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Uses of Preposition Combinations: An Error Analysis

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to identify the difficulties in the use of the preposition combinations and analyze the causes of errors made by the Engineering students while writing. The subjects of the study comprised of 60 randomly selected first-year students from two engineering colleges located in Tirunelveli city, and they were asked to write an essay. To analyze the collected data, descriptive methods were used. The results show that the Engineering students made errors in the use of prepositions after nouns, verbs, and adjectives due to the mother tongue interference and ignorance of rules. The researchers recommended that the teachers should make an attempt to provide more exposure to the learners to use these combinations and actively engage them through various consciousness-raising activities. Teachers should highlight the collocation rules while teaching; the students will get exposure to collocation in their writing and speaking.

***Keywords:** preposition combination, error analysis, essay writing, teaching preposition*

Introduction

Preposition combinations are one of the essential components in the English language and they appear in different situations and contexts. They enable the learners to relate two nouns in English. They help the learners and teachers not only to understand the importance of combinations but also to communicate ideas more effectively when they write and speak. However, second language learners of English face difficulties to master it as these combinations express a wide range of meanings as the function words (prepositions) combine with the words of other categories, such as noun, verb, and adjective (Curme, 1935). For instance, the noun and the adjective 'afraid' commonly occur with 'of'. As Huddleston (1984) points out, 'the Prepositional Phrase (PP) is a complement rather than an adjunct or a modifier; the choice of prepositions

is often determined or severely limited by the verb, adjective or noun head to which the prepositional phrase is a complement. For instance, in the sentence “She relied on Max, similar to the other one, the author of the book” – the prepositions ‘on’, ‘to’ and ‘of’ are determined by ‘rely’, ‘similar’ and ‘author’ respectively (p. 336). Sometimes the combination of a verb with a preposition has its own particular meaning, such as “call on, look after, send for, care for, abide by, differ from, and bring about” and so on. Some nouns, verbs, and adjectives are often followed by particular prepositions such as “application for, demand for, resign from, prohibit from, doubtful about (Yu, 2014, p. 226). They can collocate strongly with nouns, verbs, and adjectives; and this has been a key point that makes prepositions so difficult to learn well (Lan, 2008, pp. 107-108).

As Kennedy (2003) states, the cause of difficulty in using prepositions is that the combinations of different prepositions are used with the same lexical word which has different and often confusing meanings. The meaning of the construction ‘look at’ changes completely if one substitutes ‘up’, ‘into’, ‘for’, ‘after’ and ‘on’ in the place of ‘at’. Secondly, sometimes the difference in meaning is so slight and it becomes very difficult for the learners to differentiate among the shades of meanings indicated by different prepositions in different contexts. So, learners take a long time to become aware of subtle differences in verb-preposition meanings. An example of this is the difference between ‘concerned about’ which means ‘worried about something’ and ‘concerned with’ which means, engaged in doing something. Thirdly, in some cases, different prepositions can be used without causing a change in meaning. For example, ‘He was angry at the weather’ and ‘He was angry with me for failing to keep our appointment.’ Finally, the factor contributing to the difficulty of the prepositions is that the different word classes of the same root word sometimes go with different prepositions. We use one preposition with the verb form, another with the adjective and still another for the noun form of the root word. For example, we use ‘sympathize with someone’, ‘sympathy for someone’ and ‘sympathetic to someone’ (Kennedy, pp. 246-257). These prepositions are sometimes so firmly conjoined with other words that they have practically become one word. This occurs in three word classes: nouns, adjectives and verbs. It is not always easy to know which preposition to use after a particular noun, verb or adjective.

Nouns governed by prepositions

Some nouns are followed by a prepositional phrase in order to demonstrate what they relate to, which cannot just stand by themselves. There is usually only one possibility of preposition which must be used after a particular noun. Occasionally alternatives are possible. But in either event, it is a matter of learning which prepositions can be used with which nouns. There are some common ‘noun plus preposition’ combinations. For instance,

Addiction to alcohol is perhaps as serious as an addiction to drugs in this country.

