Common Errors in Prepositions Committed by Grade 9 Students: Implications for Teaching

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Abstract

Prepositions are small words that serve important functions in the meaning of sentences. They show relationships between persons, objects, places etc. They also act as vital markers to the sentence structure. This descriptive analysis measured and analyzed the common errors of 44 grade 9 students in the use of prepositions using an objective test. Using the measures of central tendency, particularly the mean, the study revealed that the students had more errors in prepositions of direction. Moreover, the students tend to choose inappropriate prepositions that are out of context. The results showed that students were confused with the multiple functions of prepositions. English teachers, on one hand, should review their students on how to make distinction among the rules of different prepositions and apply effective learning strategies in teaching them.

Keywords: prepositions, errors, grade 9 students

A. Introduction

Students should master writing because it is an important fundamental language skill in language learning effort. Mastery of writing skill helps students in different academic and business works like writing an essay, thesis, business correspondences, creating presentations, and many others. Because of its importance, the Department of Education (DepEd) included writing in the basic education curriculum, particularly in English. Written outputs serve as school requirements that the students need to accomplish.

However, writing is a complex task and teachers experience problems in teaching writing (Romadhani, 2014). The involvement of the mastery of all language levels makes its process complex and complicated. One shall have enough knowledge about a language's grammar to produce a good writing, but learning a correct grammar is not always achievable.

Correct learning of grammar can be achieved through the guidance of teachers. Chin (2012) states that learners need guidance to become good writers. They need to learn how to transfer their knowledge of grammatical concepts from oral language to written language. She also mentions that grammar choices affect the writing style of the learners. This makes proper use of grammar as one of the most important skills a student must master.

One of the important grammar points to master is preposition. Its function includes describing relations between two entities. These relationships include those of direction, position, time, and various degrees of emotional and mental states. There are many rules governing the use of prepositions in English sentences. In English grammar, prepositions refer to a word showing how nouns or pronouns relate to the other words that are in the same sentence. They can be called as "widgets" because they are tiny parts that are used in relating words in a sentence. They also introduce information words that include where, when and why something takes place or general description of information (Laka, 2013).

However, prepositions are one of the most underestimated grammar points. Others think that they are simply used for introducing prepositional phrases like *from the top*, *in the room,* or *with mother*; but they have purposes other than that. For instance, one preposition can either introduce time, place or other words. Because of the many uses of prepositions, confusion arises which pave way to making errors in their usage. The English native speakers rarely make mistakes in their grammar, but they also have common English errors which show how tricky the English language could be (Swick, 2005).

Lorincz (2012) says that English language learners find prepositions challenging to master due to its large numbers and different nature. Substitution, addition and omission are the most syntactic errors based on their analysis of linguistic output of learners.

In the study of Mohaghegh (2011) on grammatical errors, preposition is the most commonly committed mistake in English grammar wherein all the respondents committed errors in prepositions. Second is the use of relative pronoun, followed by the use of articles. For non-native speakers, the case is otherwise. Arjan, Abdullah and Roslim (2013) mentioned that errors dealing with prepositions are one of the most common mistakes non-native speakers make especially in writing. In the Philippines, one of the most problematic grammar points of students in writing is the prepositional error.

This misuse, as shown by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), is caused by a mismatch problem between English and other languages. When one tries to study English, he usually finds word equivalents in his native language. One reason that prepositions become problematic for the non-native speaker of English is that their forms never change (Rob Rubic, 2004). Although translation method works well for content words, it is insufficient for function words such as prepositions. In English, prepositions are of big in number and used to denote relationships, while in Filipino, they are limited to only three words --- *ng*, *sa*, and *kay*. Because of the difference in number from the English counterpart, Filipinos tend to choose the English preposition based on their first language (L1) which results in grammatical error (Castro, 2013). The same case was investigated in the EFL Iranian senior English majors (Koosha & Jafarpour, 2006). The analysis of errors in terms of collocations of prepositions was due to the transfer of L1 collocation patterns to their L2 production.

Another is the inconsistency of the English language. Certain prepositions can be applied in one form, but not in another. The English Language Learner (ELL) will not understand the reason behind these rules; native speakers do not know the explanation either (Rob Rubic, 2004).

