors. In this way, while strictly focusing on temporal prepositional tests and questionnaires, the data were collected and analyzed. This helped in the completion of the process in the form of a descriptive report.

Results and Discussions

In this section, first, the frequencies of the learners' errors of both the groups are presented, for which item wise test results are given as the following:

Total Correct Responses of Both the Groups

For the purpose to know the difference in the correct responses between the two groups, it is obvious that the students of the advanced level performed better on the test (45.92 %) than the students of intermediate level (36.30 %). This is shown in the following tables:

Table 1. Rate of correct and incorrect answers of intermediate and advanced level

S.No.	Intermediate Level		Advanced Level	
	Correct Responses	Incorrect Responses	Correct Responses	Incorrect Responses
1	9	6	15	0
2	10	5	11	4
3	3	12	9	6
4	10	5	12	3
5	10	5	9	6
6	0	15	1	14
7	4	11	7	8
8	7	8	9	6
9	2	13	6	9
10	6	9	7	8
11	12	3	8	7
12	11	4	13	2
13	5	10	5	10
14	4	11	3	12
15	0	15	1	14
16	0	15	1	14
17	0	15	0	15
18	5	10	7	8
Total	98	172	124	146

Table 2. The percentage value of the total correct and incorrect answers of intermediate and advanced level

S.No.	Intermediate Level		Advanced Level	
	Correct Responses %	Incorrect Responses %	Correct Responses %	Incorrect Responses %
1	60	40	100	0
2	66.66	33.34	73.34	26.66
3	20	80	60	40
4	66.66	33.34	80	20
5	66.66	33.34	60	40
6	0	100	6.66	93.34
7	26.66	73.34	46.66	53.34
8	46.66	53.34	60	40
9	13.34	86.66	40	60
10	40	60	46.66	53.34
11	80	20	53.34	46.66

12	73.34	26.66	86.66	13.34
13	33.34	66.66	33.34	66.66
14	26.66	73.34	20	80
15	0	100	6.66	93.34
16	0	100	6.66	93.34
17	0	100	0	100
18	33.34	66.66	46.66	53.34
Total	36.30	63.70	45.92	54.08

Correct Responses

In this section, correct responses of both the groups are analyzed with respect to the individual item.

Item No. 1

He's not home _____ present. Try later.

As it is mentioned earlier that the test and questionnaire were conducted by thirty students of the intermediate and advanced level while answering this item, the answers of 24 students were correct and six were incorrect. Out of these twenty-four students, 9 (60 %) correct responses came from the intermediate level and 15 (100 %) correct responses came from the advanced level students. Most of them replaced “at” by “in”, which means that first language interference was dominant as we say *woh ghar mein nahi hai*. The *mein* is taken for *in*.

Item No. 2

He came to this country _____ August 5, 1968.

This item was answered correctly by 21 students and the ratio between intermediate and advanced level was almost equal. Out of these twenty-one students, 10 (66.66 %) correct responses came from the intermediate level and 11 (73.34 %) correct responses came from the advanced level. Here “on” was mostly replaced by “at” and “in”, and it seems that it is because of L1 interference.

Item No. 3

We'll be ready to leave _____ an hour from now.

This item was answered correctly by 12 students. Out of these twelve students, 3 (20 %) correct responses came from intermediate level and 9 (60 %) correct responses came from the advanced level students. Here “after” or “in” was mostly replaced by “at” and it seems that it is because of ignorance of rule restriction.

Item No. 4

The reception will be on Sunday at four _____ the afternoon.

This item was answered correctly by 22 students. Out of these twenty two students, 10 (66.66 %) correct responses came from intermediate level and 12 (80 %) correct responses came from the advanced level students. Here “in” was mostly replaced by “at” and it seems that it is also because of the ignorance of rule restriction.

Item No. 5

I had dinner I read an interesting article.

This item was answered correctly by 19 students. Out of these nineteen students, 10 (66.66 %) correct responses came from intermediate level and 9 (60 %) correct responses came from the advanced level students. Here “after” was mostly replaced by “then” and it seems that it is L1 interference or translation error.

Item No. 6

She has been working _____ yesterday.

This item was answered correctly by one student and that was from an advanced level. Here “since” was mostly replaced by “to” and it is L1 interference.