It was his contribution to molecular biology that won him the Nobel Prize.

Adjectives governed by prepositions

Certain adjectives require the use of a specific preposition with a pronoun or a noun phrase that follows. Here the preposition no longer indicates motion or location, and so again one needs to learn the use of each individual adjective plus preposition combination. The constructions are followed either by a standard Noun Phrase (NP), or a gerund (Cowan, 2008, p. 148). For example,

The manager was very sorry for the inconvenience.

He is not capable of doing something like that.

In English, the simple preposition 'for' is commonly used with the adjective 'ready'. For instance; Are you ready for work? Some other adjectives have taken certain prepositions such as 'angry about/at/with', 'capable of', 'dependent on', 'disappointed about/at/with', 'excited about', 'furious about/at/with' and 'mad about/at'.

Verbs governed by prepositions

'Verb plus preposition' combination consists of a lexical verb followed by a preposition with which it is semantically and/or syntactically associated (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1155). In the sentence 'we are looking at her wonderful paintings', 'at' is more closely related to the preceding word, i.e., the verb which determines its choice, than to the prepositional complement. Kennedy (2003) also states that prepositional verbs have a lexical verb followed by a preposition. For example, 'look at', 'laugh about', 'complain about', 'sympathise with' and 'put up with' are a few phrases where the combination of verb and preposition which makes a new verb with a distinct meaning (p. 249). The preposition in a prepositional verb is preceded by a noun or a pronoun. Thus, a prepositional verb is always transitive. In the case of such phrases, the object is also placed after the prepositional verb. For example Arun has cared for her sister. In this sentence, 'cared for' is the prepositional verb and 'sister' is the noun. Some other examples of prepositional verbs are 'believe in', 'send for', 'rely on', 'look at', 'care about' etc. The blunder in applying prepositions with verbs is probably due to the interference of a person's mother tongue forcing to ignore some major combinations of prepositions and verbs.

Review of Literature

Few of the studies closely related to the preposition combinations as well as the difficulties in comprehending prepositions have been reviewed here. Deepa (2013) mentions that learners commit errors in using English prepositions, and at the same time certain strategies are mentioned by the teacher for the learners to overcome such errors, which should be applied if they want to speak and write English effectively. The study is mainly based on the learners' difficulties in English prepositions while teaching

Technical English to the Engineering students. The students understood something about prepositions but were not able to use prepositions in the correct places. Remedial measures are suggested for teachers to try to make students understand the language but not to make them memorize every aspect of the language. Kalaiselvi (2004) investigated the problems faced by college students in learning English. This study exhibits the language and linguistic errors made by college students. Her dissertation exhibits the gravity of errors made by the target group in the process of second language acquisition. Errors in prepositions were found more in number when compared to the errors made in other grammatical categories. Lakkis & Malak (2000) found Arab learners' errors on prepositional knowledge in acquiring and understanding the prepositional usage in English. The researchers argued that the subjects rely on their first language to judge the appropriate usage of prepositions. The study recommended that the instructors facilitate the process of learning prepositions by pointing out the similarities and differences between the two languages with regard to their prepositional systems. Moreover, the researchers suggested that the students need to be continually exposed to correct prepositional usage which will result in better use of the structure 'verb+ preposition'. The study recommends a better way of teaching prepositions which are chosen according to the preceding verbs, and nothing is mentioned about other cases in which the nouns and adjectives can determine the choice of the following prepositions. Kao (2001) in his study attempted to find out a few innovative ways to understand English prepositions by examining the acquisition of English prepositional verbs by Japanese learners of English as a foreign language. The subjects in the two groups were given a task involving grammaticality judgment and correction of individual sentences to test their knowledge of prepositional verbs. The researcher concluded that subjects rely on context when they use prepositional verbs. In other words, when the context makes the presence of prepositional verbs redundant, such verbs are omitted by the respondents. This study was concerned with the acquisition of English prepositional verbs and input enhancement in instructed second language acquisition, which paid more attention to the prepositions and the verbs which precede them without considering other types of prepositions which are determined by the preceding nouns and adjectives. Jansson (2006) examined the native Swedish speakers' problems in the area of English prepositions. A total of 19 compositions written by native Swedish senior high school students were analysed as basic, systematic, or idiomatic. The researcher counted the errors of substitution, addition, and omission of prepositions from the compositions. The analysis of the data revealed that fewer errors were produced in the category of basic prepositions and more in the category of systematic and idiomatic prepositions due to L1 interference; and a few errors could be explained as intralingual errors. In Dessouky's (1990) study, similar errors occurred in all levels of these subjects but the difference was in the frequency of their occurrence. The hierarchy of errors generated by her students was spelling, verb tense and prepositions. Considering the above fact, this study has made an attempt to identify difficulties in the use of preposition combinations made by engineering students. According to Liu (1999, as cited in Darvishi, 2011), the most noticeable pattern when it comes to grammatical collocations was 'verb + noun + preposition' and the most noticed source of error was

