

Frequency of the misuse of prepositions by Albanian students: A case study with first year students studying Greek, Italian and German at the Faculty of Foreign Languages

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ABSTRACT: *This study looks at English prepositions and the challenges that students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) encounter in mastering them. The purpose of this study is to describe the problems Albanian students studying English have in discovering out how to use prepositions correctly. Examples of preposition misuse are taken from the descriptive essays submitted by Albanian students at the University of Tirana, Faculty of Foreign Languages. We acknowledge that inappropriate use of prepositions was one of the ten most common errors observed in the collected corpus of essays based on the findings of the study conducted with students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages. The findings suggest that Albanian students studying English as a foreign language have difficulty using prepositions correctly. Prepositions are the most frequently misused part of speech. By, at, in, on, to, of, and for were the most often misused prepositions.*

KEYWORDS: Frequency, misuse of prepositions, Albanian students, first year students, Greek, Italian, German, foreign languages

INTRODUCTION

Prepositions are considered a part of speech, which is difficult to be understood and used by students who study English as a foreign language. And, as such, they rank among the categories used incorrectly in spoken or written language. This misuse of prepositions is not encountered in any particular age group as all age groups have difficulty using them correctly¹. Linguists Dheri² and Grubic³, believe that one of the main reasons for the misuse of prepositions is the large number of prepositions in the English language, about 150 of them. Since prepositions are polysemantic in nature, the difficulty in having their correct use is even greater. In many of the textbooks used by students who learn English as a foreign language, the explanation of prepositions covers a very small part, and even in these cases, a brief explanation of the preposition is given, followed by some examples in sentences. In a survey we made of textbooks used in our country, like *World Link*⁴, *Grammar Sense*⁵, *Click On 1*, *Click On 2*,

¹ Koruti, O., (2011). "Përdorimi i parafjalëve në gjuhën angleze dhe në gjuhën shqipe nw shkollat 9- vjeçare", Buletini shkencor UNITEL

² Dheri, V., (1984). Parafjala e gjuhës angleze, vështruar në rrafshin gjuhësor përqsës dhe metodik, vepër e pabotuar.

³ Grubic, B., (2004). "Those problematic English prepositions?". CFI- Baci Conference Long Beach, California (PP. 1-34)

⁴ Stempleski, S, Douglas, N., Morgan, R. J. (2004). *World Link*, Heinle ELT; 1 edition.

⁵ Bland K., S. *Grammar Sense*, Oxford University Press, USA (January 29, 2004)

*Click On 3*⁶, and *Grammar Dimensions 3*⁷, the prepositions are not mentioned at all, making the teacher's work in the classroom even more difficult. In other textbooks, such as *Inside Out*⁸, *Grammar Links*⁹, *Straightforward Intermediate* and *Upper Intermediate*¹⁰, the prepositions are explained only at advanced levels and in these cases, the most useful meanings are given, such as meanings related to space and time.

When prepositions are included in a given lesson, the part they occupy is no more than half a page. When prepositions aren't followed up by an explanation in the book, a teacher's only option is to have students memorize them¹¹.

Textbooks generally do not emphasize important aspects of prepositions, such as the ambiguity of a preposition, cases in which the preposition takes on different meanings depending on the context used, or when several verbs are used with a preposition assigned to express different meanings. Thus verbs like *go*, *run*, and *come* are followed by the preposition *to*, while the verb *arrive* can be followed by the prepositions *in* and *at*. Dheri¹² emphasizes the fact that students learn verbs without learning the prepositions that follow them to give the proper meaning in a given context. For example, the verb *look* takes on different meanings, if it is followed by different prepositions, such as *for*, *at* or *after*:

look *for* – kërkuj

look *at* – shikoj

look *after* – kujdesem

Dheri¹³ points out the difficulties faced by Albanian students who learn English in sentences like " *I don't know who they're looking for*," since in Albanian language the prepositions are not placed at the end of the sentences and are not separated from the prepositional phrase. He also emphasizes that Albanian students tend to form sentences in English influenced by the grammatical rules of their mother tongue, thus lowering the quality of their verbal or written communication with interlocutors, whose English is their mother tongue.