Al- Nasrawi (n.d.) states that it is hypothesized that EFL university students' most errors when dealing with prepositions are due to the intralingual transfer and the ability of students at recognition level is greater than at production level.

People have different concepts of error, but to have a standard definition of it, Corder defines **errors** as the performance failure (as cited in Castro, 2001). Also, they can be the result of faulty, controversial, or unconventional usage of grammatical element (Nordquist, 2018).

Corder (1971) (as cited in Al-Nasrawi, n.d) mentions that there are four classified categories of learners' errors: interlanguage transfer, intralingual transfer, learning context and strategies in communication. Interlingual transfer deals with the mother tongue. When the student tries to cope up with the deficiencies of the knowledge of his target language, the student may use other parts of native language pattern and applies it to the target language. The learner's foreign language problem solving is based on his/her native language. The overgeneralization of rules caused by one and more target languages is classified as intralingual transfer. In alignment with the relation of learning context, Richards (as cited in Al-Naswari, n.d) states that other classroom factors such as misleading instructions by teacher and the instructional materials such as books, textbooks and others may lead to committing errors. Brown (1980) (as cited in Al-Naswari, n.d) also states that the lack of conscious employment of non-verbal and verbal mechanisms for communication that may improve student linguistic form is classified under strategies in communication.

In addition, according to Richards and Sampson, (1980) (as cited in Yousefi, 2014), interlingual and intralingual errors are the main type of error analysis. Those from first language interference are interlingual errors while those that reflect universal operation of strategies in learning are intralingual errors. Gass and Selinker (as cited in Sudhakaran, 2015) state that, aside from the mother tongue is the second language acquisition that can be taught in a formal way or in exposing the use of language. Complexity and abstractness are the factors that affect learning of the language. Loewen (2005) states (as cited in Sudhakaran, 2015) that form-assisted learning enhances linguistic accuracy than simply engaging leaners in meaning focused lessons. Grammar needs to give importance in situations where linguistic skills do not allow learners to process the input or to re-express the content. Moreover, Lindstormberg (1991) (as cited in Sudhakaran, 2015) also states that the wrong understanding of prepositions of ESL is the primary reason of difficulty. It was found that the use of spatial prepositions can access different representations of semantic as compared to locative prepositions. Prepositions that are acquired are independent of whether they may or may not receive formal language education and mother tongue and age of the learner. An interlanguage is pertaining to an idiolect that the learner of second language developed but maintained some characteristics of their mother tongue or first language; and can overgeneralize some rules in writing and speaking of second language. It is a theory based stating a psychological framework that explains the activation of human brain in every time that the learner attempts to learn second language. Selinker (1972) (as cited in Sudhakaran, 2015), stated that those produced by native speakers are different from the utterances of learner, this can be observed in a given situation.

Selinker (1972) (as cited in Sudhakaran, 2015) also mentions that across different contexts, interlanguage may be a variable; for instance, this may be more complex, accurate and fluent in one domain. To learn the involved psychological processes there are two things that can be compared to learners' utterances. First, native language utterances convey same produced messages of a learner. Second, target language utterances convey same produced message of a native speaker.

Interlanguage perspective is possible to apply on learners' knowledge of target language such as in phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, and interlanguage pragmatics.

Richard (1885) (as cited in Bao, 2014) states that an error is when a native speaker of a language shows incomplete and flawed learning in using a linguistic item. On the other hand, James (2001) (as cited in Bao, 2014) said that error is a failure in a unit of language. Moreover, error is the product of behavior failure (Corder, 1971) (as cited in Bao, 2014). As stated above, there are many descriptions of errors.

To determine the occurrence, cause, nature and outcome of an unsuccessful second language acquisition, James (2001) proposed a process called Error Analysis. Corder (1971) said that error is not considered a "bad habit", it is a perception into students' process of learning. He also states that error is a significant factor in learners' learning because it reveals the difference between the learners' target language and transitional language grammar.