Item No. 7

The decorations were up from spring _____ fall.

This item was answered correctly by 11 students. Out of these eleven students, 4 (26.66%) correct responses came from intermediate level and 7 (46.66%) correct responses came from the advanced level. Here, “until” was mostly replaced by “in” and it seems that it is because of incomplete application of rules.

Item No. 8

I have to pay the rent _____ the 5th of every month.

This item was answered correctly by 16 students. Out of these sixteen students, 7 (46.66%) correct responses came from the intermediate level and 9 (60%) correct responses came from the advanced level. Here “on” or “by” was mostly replaced by “to” and it is because of L1 interference as we say in Urdu “*mujhe har mahene ke paanch tarekh ko karaya deina huga*”. The “ko” from the first language interferes the “on” of the second language.

Item No. 9

We'll just keep busy _____ now until the boss gets back.

This item was answered correctly by 8 students. Out of these eight students, 2 (13.34 %) correct responses came from intermediate level and 6 (40 %) correct responses came from the advanced level. Here, quite interestingly “from” was mostly replaced by “at” and it seems that it is because of overgeneralization.

Item No. 10

We must finish the project _____ a year.

This item was answered correctly by 13 students. Out of these thirteen students, 6 (40 %) correct responses came from intermediate level and 7 (46.66 %) correct responses came from the advanced level. Here random responses came from the students but most of them replied “of” instead of “within” and it is because of overgeneralization.

Item No. 11

The summer vacation I rented a boat twice.

This item was answered correctly by 20 students. Out of these twenty students, 12 (80 %) correct responses came from intermediate level and 8 (53.34 %) correct responses came from the advanced level. Here “during” or “in” was mostly replaced by “at” and it seems that it is because of overgeneralization.

Item No. 12

The movie was from August _____ October.

This item was answered correctly by 24 students. Out of these twenty four students, 11 (73.34%) correct responses came from intermediate level and 13 (86.66 %) correct responses came from the advanced level. Here “till” or “to” was mostly replaced by “in” and “on” and it seems that it is because of overgeneralization.

Item No. 13

The decorations were up _____ spring until fall.

This item was answered correctly by 10 students. Out of these ten students, 5 (33.34%) correct responses came from the intermediate level and 5 (33.34 %) correct responses came from the advanced level. Here “from” was mostly replaced by “in” and it seems that it is because of overgeneralization.

Item No. 14

Three years _____ I was studying in a school.

This item was answered correctly by 7 students. Out of these seven students, 4 (26.66 %) correct responses came from intermediate level and 3(20 %) correct responses came from the advanced level of students. Here “ago” was completely replaced by “before” and it seems that it is because of L1 interference or translation.

Item No. 15

Let's meet _____ two and three.

This item was answered correctly by one student and that was from the advanced level. Here “between” was completely replaced by “at” and it seems that it is because of overgeneralization.

Item No. 16

The show is _____.

This item too was answered correctly only by one student and that was also from the advanced level. Here “over” was replaced by “end” and it is a translation error.

Item No. 17

His sacrifices continued _____ the years.

This item was not answered correctly by anybody and “through” was replaced either by “for” or “in” and it is because of overgeneralization.

Item No. 18

He remained busy _____ the year.

This item was answered correctly by 12 students. Out of these twelve students, 5 (33.34 %) correct responses came from the intermediate level and 7 (46.66 %) correct responses came from the advanced level. Here “throughout” was mostly replaced by “in”, which is acceptable for communication purpose but not grammatically correct and it seems that it is because of overgeneralization.

Causes of Learners’ Errors

Secondly, the researcher was interested to know the causes of learners’ errors, so for this purpose questionnaire results with some reference to the test results are discussed here. It was obvious from the test that most of the learners’ errors were because of overgeneralization and L1 interference. The following responses came from the students in the questionnaire.

When students were asked the difficulties or errors that occurred in the test were because of (Question No. 1: It is similar to the Urdu structure; and Q. No. 2: I know the grammatical rule, but just have a problem relating the structure from Urdu to English) the mother language, 36.66 % to the first question and 43.34% to the second question answered that it is because of our mother language contrast with English language that leads to errors. To Q. No. 3: I know the rule well, but occasionally make errors of this type because of the lack of practice and Q. No. 4: I forgot the rule, 46.67 %, and 23.33 % respectively of students were agreed that the errors were because of incomplete rules learning.

