

THE USE OF PREPOSITIONS AMONG MALAY ADULT ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT: *One predicament facing an educationist is whether grammar should be taught formally, or allowed to be naturally acquired. A protracted case study was carried out on seven Malay students from the International Islamic University Malaysia to determine the extent to which students acquired English prepositions in the naturalistic setting. Data from students' interviews and presentations were collected initially, and subsequently at six monthly intervals over three years. An analysis of students' use of prepositions was carried out. Results showed that although errors persist, most subjects showed improvements in their use of prepositions. These findings imply that grammar should be taught in a way that is compatible with the natural processes of acquisition. Language instructors should also be equipped with special skills to be able to teach prepositions. Learners should also be developmentally ready to acquire prepositions, and changes have to be made in the curriculum for instruction of prepositions.*

KEYWORDS: Prepositions, Malay Adult, ESL Learners

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The learning of another language, referred to as second language acquisition (SLA) can take place either in the classroom or in a more 'natural' exposure situation (Gass and Selinker, 2001). Gass, Torres and Jose (2005) found that the complexity and abstractness contribute to the differential effects on language areas, where learners make use of externally driven enhancement devices. Loewen (2005), concluded that incidental focus on form, assisted learners to improve their linguistic accuracy while they were engaged in meaning-focused lessons. Meyer (1995) suggested that emphasis on grammar may be needed when the bottom-up linguistic skills of learners are not sufficient to be able to process the content of the input, or to reformulate that content when carrying out their own writing tasks.

Norton (2000) supports Bremer et al's (1996) finding that L2 was not learned through conversational interaction, because he felt that the learners were in a situation where they needed the language to communicate, but at the same time had to communicate to be able to learn the language. DeKeyser (2005) points out that in naturalistic language acquisition situations, there is an increased role of more implicit learning relying heavily on associative memory, where there is more time, and when the pattern of grammatical morphemes is much less salient. Pica (1983), found no significant alteration in the accuracy order in which grammatical morphemes were produced in both formal classroom instruction and learning in the naturalistic environment. Gorokhova (1990) studied the acquisition of English articles and concluded that only a few subjects of her study reached high levels.

Focusing next on the influence of L1, studies in Finland (Ringbom, 1987) concluded that L1 is important in L2 learning. Whong-Barr and Schwartz (2002) in an analysis of the L2 acquisition literature found clear evidence of language transfer in relation to the dative alternation.

With the introduction of the communicative approach in second language teaching and learning, there seems to be a strong tendency to not focus on linguistic forms and to reduce emphasis on grammar teaching (Nassaji, 2000). It also caused a change in emphasis in language learning to those activities that required a negotiation of meaning, learning being a more rapid process than acquisition (Wright, 1999). The communicative syllabus changed the emphasis from form to meaning. However, in countries where English is the second language, there may not be sufficient structure for the language to get the message across (Roberts, 1995). Wu (1995) suggests that form-based instruction is not just confined to the teaching of grammar rules using meta-linguistic terminologies. Grammar should not be taught in isolation for its own sake, but as social function and as discourse (Celce-Murcia and Hills, 1988). However, too much emphasis on grammar in reading and listening tasks distracts learners and is also not relevant for them (Celce-Murcia, 1991). In a further study on focus on form, Muranoi (2000) examined the impact of interaction enhancement on learning, and concluded that guiding learners to focus on form within meaning-focused instruction based on cognitive theories of L2 acquisition, is beneficial.

One of the concepts of applied linguistics is the focus on the most effective form of grammar instruction in the communicative classroom (Doughty and Williams, 1998; Lightbown, 2000; Norris and Ortega, 2000). Krashen (1981) expounds his communicative pedagogy with the view that grammar instruction has no interface with second-language acquisition, while Mangubhai et al (2005) maintain that the research is inconclusive as to whether teachers have developed a clear and comprehensive understanding of the use of communicative language teaching. Ellis (1997) says that it is based on the assumption that learners do not need to be taught grammar to allow them to communicate, but, rather, they will acquire it naturally as part of the process of learning to communicate. Consequently, in some versions of communicative language teaching, there is no direct teaching of grammar (Ellis, 1997).