Generally speaking, one of the main reasons for the incorrect use of prepositions by Albanian students is the interference of the Albanian language. The similarities between the two languages Albanian (L1) and English (L2) facilitate the acquisition of a foreign language (L2),

⁶ Evans V., O'Sullivan N., (2001). *Click On 1.2.3.*, Express Publishing

⁷ Thewlis H., S., (2007). *Grammar Dimensions 3*, Thomson Heinle; 4th edition

⁸ Kerr P., Jones C., (2007). *Straightforward Upper Intermediate*, Macmillan Education

⁹ Butler L., Podnecky J., (2004). *Grammar Links 1: A Theme-Based Course for Reference and Practice*, 2nd Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company.

¹⁰ Kerr P., Jones C., (2007). *Straightforward Upper Intermediate*, Macmillan Education

¹¹ Evans, V. & Tyler, A. (2005). *Applying Cognitive Linguistics to Pedagogical Grammar: The English Prepositions of Verticality*. [http:// www.vyvevans.net/applycoglxpedagogy.pdf](http://www.vyvevans.net/applycoglxpedagogy.pdf)

¹² Dheri V., (1984). "Parafjala e gjuhës angleze, vështruar në rrafshin gjuhësor përqasës dhe metodik, punim Doktorature (vepër e pabotuar).

¹³ Dheri V., (1984). "Parafjala e gjuhës angleze, vështruar në rrafshin gjuhësor përqasës dhe metodik, punim Doktorature (vepër e pabotuar).

while differences (peculiarities) hinder the acquisition process, and as a result, students will use the foreign language (L2) incorrectly.

Objective

Our study aims to describe the difficulties encountered by Albanian students learning English in coming up with the correct use of prepositions. At the same time, there are given examples of misuse of prepositions in the descriptive essays written by Albanian students, who study at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana. Particularly, our study aims to shed light on these questions:

- a) What are the most common mistakes in a descriptive essay?
- b) Is there variability in the frequency of the misuse of prepositions by students of three different departments (Greek, Italian and German) of FGjH?
- c) What are the prepositions used incorrectly conditioned on the given context?

Hypotheses

The hypotheses of our study include:

- a) Misuse of prepositions is one of the 10 most common mistakes in a descriptive essay.
- b) The frequency of the misuse of prepositions will be similar for students of the three different departments involved in our study.
- c) Prepositions are used incorrectly in some given linguistic contexts.

Our study is of interest to teachers of English as a foreign language, as it provides information based on real data about the misuse of prepositions in descriptive essays. There have been other studies¹⁴, which have treated the way of preposition acquisition, but they have been focused only on a few prepositions, or have not provided examples illustrating how these prepositions can be used concretely in different contexts. The corpus of this study consists of 200 essays submitted by first-year students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Tirana, Albania, who are studying Greek, Italian, and German as first foreign languages and English as a second foreign language.

METHODOLOGY

Study Sample

The corpus of this study is based on 200 essays written by first-year students studying Greek, Italian and German as a first foreign language, and English as a second foreign language, at the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Tirana, Albania. Most of the students, 165 females and 35

¹⁴ Koosha, M., & Jafarpour, A. A. (2006). Data-driven learning and teaching collocation of prepositions: The case of Iranian EFL adult learners. *Asian EFL Journal*, 8 (4), 192-209.

-Grubic, B., (2004). "Those problematic English prepositions?". *CFI- Baci Conference* Long Beach, California (PP. 1-34)

-Herskovits, A., (1986). *Language and spatial cognition: An interdisciplinary study of the prepositions in English*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press

males, were aged between 18 and 20 years. Their language level varied from beginner to advanced, even though English is a widespread language in the Albanian education system. Participants were students who voluntarily participated in this study.

They were informed that they could withdraw and discontinue their participation in the study at any time, without any penalty. The theme of the essay was "A day in my life". If during the essay writing process students displayed any concerns, they were entitled to refuse to write for a typical day of their daily lives. They were informed that their essays would be anonymous and for study purposes they would be identified by numbers. They were also told that the essays would be stored in a safe place and that only those who would process the data could have permission to read them. Faculty staff or administration were not present during the writing process, nor were they allowed to read the essays. In the end, they were informed that after processing the data their essays would be disposed of. Participants sign a Consent Form, thus giving us permission to study their essays. (see Appendix 12).