To Q. No. 5: The teacher’s explanations were not clear and Q. No. 6: The structure has not been taught yet, (30 %) and (43.33 %) respectively, of students answered that the errors are because of teaching. To Q. No. 7: I apply the same rules of one category of prepositional use in the other category of the preposition, 26.67 % of students were agreed and 50 % were undecided and did not know the reason.

Table 3. Rate of intermediate and advanced level responses to the questionnaire

Q.No	Intermediate Level			Advanced Level			Total		
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1	5	1	9	6	4	5	9	5	14
2	8	4	3	5	5	5	13	9	8

3	6	5	4	8	4	3	14	9	7
4	4	6	5	3	8	4	7	14	9
5	4	4	7	5	4	6	9	8	13
6	7	3	5	6	4	5	13	7	10
7	2	8	5	6	7	2	8	15	7

Table 4. The percentage value of intermediate and advanced level responses to the questionnaire

Q. No.	Intermediate Level			Advanced Level			Total		
	Agree%	Undecided%	Disagree	Agree%	Undecided%	Disagree%	Agree%	Undecided %	Disagree %
1	33.34	6.66	60	40	26.66	33.34	36.66	16.66	46.68
2	53.34	26.66	20	33.33	33.33	33.34	43.34	30	26.68
3	40	33.34	26.66	53.33	26.66	20	46.67	30	23.33
4	26.66	40	33.34	20	53.34	26.66	23.33	46.67	30
5	26.66	26.66	46.66	33.34	26.66	40	30	26.66	43.34
6	46.66	20	33.34	40	26.66	33.34	43.33	23.33	33.34
7	13.33	53.33	33.34	40	46.66	13.34	26.67	50	23.33

To sum, it can be said that a test consisted of eighteen blanks was attempted by thirty students of both the intermediate and advanced level of students. Out of fifteen intermediate level students, 98 (36.30 %) came up with correct and 172 (63.70%) with incorrect responses; on the other hand, out of fifteen students of advanced level, 124 (45.92 %) correct and 146 (54.08 %) incorrect responses came. If we compare advanced level students' correct answers: 124 (45.92 %) with intermediate level correct answers: 98 (36.30%), it is obvious that advanced level students are far better than intermediate students which confirms the first presupposition that teaching does matter. Here, the frequency of errors of both the groups is 58.89 %, which is higher than fifty percent and the more problematic temporal prepositions were since, ago, between, over and throughout, were almost 6.66 % correct and 93.34 % incorrect responses came.

Secondly, when we considered the causes of errors, it was found that most of the students' errors were because of overgeneralization and L1 interference. The questionnaire result also shows that 26.67 % of students agreed against 23.33 % that the errors are because of overgeneralization. In the same way, in question two, where students were asked: I know the grammatical rule, but just have a problem relating the structure from Urdu to English, most of the students, i.e., 43.34 % agreed against 26.68 % who did not agree. It shows mother tongue interference. The respondents over use of grammar can be attributed to their age as after the passage of the childhood learners depend on rationalization and conceptualization of the second language through the lens of grammar. Moreover, Grammar Translation Method is used for English language teaching in such a way that learners cram up the definition of grammatical categories but remain handicapped in learning of language. Most of the learners become over-users of grammars, and some become under-users, while very few achieve the balance in the use of grammar and become optimal users. Teachers also ignore the disadvantage of the over-use and under-use of grammar by the learners. They force the students to prepare for the upcoming large-scale examinations of SSC (Secondary School Certificate) and HSSC (Higher Secondary School Certificate) where the focus on the overt knowledge of grammar is rewarded and application of grammar in language and communication is ignored. Another, an indicator of GTM is also observed in the study as the first language of the learners and its translation into and from English posed a significant challenge for the learners.

Conclusion

This study was an attempt to contribute to an understanding of temporal prepositional errors. This study focused on different temporal prepositions and an effort was made to know about their possible sources and causes. In this study, it was observed that temporal preposition is the problematic area of students, where error results from different sources but the two main sources are L1 interference and overgeneralization. So, remedial work should be carried out while keeping in view these two possible sources of learners' temporal prepositional errors.

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