One argument against the teaching of grammar is that teachers may be so preoccupied with efforts to correct and eradicate mistakes, that they may miss the objective of learning the language - that of being able to function in society (Crismore, Ngeow and Soo, 1996). Selinker and Lamendella (1981) have claimed that language learning takes place at the unconscious level. The naturalistic context, does not involve formal instruction, but the learner is involved in various every day interactions, and has to rely on his background knowledge, learning strategies, and intuition to cope. Various authors (Norton, 2000; Goldstein, 2001) have shown that in naturalistic language learning, the actual exposure to the target language may be much less than expected because many factors affect the quantity and quality of the input. Zhang, Yanyin, Widyastuti, and Ima (2010) point out that the higher the proficiency in L2, the better the acquisition of the language.

Ellis (2002) suggests that language acquisition can be speeded up by explicit instruction. Support for this view has been provided by others like Smith (1994) and Govindasamy (1994), who have argued that imparting the formal properties of language or 'consciousness raising' assists in language learning. It has been proposed that formal instruction is 'consciousness raising' (Ellis, 1990; Schmidt, 1990). This term has been used by Rutherford and Smith (1985)

to indicate increased learner awareness of particular linguistic features. Rutherford and Smith (1988), however, point out that grammatical consciousness raising, referring to developing knowledge of grammatical features of a language, has been long used as a pedagogic tool, as far back as a thousand years to the study of Latin grammar.

With respect to Malaysian ESL learners, Ismail (2005) found that characteristics like linguistic focus, complexity, type of feedback, source and direction of form focused instruction influenced the frequency of uptake and the degree of success. Govindasamy and Nambiar (2006) found that there is a great tendency for Malay speakers to use formulaic expressions. Another study on Malay ESL college students found improvements in clarity and coherence of their language with instruction (Govindasamy, 1994). Focusing on prepositions, Ruziah Md Zin (2006) found that error identification drills minimized wrongly used prepositions. Wong and Chong (2006) concluded that the majority of the learners were able to recognize and judge appropriately the surface structure of the grammatical stimuli with English locational and directional prepositions but become less determinate in their judgments of directional reading with English directional prepositions. Mohideen (1991) identifies the preposition system as one of the grammar items in the English language that pose persistent difficulty to Malaysian students.

Considering the acquisition of prepositions Lindstromberg (1991) feels that the main cause of the difficulties that ESL learners face in acquiring prepositions, is their wrong understanding of prepositions. Apart from this, the acquisition of preposition stranding and preposition pied piping have been described (Bardovi-Harlig, 1987). It has also been suggested that learners acquire a dative rule that may vary in the usage of prepositions, with a tendency to overgeneralise the use of prepositions derived from the double object sentence form (Gropen et al, 1989). McDonough (2006) concluded that syntactic priming occurred only with dative prepositions, but not with double-object datives. Pavesi (1987) postulates that the learning setting - classroom versus naturalistic – could affect variability and systematicity in second language acquisition, with specific reference to prepositions. With respect to the analysis of preposition usage, Sandra and Rice (1995) concluded that usage of spatial prepositions accesses a different semantic representation compared to the locative prepositions. There is also a definite order with respect to accuracy that is independent of the learner's mother tongue, age and whether or not they have received formal language instruction (Dulay and Burt, 1974, 1973; Bailey, Madden and Krashen, 1974).

In assessing competence in the use of prepositions, error analysis is most commonly used. Schmidt (1990) points out that errors in language use are due to not knowing the rules of grammar, forgetting them or, even, not paying attention to them. Ellis (1997) points out that investigation of L2 acquisition could focus on the types of errors made by learners, and how these errors change over time. From this, developmental patterns can be identified by describing the stages in the acquisition of specific grammatical features. Gorokhova (1990) indicates that error analysis has played a major role in research on L2 acquisition. Duskova (1983) concluded that it was a combination of the native and target languages that contributed to the errors, while Schumann (1979) found in addition, that developmental factors contributed to errors. It has been found to be more difficult to spot errors in spoken, informal language as compared to written, formal texts. Kramersch (1998) suggests that conversational speech is transient, in the sense that speech is almost spontaneous.

Statement of the Problem

In Malaysia, English used to be the medium of instruction and the language of administration in the colonial days till independence in 1957, and for about a decade after that. However, with the implementation of the National Language Policy in 1967, the English language was gradually phased out as the main medium of instruction in primary, secondary and tertiary education in the country. The national language, *Bahasa Malaysia* (BM), supplanted English as the premier language of the nation. This reduction of the importance in the use of the English language has implications for the ESL classroom situation in Malaysia.