the negative transfer. While writing an L2 sentence in the course of learning, errors can occur in words or grammatical features. Incomplete knowledge is the main reason for the occurrence of such errors. The occurrence of mistakes may be due to the lack of attention on the part of a learner. Here in this research article, the researchers have proposed remedial measures to overcome the difficulties in the use of prepositions through repeated practice of the basic norms of using prepositions in sentences.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are specified as follows:

1. To identify the difficulties in the use of preposition combinations; and
2. To analyze the cause of errors made by the Engineering students.

Methodology

The researchers have employed the descriptive method for data collection and applied qualitative analysis to analyze the data.

Subjects of the study

The subjects of the study were 60 randomly selected first-year students from two engineering colleges located in Tirunelveli city, Tamil Nadu, India. In the colleges, English is taught and used as the medium of instruction. Among the respondents chosen for the research, 25 and 35 were male-female respectively. A descriptive method was used for collecting data. The participants were pursuing an Engineering course in the batch of 2019-2023.

Data collection and instrument

All the respondents were requested to write an essay on the advantages and disadvantages of using a mobile phone, within a period of 50 minutes and using a minimum of 250 words. Qualitative analysis was carried out in order to find the difficulties of using preposition combinations while writing. The figures are tabulated and scrutinized using the 16.0 version of SPSS. Then, the types of errors, the number of errors, and percentages are demonstrated using tables.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, the errors are tabulated and categorized into three distinct categories like 'noun plus preposition', 'verb plus preposition', and 'adjective plus preposition'. The result reveals that the respondents have a high frequency of errors in preposition combinations. In this respect, Table 1 shows the analysis of errors based on

the type of errors, number of errors and percentage. The result shows that the highest percentage of errors (47%) was made by the students in the category of 'verb plus preposition', with 108 errors. Similarly, 35% of errors were committed in the 'adjective plus preposition' category, with 80 errors; and 43 errors (18%) have been committed in 'noun plus preposition'. Thus, the table below indicates that more errors have been made by the respondents in the 'verb plus preposition' category compared to 'adjective plus' and 'noun plus' preposition. The possible reasons for the errors are L1 interference and complexity of the application of rules according to the context.

Table: 1 Analysis of errors

Type of errors	No. of errors	Percentage (%)
Noun plus preposition	43	18%
Verb plus preposition	108	47%
Adjective plus preposition	80	35%
Total	231	100

Table 2: Common errors of preposition combinations

Classification of errors	Errors	Correction
Noun plus Preposition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Mobile phone helps us to get solution at our personal problems. ➤ The major cause in road accidents is due to the use of mobile phone while driving. ➤ Nowadays, mobile phone has positive and negative impact in students. ➤ A reason from having a mobile phone is to communicate easily from one person to another. ➤ Students use mobile phone for long hours nowadays because they have less interest to doing exercise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Mobile phone helps us to get solution to our personal problems. ➤ The major cause of road accidents is due to the use of mobile phone while driving. ➤ Nowadays, mobile phone has positive and negative impact on students. ➤ The reason for having a mobile phone is to communicate easily from one person to another. ➤ Students use mobile phone for long hours nowadays because they have less interest in doing exercise.