Description of the activity

Based on Lozanov's¹⁵ recommendations, the classroom benches were placed in an oval shape and music was played in the background, thus creating a relaxing and soothing atmosphere for the students. Given their language level, real-life situations were selected. Participants were asked to write an essay outlining their typical day. Students were informed that the essays written by them would not affect the final grade as they would be used for scientific research purposes only.

We predicted that if students were asked to write descriptive essays, the most frequently used parts of speech could be nouns, adjectives, verbs, and prepositions. Students were not allowed to use dictionaries, or ask the teacher, or peer for help. The essay writing process took 45 min and students were told to write an essay between 150 and 200 words.

To identify incorrectly used grammatical parts, we relied on the definition of error given by Dulay, Burt and Krashen¹⁶, as: "any deviation from a correct use of standard language". The standard language is the English language described by Quirk and Greenbaum in their grammar book "*A University Grammar of Contemporary English*".

Wilkins¹⁷ claims that the mistakes that students make are very important and he considers them as a tool that enhances the learning process and helps master a foreign language. At the same time, they serve the teachers to be aware of the difficulties encountered by the students. And yet many scholars hold different views when it comes to the definition of the term 'error'. Thus, Corder¹⁸ points out that there are two different and contradictory attitudes: the first one is that mistakes (made mainly by those who speak English as a foreign language) are unacceptable and as such should be avoided. The second attitude is that mistakes are common

¹⁵ Lozanov, G., (1995 – 2005). Suggestopaedia - Desuggestive Teaching Communicative Method on the Level of the Hidden Reserves of the Human Mind, Summary of Lectures, Vienna.

¹⁶ Dulay, H., Burt M., Krashen S., (1982). *Language Two*. New York: Oxford UP.

¹⁷ Wilkins D.A., (1996). *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*: Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

¹⁸ Corder S.P., (2000). *Error Analysis*: London, Longman Publishers.

and inevitable. Strevens¹⁹ claims that mistakes are common and inevitable during the learning process and acquisition of a foreign language.

RESULTS

Quantitative analysis

Essay	200
Total number of errors	2800
Average number of errors per essay	14
Average number of words per essay	120

Table 1. General data on the essays

Table 1 presents general data on the total number of essays written by students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages. It also provides the total number of errors, the average number of errors in each essay, and the average number of words per essay.

No.	Type of error	Number of errors	%
1.	Misuse of prepositions	460	16.4
2.	Misuse of nouns	425	15.2
3.	Verb tenses	398	14.2
4.	Misuse of verbs	311	11.1
5.	Wrong word order in a sentence	170	6.07
6.	Adding prepositions	198	7.09
7.	Omission of prepositions	217	7.4
8.	Misuse of articles	142	5.07
9.	Misuse of participles	126	4.4
10.	Misuse of possessive pronouns	113	4.03

Table 2. Ten most frequent errors

Table 2 provides 10 most frequent errors encountered in the essays written by the participants in the study. As illustrated in this, prepositions are one of the parts of speech which are often

¹⁹ Strevens, M., (2004). The causal and unification accounts of explanation unified—causally. *Noûs*, 38, 154-179.

incorrectly used by students. In this list of errors, prepositions appear in first, sixth, and seventh place.

Types of errors	Students	%
Misuse of a preposition	135	67.5
Adding prepositions	76	38
Omission of prepositions	73	36.5

Table 3: Types of preposition errors and the number of students per error

Regarding the percentage of incorrectly used prepositions for each type and each student, it is noted that 135 participants (67.5%) used one preposition for another (misuse error); 76 participants (38%) added a preposition in contexts where no preposition is used (adding prepositions) and 73 participants (36.5%) did not use a preposition in contexts when a preposition is required (omission of prepositions).