Error Analysis has five steps. The following are the steps of Error Analysis according to Corder (1971) (as cited in Bao, 2014).
1. Collection of the samples of the students' language (i.e. deciding what outputs of the learner's language can be used for the analysis and how to collect the data).
2. Identification of errors (i.e. the way of identifying the errors, e.g. by underlying the errors and using the symbols of correcting code).
3. Error description (i.e. the errors can be categorized into groups which are stated according to their origin and presence).
4. Error explanation (i.e. calculating and explaining the errors in a suitable way).
5. Error evaluation (i.e. this step involves the interpretation of tables, graphs and conclusions).

There have been numerous studies on preposition errors. One of which is the study of Herdi (2017) indicating that few students got the score of "very good", and more students got "fair" score in the test on prepositions. It was also found that the category of prepositions of direction got the less percentage of correct answer. The results of the study

revealed that more students failed to use appropriate prepositions. This means that most of the students have a "not so good" ability in using prepositions of direction. Based on the test analysis, errors on prepositions of direction frequently occurred in the test. It was also found that the use of 'on',' in', 'to', are the most common mistakes committed.

In the study of Blom (2006), she used two tests (oral test and multiple-choice test) and selected two groups of grade 9 students. The analysis of errors showed that students failed to comprehend prepositions as part of multiword expression. Likewise, the study proved that learners can work better in a task that tested their perceptive knowledge of prepositions. As an intervention, she suggested that helping students to notice lexical chunks and grammatical collocations is important.

In another study, Jansson (2006) studied what the problems of native Swedish speakers had in prepositions by using Error Analysis approach. Jansson collected 19 compositions, including 876 prepositions, written by Swedish senior high school students. He categorized the errors with preposition to three: addition, substitution, and omission. He explained that intralingual and interlingual interferences were the hypothesized cause of errors.

Next, Foo (2007) analyzed the usage of the Chinese ESL learners on the different types of prepositions by applying Error Analysis approach. He investigated how Chinese ESL learners used prepositions of place, direction and time. He also tried to explain the origin of the errors made. There were 38 Chinese secondary school students who were involved in translating Chinese compositions that had tons of prepositions of place, direction and time into English. The result of the analysis revealed that the most problematic type of preposition is the preposition of time. Among the three error categories, substitution was the most prominent. Also, the developmental factors of excessive generalization, intralingual interference, omission and false concept were the sources of errors.

On the other hand, Gomez (2010) studied the use of prepositions by involving the Upper Intermediate English course students from an ELT program. The study included 54 writing compositions composed by 20 students from different courses in three different time and day. The result of the study showed that 13 prepositions (into, to, because of, on, above, about, by, in, with, for, from, at) were the most erroneous. These prepositions were misused 24 times.

Another study by Gvarishvili (2012) tested the limitation in which learners depend on their L1 knowledge of prepositions in learning and acquiring the usage of English prepositions. The author focused on the interlingual transference level. The author collected 105 written compositions of Georgian ESL students. The author analyzed the compositions by following the steps of Error Analysis (collecting written compositions, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors and evaluation of errors). The analysis showed that misuse of prepositions is caused by the negative interference of the learners' native language.

Nginios (2013) analyzed the learning of the French speakers about Spanish prepositions. The author wanted to make activities and strategies as an intervention to lessen the mistakes in using prepositions. His arguments were all based on an extensive literature review. He concluded that the students did not know the proper usage of prepositions that made the learning of prepositions difficult. He also stated that teaching of grammar using inductive method might have led to the fossilization of errors. Therefore, he included activities that mainly focused on prepositional use.

Another is about the investigation of Islami (2015). He discussed the usage of prepositions of English and studied the sources of errors and difficulties of ELL learners. Likewise, the study examined the misuse of prepositions committed by the first grade of Economic students at the AAB private college in Kosovo, including also the Faculty of Education students at the Public University of Prishtina. There were 364 students who were randomly selected (182 from each institution). The essays written by the learners in their first semester test were the instrument used in this study. The study revealed that the most erroneous preposition is the preposition of time (in, on and at) due to the interference of the native language. He suggested that using Prototype Approach and Collocative Approach would increase the scope of assimilation of prepositions.

On one hand, a different outcome was found in the study of Chua et al. (2015). Their study showed that the interference of the mother-tongue with the proper use of prepositions is not high. The errors recorded from the respondents were purely ungrammatical, and not because of the transfer issue within the two languages.