<p>Verb plus Preposition</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Mobile phone is cheaper when we compare for other means of communication. ➤ If students spend hours in their phones, they will not concentrate in their studies. ➤ Mobile phone helps to communicate through people who are far away from us. ➤ We need not worry for losing our way when we use the cell phone's GPS system. ➤ Nowadays students get addicted towards mobile games like pubg, free fire, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Mobile phone is cheaper when compared to other means of communication. ➤ If students spend hours on their phones, they will not concentrate on their studies. ➤ Mobile phone helps to communicate with people who are far away from us. ➤ We need not worry about losing our way when we use the cell phone's GPS system. ➤ Nowadays students get addicted to mobile games like pubg, free fire, etc.
<p>Adjective plus Preposition</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Nowadays mobile phones are available on various shapes and sizes in the market. ➤ The teachers were angry about their students for not doing their homework. ➤ Today, students are crazy upon using mobile phone such as listening to music, chatting and playing games. ➤ People should be aware about the evil outcomes of the mobile usage. ➤ Parents are responsible to keeping their children safe while using facebook, instagram, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Nowadays mobile phones are available in various shapes and sizes in the market. ➤ The teachers were angry with their students for not doing their homework. ➤ Today, students are crazy about using mobile phone such as listening to music, chatting and playing games. ➤ People should be aware of the evil outcomes of the mobile usage. ➤ Parents are responsible for keeping their children safe while using facebook, instagram, etc.

Noun plus Preposition

Mobile phone helps us to get **solution at** our personal problems.

The major **cause in** road accidents is due to the use of mobile phone while driving.

A reason from having a mobile phone is to communicate easily from one person to another.

Students use mobile phone for long hours nowadays because they have less **interest to** doing exercise.

Nowadays, mobile phone has positive and negative **impact in** students.

In the first sentence mentioned above, the learners are not able to use the preposition correctly. In addition to noun + preposition, they have a problem in choosing the appropriate word according to the context. This error highlights the failure in identifying the right choice of preposition while constructing the sentence. The combination of noun + preposition 'solution to' denotes an answer to the problem. The above error may be due to a lack of knowledge and shows that the respondent is not sure of the use of noun + preposition. The incorrect noun + preposition collocation is clearly linked with the learners' first language influence in the second sentence. The respondent might not be sure about the correct preposition that follows the noun 'cause'. The correct noun + preposition collocation 'cause of' refers to the reason why something, especially bad, happens, whereas the received lexical category is 'cause in'. Sometimes the respondents are unaware of the mismatches between their mother tongue and English that could violate the restrictions of collocation in L2 English. The erroneous construction is due to noun plus preposition, which has misled the meaning of the sentence. In the third construction, the respondents have selected the incorrect lexical item 'reason from' instead of the appropriate noun + preposition combination 'reason for'. The above error is syntactically wrong because the respondent has not arranged the proper noun after a preposition. The noun + preposition combination 'reason for' denotes the cause of an event, situation, or something which provides an excuse or explanation. This error is due to a lack of knowledge to use the wrong noun + preposition combination. In the fourth sentence, the fixed combination of noun and preposition 'interest to' is unacceptable. An appropriate noun plus preposition in the above context 'interest in' refers to be intrigued by or curious about something. Such an error is attributed to the mother tongue interference and ignorance of rules. The fifth construction is grammatically wrong because the respondents have not selected the correct preposition after the noun. The correct noun plus preposition 'impact on' refers to a marked effect or influence. The learners framed the above construction due to the translation of thoughts from L1 to L2.