In addition, there were also changes in grammar teaching in Malaysian Schools with a shift in emphasis from structure to teaching language as a means of communication, resulting in many diverse and controversial views amongst local ESL teachers. Instead of teaching notions and functions of grammar, the communicative approach was introduced wherein grammar was integrated with the literary skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. This resulted in a deterioration of students' grammar skills, especially in the use of grammatical items. Asmah (1987) contends that English is still recognized as important in facilitating international trade, diplomacy, and to advance science and technology in the country. There are three major ethnic communities in Malaysia – the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Asmah (1992) elucidates reasons for the Malays facing difficulties in acquiring grammar, like understanding the notion of time with the use of tenses, since the Malay language does not have a tense system. Gill (1993) points out that there has been cross-fertilization between Malay, English and the various ethnic languages in Malaysia like Cantonese and Tamil. Thus, English in urban Malaysia, influenced by the other local languages, has many variations. Kaur (1995) contended that there was a need for English language instruction to be continued in Malaysian schools, possibly with greater emphasis.

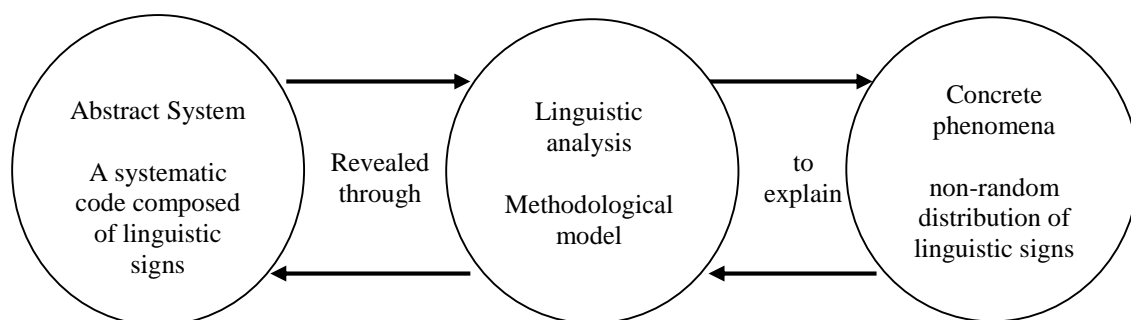
Purpose of the Study

This study focuses on the ultimate attainment of mastering prepositions by Malay ESL learners, in the absence of formal teaching focused on prepositions.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The theories of second language acquisition especially those concerning naturalistic learning have been the subject of much debate and analysis. However, little by way of scientific analysis has been done. To be able to study naturalistic acquisition in a quantitative manner, patterns of errors of learners over a protracted period of time must be discovered. The semiotics-based methodology used for language analysis by language experts from Columbia School of Linguistics has been adopted. This semiotic analysis methodology has its historical roots in Saussure and his Structuralist Paradigm, which was later modified into the sign-oriented framework in research works carried out by Tobin (1990) and Reid (1995). It investigates the specific use of concrete language data obtained from spoken discourse in differing linguistic and situational contexts. Only actual language samples are investigated to observe patterns of use. The various stages in the investigation tell us how a system is discovered as depicted in the figure below:

Figure 1. The sign-oriented framework (adapted from Tobin, 1990, p. 48)



The sign-oriented framework described above and the theoretical considerations discussed thus far were used to develop an analytic framework shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Framework of the study

Abstract system	Analysis of concrete phenomena			
	Core value of system	Misunderstanding of core value of the system		
Prepositions	Correct use of prepositions	Misunderstanding and errors: Errors in use of prepositions		
		Prepositions inserted where not needed	Incorrect prepositions used	Prepositions missed
	Coherent message	Incoherent message		Errors of omission
	Errors of commission			

The above-mentioned framework was used to analyze the data collected over the period of the study to look at the degree of accuracy of the production of prepositions, as well as analysis of the different types of errors.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This is an exploratory-quantitative-statistical paradigm using the case study approach, characterized by a non-experimental design, with subsequent statistical analysis. It uses a longitudinal approach that entails observing the development of linguistic performance, over a span of time.

The Sample

The sample for this study was seven pre-matriculation Malay students of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) with an average age of 19 years. All of them were from public schools (where the medium of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia). At the time of commencement of the study, they were studying English prior to taking up their respective

majors at the main campus, mostly professional courses. Based on baseline data, their proficiency in the use of prepositions ranged from 61.1 % to 71.6% coherent messages in the speaking tasks.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were utilized, the first being an interview with the students, while the other was a presentation. These tasks were conducted in five phases - an initial round, followed by subsequent rounds of the tasks at six monthly intervals. At each phase, individual pieces of information of each separate task were obtained for analysis.