Type of errors	Students of 'Bachelor in Greek language'	Students of 'Bachelor in Italian language'	Students of 'Bachelor in German language'
Misuse of a preposition	37	26	33
Adding prepositions	45	27	46
Omission of prepositions	53	33	16

Table 4. Frequency of the misuse of prepositions by the students of bachelor degree in Greek, Italian and German language

Table 4 presents the types of errors made by students of bachelor degree at the Faculty of Foreign Languages. 37 students studying Greek as a first foreign language, 26 students studying Italian as a first foreign language, and 33 students studying German as a first foreign language used one preposition for another (error of misuse). Regarding the error of adding a preposition in contexts where no preposition is required (error of adding prepositions), the number of students that made mistakes in writing essays is respectively: 45 students who study Greek, 27 who study Italian and 46 who study German. The number of students who omitted the use of a preposition in contexts where a preposition was required (omission of preposition error) is respectively 53 students who study Greek, 33 who study Italian and 16 who study German.

Qualitative analysis

Referring to Dulai, Burt and Krashen²⁰, we will discuss the types of errors (misuse of a preposition for another; adding prepositions; omission of prepositions) by analyzing and illustrating with examples taken from students' essays. At the same time, we will try to present the causes of errors, which can be²¹: errors caused by the influence of the mother tongue, Interlingual errors; and intralingual errors.

Errors caused as a result of mother tongue interference (in our case, Albanian) occur because students think in their native language even when the language required in the conversation is a foreign language (in our case English) and often the speech they produce is a literal translation from one language to another. As for intralinguistic errors, we say that they are caused by the language structure, as well as by the strategies employed in the learning process of a foreign language. Referring to Brown²², we can say that in the first stages of the learning process in a foreign language, the errors that are most often encountered are the ones caused by mother tongue interference, but with the increase of the language level attainment, the most common errors relate to the language structure of the foreign language.

The misuse of a preposition for another is defined as: "using a preposition instead of the preposition required in a linguistic context" The error of adding a preposition in language structures it is not required, is defined as: "the use of a preposition in contexts where it is not necessary to use one ", while the error of omission of prepositions is defined as: "the omission of an element which is indispensable in a language structure²³. We were presented with a considerable number of cases for each type of error, but we have come up with the decision to illustrate and analyse three examples for each type. If many of the students misuse the prepositions, it means that they have difficulty mastering them correctly. And yet, even when they try to avoid words or expressions that they do not understand, it does not mean that they do not have difficulty in using the prepositions correctly²⁴.

While analysing the errors encountered in the essays, two main features were observed. First, incorrectly used prepositions appear in a certain linguistic context and never in other contexts. For example, no misused prepositions are observed in noun structures. Second, qualitative analysis will acquaint us with the types of errors students have made while writing essays.

Following, we will introduce the types of linguistic contexts in which prepositions are used incorrectly. Each of these linguistic contexts is illustrated with examples selected from the corpus collected in descriptive essays.

²⁰ Dulay, H., Burt, M.& Krashen, S. *Language two*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982

²¹ James, C. (1998). *Errors and language learning and use: Exploring error analysis*. New York: Pearson Longman.

²² Brown, D., (2000). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (4th ed.). New York: Pearson Longman.

²³ Brown, D., (2000). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (4th ed.). New York: Pearson Longman.

²⁴ Lightbown, Patsy M. & Spada, N., (2003). *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The error of preposition misuse

Mother tongue interference, in our case the Albanian language, and the foreign language influence, English, are the main factors to lead to the misuse of prepositions by the students participating in this study. In parentheses, it is given the correct preposition to be used in the structures presented.

a) Prepositional phrases used to indicate position, direction and means of transport:

have a tattoo <i>in</i> my arm. (on)	Kam një tatuazh <i>në</i> krahë...
goes <i>in</i> school ...(to)	shkon <i>në</i> shkollë...
go to school <i>by</i> foot (on)	shkoj <i>në</i> shkollë <i>me/në</i> këmbë...