Verb plus Preposition

Mobile phone is cheaper when we **compare for** other means of communication.

If students spend hours in their phones, they will not **concentrate in** their studies.

Mobile phone helps to **communicate through** people who are far away from us.

We need not **worry for** losing our way when we use the cell phone's GPS system.

Nowadays students get **addicted towards** mobile games like pubg, free fire, etc.

The above sentence indicates that second language learners face real difficulties in choosing the appropriate preposition after verb to express their ideas obviously. Instead of selecting the correct combination of the prepositional verb 'compare with',

the respondents have used the wrong prepositional verb 'compared for' which does not suit the above context. The expected prepositional verb 'compared with' refers to compare something with something else; as is to judge how the two ideas mentioned in the sentence are similar or different from each other. (LePan, 2003, p. 46). The respondents provided wrong lexical categories due to their mother tongue interference and lack of competence in the usage of prepositional verb. Apart from the troubles regarding the usage of prepositions as mentioned in the second construction, the second language learners appear to be troubled with their mother tongue and complex rules of the second language when dealing with the collocations involving verb after a preposition. The deviant verb + preposition collocation 'concentrate in' clearly showed by the respondents' mother tongue influence. The correct lexical item 'concentrate on' refers to direct one's attention and efforts towards a particular activity, subject, or problem. Some respondents having limited English proficiency may have a tendency to transfer these collocations to English, leading to the deviant combination. And also, the errors are attributed to the unconscious use of collocation according to the context. The lexical item 'communicate through' is wrongly constructed by the respondent in the third sentence, whereas the correct preposition after the verb is 'communicate with'. It refers to share information with others by speaking, writing, moving our body or using other signals, make something known to others (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary). Thus, the respondents transfer negatively while framing the sentence from their mother tongue into English. The lexical category 'worry for' in the fourth sentence is unacceptable. The correct verb after the preposition 'worry about' refers to a thing that could cause trouble, whereas the incorrect lexical category 'worry for' means something that you are concerned about, not that thing will do harm but that it will suffer harm. The verb plus preposition does not semantically suit the above construction. This error is due to the complexity of prepositional rules that leads to the respondents' failure in acquiring the target language. The respondents need more instances of the proper use of preposition after the verb and the researchers have given exercises to overcome the difficulties in the use of preposition. In the last sentence, the respondents are not able to use the verb + preposition combination correctly. This error highlights the failure in identifying the right choice of preposition while constructing the sentence. The correct lexical category 'addicted to' which denotes compulsively or physiologically dependent on wrong habit - forming is due to L1 influence.

Adjective plus Preposition

Nowadays mobile phones are **available on** various shapes and sizes in the market.

The teachers were **angry about** their students for not doing their homework.

Today, students are **crazy upon** using mobile phone such as listening to music, chatting and playing games.

People should be **aware about** the evil outcomes of the mobile usage.

Parents are **responsible to** keeping their children safe while using face book, instagram, etc.