RESULTS

The students' use of prepositions was analysed based on a framework derived from Tobin's (1990) sign-oriented framework as mentioned above. This analysis focused on student's use of prepositions, the correct use of prepositions reflecting the student's ability to convey a coherent message - an indication of the student's proficiency in the use of prepositions. On the other hand, if the student had made errors, the message became incoherent. These errors were classified as errors of commission, where either a wrong preposition had been used, or a preposition had been used unnecessarily. The other type of error was an error of omission where a preposition had been omitted. Analysis was also made to determine if there was a specific pattern in the acquisition of prepositions, focusing mainly on the more commonly used prepositions. Apart from this, alternative locative forms used by students were identified.

Acquisition of Prepositions

An initial analysis of the performances of students for individual prepositions proved to be not fruitful since the level of errors in prepositions in general was small. This number became even smaller when considering individual prepositions, making it difficult to draw valid conclusions. From an overall perspective, improvements were seen in the use of prepositions by students, based on the diminishing number of errors over time as seen in table 2 below. Since the topics for the speaking tasks were the same for all the data sets, and there were no specific alternative locative structures, it can be concluded that there was improvement among all students.

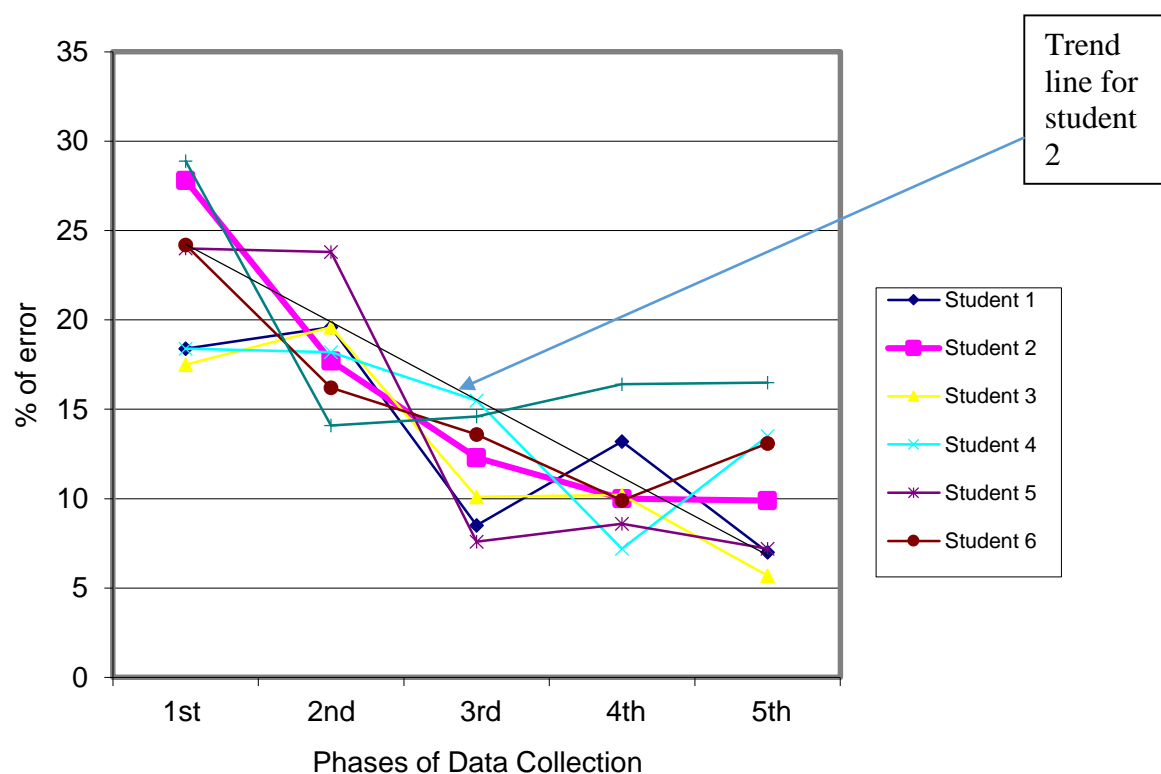
Table 2. Average levels of errors in the use of prepositions

Student	Percentage of errors (%)				
	1 st phase	2 nd phase	3 rd phase	4 th phase	5 th phase
1	18.4	19.6	8.5	13.2	7.0
2	27.8	17.7	12.3	10	9.9
3	17.5	19.6	10.1	10.2	5.7
4	18.4	18.2	15.5	7.2	13.5
5	24.0	23.8	7.6	8.6	7.2
6	24.2	16.2	13.6	9.9	13.1
7	28.9	14.1	14.6	16.4	16.5

However, while in general, students made less errors over time, the extent of errors differed with different students. As further illustrated in the line graph in figure 2 below, Student 2

showed the best level of improvement,(as illustrated by the trendline) followed by Student 6, with Student 7 showing least improvement.

