

Article no 5

The Use of Prepositions in English Among Arab Students

A Comparative Study of English and Arabic Use of Prepositions Amongst Arab Native Speakers

Key Words: conjunctions – set of verbs – native language – prepositions of time – prepositions of place – gerund verbs – polysemous (having multiple meanings) – incomprehensible – ontological – nuances.

In this article the researcher raises the problem that Arab students have when they use prepositions in English because of the quite apparent differences between the prepositions in English and Arabic, there are much more prepositions in English than in Arabic which leads to ambiguity among Arab students in using prepositions in English.

The researcher gives some examples of common mistakes that Arab students make a lot when they write or speak.

The researcher put the prepositions in three categories, prepositions of place/time and other important prepositions in purpose to facilitate the correct use of prepositions for Arab students.

Arab students face a real problem with using incorrect prepositions when they write compositions in English because of the quite difference in using prepositions in both languages.

For example many of our students write (Wait me) instead of (Wait for me), that's because in the Arabic language there is no preposition after the verb (wait), it's not the case in Hebrew since they have a preposition after the verb (wait).

It is so important to acknowledge the great importance of the use of prepositions in English sentences.

Statistics show that one English page contains about 300 prepositions, 200 pronouns and 100 conjunctions and other form words. In other words, there are about 600 form Prepositions pose major problems when translated from Arabic into English or vice versa. The accurate mapping between English-Arabic and Arabic-English

prepositions are sometimes very difficult to determine by Arab learners. This article is designed to identify the difficulties concerning preposition, which Arab students may face when translating into English or vice-versa.[10, pp. 344-361].

English prepositions have always been a source of great difficulty for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners regardless of his or her mother tongue [3, p-250]. One reason for this is because EFL learners usually try to relate the use of English prepositions to their mother tongue (MT) prepositional system. In many instances, the difference in the number of prepositions and the lack of a one to one mapping between the English and the MT prepositions is the source of the difficulty. In addition to this, since prepositional usage in English can be highly idiomatic (especially in preposition verbs and phrasal verbs), the nuances of idiomatic usage of English prepositions are highly challenging to EFL learners and even native speakers are sometimes unsure of the correct form (Gass S, 1983: 161).

Furthermore, problems EFL learners have with the prepositions are compounded by the fact that prepositions, in general, are highly polysemous and represents an ontological category that is highly conceptual. These means that EFL learners are often confronted with making decisions as to which prepositions to use since the conceptual mapping in the mother tongue might be different. Thus, prepositions usage often stand in the way of achieving grammatical fluency and accuracy for the EFL learners. Among Arab EFL learners, prepositions are considered to be the most difficult because of cross linguistics differences between the Arabic and English prepositional system. The language specific differences between the Arabic and English prepositions that are not present in the Arabic language. [9, pp. 327-344].

In learning these prepositions , Arabic EFL learners sometimes transfer their mother tongue system with a limited number of prepositions to transfer their usage of English prepositions resulting in incorrect English prepositional usage and the lack of idiomaticity. Sometime, inaccuracy in prepositional usage (especially in translation) are also produced as a result of the cross-linguistic differences [11]. This paper examines the problems Arab EFL learners have with the basic English

prepositions at, in and on and attempts to account for their difficulties with these English prepositions through a comparative study of the Arabic prepositional system.

words per 100 sentences. [2, p.4] "It is self-evident that omitting these words from the text might make it absolutely incomprehensible, and their wrong usage would lead to misunderstanding it"[4, pp.47-59].

The number of prepositions in English is much more than in Arabic, hence many Arab students make a lot of mistakes in using one preposition like (**to**), as the following example, where they have to use another one.

“When they learn the implication or the direction of the prepositions "**up, down, to, at**" they also learn that while "**to**" and "**at**" can be expressed by one preposition in Arabic /ila /, yet they are independent of each other in English, and they usually follow different sets of verbs. The students also notice that "**up**" is the opposite of "**down**".[2, p- 28]

Prepositions are short words (on, in, to) that usually stand in front of nouns (sometimes also in front of gerund verbs).

Even advanced learners of English find prepositions difficult, as a 1:1 translation is usually not possible. One preposition in your native language might have several translations depending on the situation.

There are hardly any rules as to when to use which preposition. The only way to learn prepositions is looking them up in a dictionary, reading a lot in English literature and learning useful phrases by heart. .[5, p. 42].

The following table contains rules for some of the most frequently used prepositions in English: [6]

Prepositions – Time

English	Usage	Example
on	days of the week	on Monday
in	months / seasons	in August / in winter

English	Usage	Example
	time of day year after a certain period of time (<i>when?</i>)	in the morning in 2006 in an hour
at	for <i>night</i> for <i>weekend</i> a certain point of time (<i>when?</i>)	at night at the weekend at half past nine
since	from a certain point of time (past till now)	since 1980
for	over a certain period of time (past till now)	for 2 years
ago	a certain time in the past	2 years ago
before	earlier than a certain point of time	before 2004
to	telling the time	ten to six (5:50)
past	telling the time	ten past six (6:10)
to / till / until	marking the beginning and end of a period of time	from Monday to/till Friday
till / until	in the sense of <i>how long something is going to last</i>	He is on holiday until Friday.
by	in the sense of <i>at the latest</i> up to a certain time	I will be back by 6 o'clock. By 11 o'clock, I had read five pages.