The respondents fail in the usage of a preposition after the adjective 'available', and wrote 'available on', instead of writing 'available in' which made the sentence erroneous. The correct adjective + preposition 'available in' refers to able to be used, or reached, whereas the lexical item, 'available on' does not suit the above context. The learners framed the above construction due to the translation of thoughts from L1 into L2. The lexical category 'angry about' in the second sentence is a wrong combination of adjective + preposition by the respondents because 'angry at/about' refers to something, whereas the expected lexical category, which suits the above context, is 'angry with'; so the preposition 'about' has to be substituted for 'with' to make it acceptable. The expected combination of adjective + preposition is 'angry with', which denotes, having a strong feeling against someone for doing something (LePan, 2003, p. 44). The source of this error is attributed to mother tongue interference and ignorance of rules in the use of adjective plus preposition. The adjective plus preposition 'crazy upon' is rather uncommon since the correct preposition after 'crazy' should be 'about' or 'for something' in the above context. This error occurs when the learners do not apply a correct preposition after adjective. The combination of adjective + preposition 'crazy about' means, being highly interested in something or love someone very much. Students need to comprehend the combinations of a preposition, how they are formed and when to use them. The reason behind the erroneous usage is due to the mother tongue interference of learners in the fourth construction. The adjective + preposition combination 'aware about' is incorrect since the proper, widely-used preposition after 'aware' should be 'of'. The appropriate adjective plus preposition in the above sentence is 'aware of', which means knowing that something exists, or having good knowledge (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Third Edition). Sometimes the learners of English are not aware of the mismatches between their mother tongue and the second language which could violate the combinational restrictions in L2. The deviant combination of adjective plus preposition is 'responsible to' instead of 'responsible for' in the final sentence. The expected lexical category 'responsible for' denotes a task that a person or group has to carry out; whereas the incorrect adjective plus preposition 'responsible to' refers to the person or group of people to whom you have a duty. The respondents might have thought in their first language and applied the wrong preposition in the above context. The solitary way is to drill them to ensure that they know the expressions by-heart of the prepositional combinations that they need in their target language.

Results and Discussion

As stated earlier, the present study is aimed at identifying the difficulties and analyzing the causes of errors made by the Engineering Students in the city of Tirunelveli. It is observed that the Engineering Students have encountered many difficulties while using prepositions along with its combinations. The results reveal that the respondents have made errors while writing an essay such as noun plus preposition, verb plus preposition, and adjective plus preposition. They have a few troubles in choosing the correct lexical categories due to the lack of knowledge regarding the usage and

complexity of rules in L2. Some respondents have placed prepositions inappropriately after the content words like verbs, nouns and adjectives as they are bizarre. The present study corroborates with the findings of the previous study. This finding is in line with the findings of Lakkis & Malak (2000) who have claimed that the subjects rely on their first language to judge the appropriate usage of prepositions. In addition, it is suggested that the students need to be continuously exposed to the accurate usage of preposition combinations which might result in a better comprehension of prepositional verbs. The result also supports the findings of Kao (2001) who have relied on the context while using prepositional verbs and other combinations of a preposition. The Teaching Community should make an attempt to find out the context where the students tend to confuse the use of syntactic rules of the other language. Such errors caused by the influence of L1 could be minimized only when the teacher gives special exercise guiding them to differentiate the rules governing L1 and L2.

After the analysis of errors, the findings reveal that errors that occurred in the essays written by the engineering students are noun plus preposition, verb plus preposition and adjective plus preposition. The researchers found that there were three types of errors to be the problematic areas and the most common errors made by the engineering students were verb plus preposition.

Conclusion and Implications

From the present study, it could be concluded that the preposition combinations are problematic for the respondents. It is revealed that their competence in using the combinations of preposition is limited. The errors committed by the students are prominently due to the complete or partial interference of L1. These fixed expressions with prepositions have to be learned by-heart because they cannot be meaningfully constructed. The errors identified are due to the wrong selection of prepositions after noun, verbs, and adjectives.

Implications for teachers

Students should be made aware of the nouns, verbs and adjectives which are followed by certain prepositions. In addition to some of these, verbs can be used with different prepositions which might have different meanings. Teachers ought to help the learners when they commit errors in using preposition combinations in the classroom, which might be helpful in overcoming the difficulty of using prepositions while writing. Moreover, teachers should make an attempt to provide better exposure to the learners to use these combinations and actively engage them through various consciousness-raising activities. In addition, teachers can highlight collocation rules while teaching spoken and written English. When they teach collocations properly, the students may possibly overcome prepositional errors.

Implications for students

Learners should pay more attention to the usage of these combinations and overcome their problems. Unless the students work hard to practice the multifarious combinations of prepositions, it might not be an easy chore.

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