Figure 2. Errors in use of prepositions



Types of Errors in the Use of Prepositions

From an overall perspective, all students had committed more errors of commission than errors of omission. This is not surprising since errors of commission include both the use of wrong prepositions as well as the unnecessary use of prepositions.

Table 3. Average levels of errors of commission and omission in the use of prepositions

Name of Student	Errors of Commission (%)	Errors of Omission (%)
Student 1	11.8	1.6
Student 2	13.1	2.2
Student 3	10.5	1.6
Student 4	10.9	4.4
Student 5	11.9	2.1
Student 6	10.9	3.4
Student 7	17.2	1.5

From table 3 above, it can be seen that the levels of errors of commission were mostly in the range of 10.5% to 11.9%, except for two students (Student 2 and Student 7) who had higher values, 13.1% and 17.2% respectively. Despite having a relatively higher level of errors of commission, Student 2 showed the best improvement in the use of prepositions, while Student 7, who had the highest levels of errors of commission, did not have any improvement. The

errors of omission were mostly in the region of 1.5% to 2.2%, again with two students having slightly higher values, Student 6 with 3.4% and Student 4 with 4.4%.

The line graphs in figures 3 and 4 below summarise the results of errors in students' interlanguage in the different tasks. As can be seen, here too, there were differences in the performances of students. While all students had generally shown improvement in the use of prepositions in the presentation task, in the case of the interview, Student 3 appeared to have not had any improvement (as indicated by the trendline) while Student 6 showed only minimal improvement.

Figure 3: Errors in the use of prepositions in the presentation task

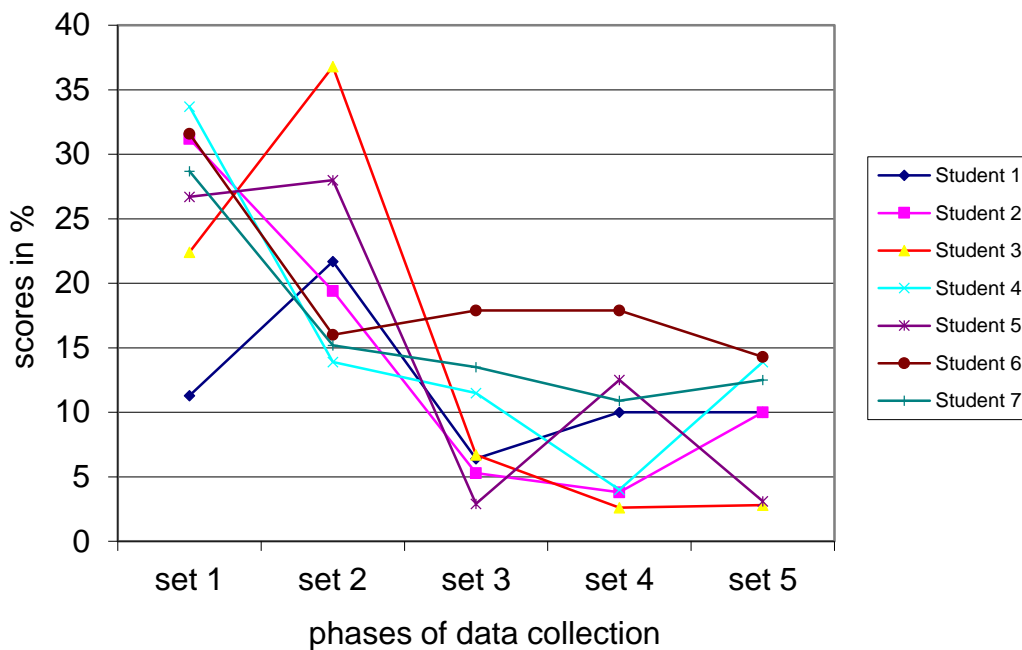
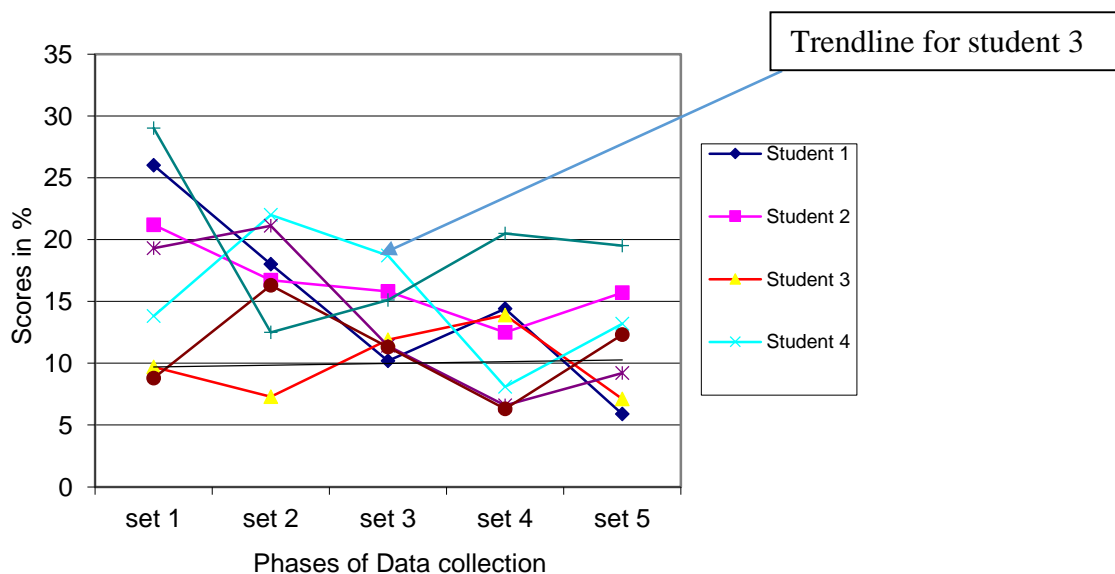