Prepositions – Place (Position and Direction)

English	Usage	Example
in	room, building, street, town, country book, paper etc. car, taxi picture, world	in the kitchen, in London in the book in the car, in a taxi in the picture, in the world
at	meaning <i>next to, by an object</i> for <i>table</i> for events place where you are to do something typical (watch a film, study, work)	at the door, at the station at the table at a concert, at the party at the cinema, at school, at work
on	Attached for a place with a river being on a surface for a certain side (left, right) for a floor in a house for public transport for <i>television, radio</i>	the picture is on the wall London lies on the Thames. on the table on the left on the first floor on the bus, on a plane on TV, on the radio
by, next to, beside	left or right of somebody or something	Jane is standing by / next to / beside the car.
under	on the ground, lower than (or	the bag is under the table

English	Usage	Example
	covered by) something else	
below	lower than something else but above ground	the fish are below the surface
over	covered by something else meaning <i>more than</i> getting to the other side (also <i>across</i>) overcoming an obstacle	put a jacket over your shirt over 16 years of age walk over the bridge climb over the wall
above	higher than something else, but not directly over it	a path above the lake
across	getting to the other side (also <i>over</i>) getting to the other side	walk across the bridge swim across the lake
through	something with limits on top, bottom and the sides	drive through the tunnel
to	movement to person or building movement to a place or country for <i>bed</i>	go to the cinema go to London / Ireland go to bed
into	enter a room / a building	go into the kitchen / the house
towards	movement in the direction of something (but not directly to it)	go 5 steps towards the house
onto	movement to the top of something	jump onto the table
from	in the sense of <i>where from</i>	a flower from the garden

Other important Prepositions

English	Usage	Example
from	who gave it	a present from Jane
of	who/what does it belong to what does it show	a page of the book the picture of a palace
by	who made it	a book by Mark Twain
on	walking or riding on horseback entering a public transport vehicle	on foot, on horseback get on the bus
in	entering a car / Taxi	get in the car
off	leaving a public transport vehicle	get off the train get off the bus
out of	leaving a car / Taxi	get out of the taxi
by	rise or fall of something travelling (other than walking or horse riding)	prices have risen by 10 percent by car, by bus
at	for <i>age</i>	she learned Russian at 45
about	for topics, meaning <i>what about</i>	we were talking about you

There are some common mistakes that our Arab students make when they write an essay or simple sentences that include prepositions, as an English teacher in the junior high school, I would like to mention some of them.

Our students write for example: My father works **in** a farm instead of **on**, Birds live **on** a tree instead of **in**, He is standing **on** the bus stop instead of **at**, We traveled **in** the boat instead of **on** and the same with a ship and bus.

The reason of these mistakes that in Arabic we have only **in** in the same meaning of at, and **on** when we mean something not inside but just as an opposite of under.

The same thing we have in prepositions of time we use just **in** in Arabic not **on** as it used for days and **at** as it used with time, so our weak students write **in** Monday instead of **on** and **in** 7 o'clock instead of **at**.

2. Comparison between English and Arabic prepositions (**fii...in**), (**ala...on**)

English language researchers are well aware that English prepositional usage is one of the Arab learners are also expected to find similar difficulties in the use of English prepositions because although Arabic and English prepositions have some characteristics in common, they differ in both number and usage. There are only twenty Arabic prepositions the most important and commonly used are six prepositions, (min, ila, ala, ba, la, fi), [1, pp.41-50] while in English there are one hundred fifty prepositions [7, p-26].

A preposition by definition expresses a relationship between two entities: it indicates a relationship in space (between one object and another), and/or a relationship in time (between events), and/or a more abstract relationship. So, the first characteristic is that neither Arabic nor English prepositions can stand by themselves: they get their meanings through their usage in contexts. The other characteristics is that the number of prepositions in English is more than Arabic in Arabic is limited, as mentioned above; but, at the same time, each preposition may have to serve variety of purposes. The same preposition may express time or place and be followed by a noun, a verb, an adverb or an adjective; also it may be used idiomatically.

The main problem for these learners lies firstly in the fact that not every Arabic preposition has definite equivalent in English and vice versa, and secondly, in that not every English or Arabic preposition has a definite usage and meaning, indicating only time or place or following preceding a certain word. The most problematic of all prepositions for both place and time.

“fii and on”. The first example the Arabic preposition ” **fii**” is used as an equivalent instead of **“in, into, at, on, during’, within, and inside.”**

This particular preposition has therefore great semantic power in both standard and colloquial Arabic: it's the filter through which all these English equivalents must pass. It is used to denote time and place and occurs with many different Arabic words in abstract and metaphorical usages. Therefore “

fii'

as well as other Arabic prepositions interferes the selection and usage of English once.

Fii

1. I slept **in** bed. (Correct response) (In)
2. Spring begins **in** the first of March. (On)
3. **In** the end of the journey we brought fruit. (At)
4. **In** my last holiday I did many different things. (During)
5. I went home **in** happily. (**in** must be dropped before an adverb)
6. The plane is flying **into** the sky. (In) The first English preposition that is likely to be produced as the equivalent of the Arabic preposition fii is “in” as shown in the first sentence where it is used correctly.[1, pp. 41-50].

Another problem in this area is caused by the English language, which in certain places allows a reasonable degree of freedom of choice with regard to certain prepositions and prepositional phrases. These choices sometimes, confuse the Arab learners to such an extent that he or she may choose the wrong item, which would, again, negatively influence the quality of the translation. These two main pitfalls in the prepositional from Arabic into English.

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Sep. 2014