As it is seen from the translation in Albanian of the English examples, the preposition used in the three structures is the preposition *in* (*në*), leading students to have difficulty in the correct use of its English equivalent.

b) Prepositional phrases in structures like “verb + preposition ‘on’ + noun / pronoun”:

think <i>for</i> him everyday (about)	mendoj <i>për</i> atë përditë...
Get mad <i>with</i> my brother...(at)	nevrikosem <i>me</i> vëllain tim
married <i>with</i> Denis (to)	martuar <i>me</i> Denisin

Error of adding prepositions

Considering the data collected from a corpus of 200 essays, the error of adding prepositions, in cases when the language structure does not require one, is less common compared to the error of preposition misuse. The analysis of the students' essay errors shows that the error of adding a preposition is a result of the mother tongue interference (Albanian language), and also of the influence of the foreign language (English language).

I go <i>to</i> home.	Shkoj <i>në</i> shtëpi.
met <i>with</i> my friend...	u takova <i>me</i> shokun.
My house is near <i>of</i> your house.	Shtëpia ime është afër shtëpisë tënde.
dressing for to go to the party...	të vishem <i>për</i> të shkuar në festë...
have money <i>for</i> to buy food...	kam lek <i>për</i> të blerë ushqim...

Error of omission of prepositions

Analysis of student essay errors shows that 36.5% of the students do not use prepositions when required. The reason for the omission of the prepositions is a result of the mother tongue interference, first language strategy, and the influence of the foreign language, second language strategy. The following are examples taken from student essays:

a) Omission of the preposition *of*

the beginning ___ the second week... fillimi i javës së parë...

know the strategic position ___ Tirana... njoh pozicionin strategjik të Tiranës

communicate with people ___ other nations... komunikoj me njerëz të shteteve të tjera...

In all the above examples, no preposition use is required in the Albanian language and the relationship of words in the sentence is regulated through the inflectional system.

b) Omission of the preposition *for*

still hunting ___ the book... duke kërkuar librin...

pay ___ the lunch... paguaj drekën

wish ___ any reward... dëshiroj ndonjë shpërblim

In all the above examples, no use of prepositions is required in the Albanian language and the relationship of words in the sentence is regulated through the inflectional system.

c) Omission of the preposition “**to**” in sentences containing transitive verbs which can be followed by two objects (direct, indirect).

I gave my book ___ her i dhashë librin tim asaj...

gives her address ___ the lady i dha adresën e saj zonjës...

introduced me ___ his parents më prezantoi prindërit e tij...

In Albanian language the indirect object is expressed with a noun in dative case.

CONCLUSION

Our study was conducted to analyze the most common errors in a descriptive essay. Based on the results of the study conducted with the students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages, we can admit that the incorrect use of prepositions was one of the 10 most common errors observed in the collected corpus of the essays.

The results show that Albanian students, who study English as a foreign language, encounter difficulties in the correct use of prepositions. As we discussed above, prepositions were the part of the speech that is most frequently misused. The prepositions that were most often used incorrectly were: **by, at in, on, to, of, for**.

Regarding the first hypothesis we admit that it is fully proved since the prepositions were the part of speech used most often incorrectly, and in a list of the ten most common errors, they were ranked in the first, sixth and seventh place. The second hypothesis, in which we predicted that the frequency of the misuse of prepositions would be the same for all bachelor students studying Greek, Italian and German at the Faculty of Foreign Languages is partially confirmed.

Based on the analysis of the collected corpus it was noticed a varying frequency of prepositions used incorrectly by the students, which nevertheless remains high for all the students who were part of our study. The most common errors were misusing one preposition for another, adding prepositions, and omitting prepositions. Students with little linguistic knowledge use prepositions incorrectly by adding or removing them according to the given context²⁵.

As for the third hypothesis, the prepositions are used incorrectly in certain contexts, we say that it is fully proved based on the results of the study. However, the results of our study cannot be generalized to all Albanian students who study English as a foreign language. It is necessary to conduct further studies, where participants can be students with different language competencies and to analyze the correct use of prepositions in specific given contexts.

Based on the results of our study we think that students need further explanations on the correct use of prepositions. English teachers should explain the prepositions in detail, provide as much information as possible about their semantics, and how they should be used in different contexts. Teachers can also provide practical tips on how students can learn to use prepositions correctly.

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²⁵ Dheri V., (1984). "Parafjala e gjuhës angleze, vështruar në rrafshin gjuhësor përqasës dhe metodik, punim Doktorature (vepër e pabotuar).

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