Figure 4. Errors in the use of prepositions in the interview task

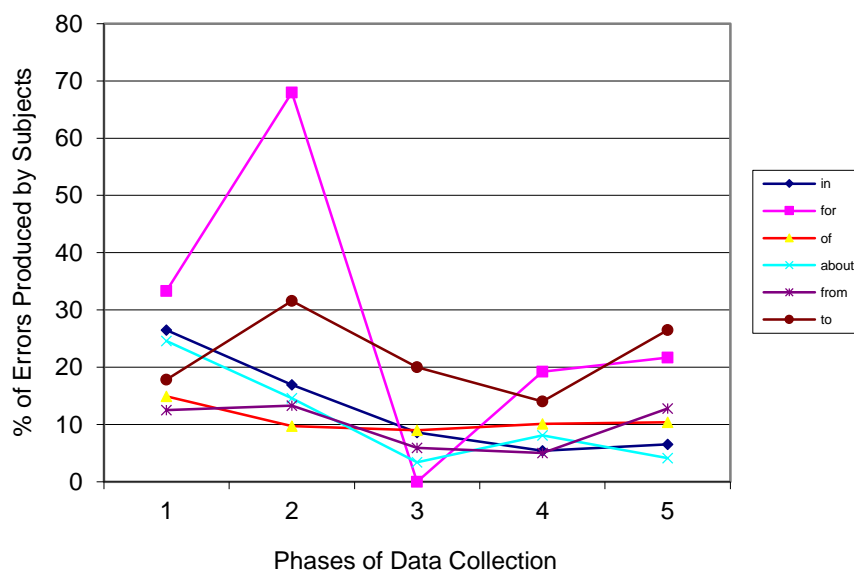


Pattern of Acquisition of Prepositions

Analysis of the level of errors in the commonly used prepositions showed a decrease in the number of errors over the period of study. The major degrees of improvement were seen with the prepositions ‘in’, ‘for’, and ‘about’, with a slight improvement in the use of the prepositions ‘from’ and ‘to’, while there was almost no improvement in the use of the preposition ‘of’ as seen in table 4 and the line graph in figure 5 below.

Preposition	Percentage of errors (%)				
	1 st phase	2 nd phase	3 rd phase	4 th phase	5 th phase
in	26.5	16.9	8.6	5.4	6.5
for	33.3	68.0	0	19.2	21.7
about	24.6	14.6	3.4	8.1	4.1
from	12.5	13.3	5.9	5.0	12.8
to	17.8	31.6	20.0	14.0	26.5
of	14.9	9.7	9.0	10.1	10.4

Figure 5. Errors in the use of commonly used prepositions



One of the most common errors made by the students was the use of the phrase involving a preposition, “ ‘for’ me”, in situations where it was not required. Another common error is the use of ‘for’ instead of ‘to’ (as an infinitive or preposition) and vice versa. There were also instances of other words like adverbs being used instead of prepositions. Students also tended to begin sentences with the preposition ‘about’.

DISCUSSION

All students improved in the use of prepositions over time. This can be related to the background of these students since the majority of them were from rural backgrounds speaking in Malay both in school and at home, as well as with their friends. However, at IIUM they came

into contact with foreign students and were forced to speak in English. These students may not have used L1 transfer strategies much due to the fact that their fellow learners were from a variety of L1 backgrounds who knew no Malay. Therefore, they could not fall back on Malay when they encountered difficulties with English. This is supported by Ellis (1994) who elaborated that in the natural settings be it the street, market or workplace, the learning of the target language was through observation and direct interaction with speakers of that language.

With respect to errors of omission, James (1998) pointed out that omission was ungrammatical, and that a high omission rate led to truncated interlanguage, which was typical of untutored learners or learners in the early stages of learning. Kellerman, Ammerlaan, Bongaerts and Poulisse (1990) suggested that more advanced learners resort to compensatory strategies to express their idea. James (1998) also postulated over-generalisation as a learning strategy based error.

Another reason for the differences in performances is that students may be at different stages of learning, some having completed the learning process, while others may be still in the midst of it. James (1998) postulates that during the learning process, learners accumulate good target language-like repertoires and at the same time retain the wrong forms they had been using all along, so that the incorrect and right forms co-exist side-by-side for a while. Subsequently, the old and wrong forms are removed.

Many of the studies on second language acquisition in the naturalistic setting (for example, Schmidt, 1983, Norton, 2000 and Goldstein, 2001) were conducted with immigrants, or in the case of Schmidt (1983) a foreigner in an English speaking country. Many subjects in these studies did not have much interaction with native speakers, nor were they given the space needed to develop competence in the target language. They merely needed mastery of the language for communication purposes (Bremer et al., 1996). Norton (2000) argued that subjects should also possess additional interest to develop mastery of the language rather than just gain communicative skills. The students in this study, on the other hand, were in the academic environment, so they had to interact and develop competence since apart from communicating, they also had to develop competence in the English language.

Apart from this, as mentioned in the theoretical framework, Tobin (1990) described the mechanism of development of highly polysemous words, illustrating how the prepositions may begin as 'locatives', and then extend metaphorically from concrete spatial messages to the more abstract area of 'temporal' messages, and subsequently to the more abstract area of 'existential' messages, until it can reach a point of being 'nominalised', or made into adjectives.

With respect to the use of alternative locative frames, as mentioned by James (1998), this could arise from the students' efforts to express themselves in the target by any other means that they feel comfortable with. Another possible explanation is provided by Yule and Tarone (1997), who discussed communication strategies used by non-fluent learners during L2 interaction, in order to overcome specific communication problems.

From an overall perspective, some of the errors seem to be due to the students' L1, which is the Malay language. Such errors are known as interlingual errors (James, 1998). One of the most common errors made by the students was the use of the phrase involving a preposition, "'for' me", in situations where it was not required. There were also instances of other words

like adverbs being used instead of prepositions which can again be attributed to the transfer from the mother tongue. Another effect of L1 was the use of the preposition ‘about’ – “*About my hostel...., About pollution....., About homework...*” While in the English language the practice is to describe the area of discussion as in the following “My hostel is...Pollution is...When the teacher gives us homework..”, in Malay, there is a tendency to use an introductory phrase as follows: “*Mengenai/ Berkenaan dengan asrama saya (About my hostel) ...Mengenai kerjarumah (About homework)Mengenai pollusi (About pollution) ...*

Various authors have examined L1 transfer on the impact of acquiring English as a second language. Mukattash (1984) in a study of Jordanian learners attributed some errors in the use of English prepositions to language transfer from Jordanian Arabic and Modern Arabic, and concluded that there was a dominating L1 interference. Pavesi (1987) also indicated transfer as a source of some of the English prepositional errors of Italian speakers. Jarvis and Odlin (2000) indicated that Finnish learners of English were found to omit English prepositions more often than Swedes. This has been attributed to the substantial differences between Finnish and English with respect to the languages’ spatial systems, whereas Swedish has more similarities to English. Green et al. (2000) pointed out that Chinese writers have a tendency to use topic-fronting devices like ‘for’ and ‘concerning’ to begin sentences.

Students do seem to find some prepositions easier than others, so that these were acquired earlier. This data is in line with Ellis’ (1997) work on developmental patterns which suggested that some of the linguistic features are easier to learn than others. In addition, learners also employ various learning strategies to develop their interlanguages (James, 1998). Galleguillos (2013) found that students used several strategies to acquire prepositions like ‘in’, ‘on’, and ‘at’, like overgeneralization of basic uses, inference, application of rules, mental images, among others. The results of this study seem to concur with the findings of the studies discussed here.

IMPLICATIONS TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The findings of this study have implications for the ESL classroom. They appear to fit the current recommendations of grammar teaching, especially those postulated by Ellis (1997) and others (Pavesi, 1987; Norton, 2000, Al-Qudah,2013). The general consensus is that it may be beneficial to teach grammar, but it should be taught in a way that is compatible with the natural processes of acquisition. This teaching should focus on developing implicit knowledge of the L2, although explicit knowledge should not be neglected.

The results of the study also indicate that teachers need to be equipped with special skills to teach prepositions. One suggestion would be to formally teach those grammatical items that students may have difficulty in acquiring naturally. To be effective, language teaching requires extensive L2 input, maximizing the use of the L2 in the classroom, so that the L2 becomes the medium as well as the object of instruction. There should also be opportunities for students to receive input outside the classroom, by providing extensive reading programmes based on carefully selected graded readers, suited to the level of the students.

Another requirement is to ensure that learners are developmentally ready to acquire prepositions. In addition, individual differences in learners have to be taken into account as well. It needs to be borne in mind that there is also considerable variability in the rate of learning and in the ultimate level of achievement.

There would also have to be changes adopted in the curriculum for instruction of prepositions. While there is a need to focus on both semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning, the latter deserves greater emphasis. A task-based or task-supported approach would allow students to concentrate on the meanings of lexical items or of specific grammatical structures. Instructors would have to realize the importance of L2 as a tool for communicating, and to function as communicators. Instruction should also focus on form via grammar lessons for teaching specific grammatical features by means of input- or output processing, the use of focused tasks where learners have to understand and process specific grammatical structures in the input, and/or to produce the structures in the performance of the task, and with methodological options where students pay attention to form in the context of performing a task.

The results have implications in pedagogy, especially as there is a dearth of ESL grammar textbooks that have separate chapters on the teaching of the preposition system. Those books that do usually limit their explanations and exercises to the most overt, often anaphoric preposition use. This lack of teaching materials constitutes just one of the problems in teaching the English preposition system.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, all subjects of the study showed improvements in performances in their use of prepositions over the period of study tasks. However, the degree of improvement was different with different subjects. The subjects of the study had more errors of commission than errors of omission. However, again some subjects were more competent in the use of prepositions than others, as evidenced by the differences in the frequencies of errors made by them.

With respect to different types of errors in the subjects' use of alternative locative frames, one of the most common errors made by most of the subjects was the use of the phrase involving a preposition, " 'for' me", in situations where it was not needed. This seems to be due to transfer of the learners' L1. The L1 transfer strategy was also seen in many subjects' production of the L2. There were also instances of alternative locative frames, like adverbs being used instead of prepositions.

Focusing on a specific pattern in the acquisition of prepositions by subjects, considering the performances of subjects in the most commonly used prepositions, the best improvement was seen in the prepositions 'for', 'in' and 'about'. There was good improvement in the use of the preposition 'in'.

FUTURE RESEARCH

It is suggested that this study be repeated over a longer period of five to six years. This could be further improved with a larger study sample. Ortega and Ibarra-Shea (2005) suggest the term "programmatic research" for longitudinal research in SLA using large samples and longer periods of observation (four to six years) citing examples of studies on 73 French-speaking students for six years and a four-year study of 57 university students. This may reveal patterns

of acquisition of prepositions much more clearly and trending of performances would also be more valid and reliable than in a three-year study as the present one.

A comparative study between the formal teaching of prepositions compared with a situation where students acquire prepositions naturally would provide conclusive evidence on which of these approaches are more effective. However, this study should focus on selected prepositions or groups of prepositions to allow more accurate results.

Another area of possible study is to focus on specific prepositions or groups of prepositions such as locational or directional prepositions. An in-depth study of the progress of the subjects in the acquisition of these prepositions over time will allow a more thorough examination of the factors and underlying grammatical features influencing acquisition.

While this study focused on students whose L1 is Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) and whose medium of instruction in school had been Bahasa Malaysia, it may be worthwhile to compare the performances and language competence with students whose medium of instruction is English, for example, those who attend international schools. Apart from differences in competence levels, differences in acquisition patterns may also be observed.

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