The curriculum guide prepared by the DepEd shows that grade 9 English is focused on Anglo-American literature. Most of the activities involve creative writing, speech choir and drama. These activities require writing outputs whose criteria include grammar accuracy. Such writing outputs require the application of grammar points including the correct use of preposition. These requirements among grade 9 learners were the basis of the researchers in choosing the target population of the study.

In line with this study, the researchers identified the most common errors in the use of prepositions that grade 9 students committed using their students' writing outputs with the aim of identifying the errors and suggesting to teachers teaching points to aid students in the correct use of this part of speech. This study benefits students to be more aware of which prepositions have the most misconceptions and prepositions that are mostly misused. This helps them to avoid making the same errors in prepositions to improve their skills in English writing. Moreover, it will help the teacher to determine which point in preposition they should focus more when teaching the concept to the students.

Specifically, the researchers sought to answer the following questions:
1. What are the common errors of grade 9 students in using prepositions?
3. According to the perceptions of the grade 9 students, what could be the cause of the errors and difficulties in using prepositions?
3. What are the implications of the errors for teaching prepositions?

B. Methodology
The researchers used descriptive analysis as the research design of the study. As defined by Trochyn (2006), it is simply describing what the data shows and focuses on the present condition (Calmorin, 2007). Descriptive analysis is composed of raw data transformed in a form that is easy to comprehend and explain rearranged, organized, and manipulated data that produce a descriptive information (Zikmund, 2013). Descriptive analysis provides simple summary about the sample and measures. In the present study, the researchers have identified, described, explained and evaluated the common preposition errors that the grade 9 students usually commit based on Corder's Error Analysis (1971) (as cited in Bao, 2014).

Participants
The respondents of the study were 44 grade 9 students from a section randomly selected in a public high school in Angeles City. Their ages ranged from 14 to 16 years old and most of them are female. The grade 9 students were chosen because the curriculum guide set by DepEd reflects that students should produce more written outputs in their school activities.

The researchers identified one school in Angeles City. The section was identified through lottery sampling. There were four sections in grade 9. The section that participated was also chosen through lottery sampling. All the students were present during the data collection.

Materials and Design
The researchers constructed a 60-item objective test adopted from different tests on prepositions. The test was validated by three professors from Angeles University Foundation. The validators' suggestions on how to improve the test were also considered in revising the test paper. There were changes on the way the instructions for each test were stated. There were also items that were changed to avoid negative ideas. One example among the negative items that were changed was the sentence, "I'm so fed up _____ this drama!" Some distractors were also changed in some items. The test consists of four parts. Test I was adopted from the instrument used in the study of Blom (2006). It was a multiple-choice test covering the different prepositions. Test II was adopted from the exercises on prepositions in Learnclick.com constructed by Julian (n.d) It was also a multiple-choice test wherein the students would choose

from the prepositions IN, ON, and AT, and they would write their answer on the blank in each item. Test III was a paragraph taken from a website named ISLcollective.com It was a completion -type of test in which the students would fill in the blanks with the correct prepositions. Lastly, Test IV was a perception test and the students would encircle the answer whether they found the test easy or difficult. If they chose difficult, they would proceed to the next item and check options that they think caused the difficulty of the test. The options included in item number 2 of test IV was based on the articles found by the researchers regarding the causes of errors and difficulties in using prepositions.

Data Collection procedure
The researchers collected and reviewed related studies and literature to enrich their knowledge about the topic. They used the library facilities in Angeles University Foundation, Angeles City, and accessed the internet to search for articles relevant to the topic.

The researchers gathered and synthesized all the relevant information they collected. Afterwards, they wrote a letter to the principal of the participating school to request for permission to conduct a research in the identified school. When the permission was granted, the researchers gave and explained the written consent form to the chosen participants of the study. The participants were asked to let their parents sign the consent form. The test was administered on March 13, from 4:30 to 5:20 in the afternoon. Before the test began, the researchers used a script to orient the students regarding the test items and the instructions on how to answer each part of the test. Sixty minutes was allotted in answering the test. The students were instructed to raise their hands upon completing the test. Then the test administrators collected their test papers.
      The tests were checked by the researchers using the answer key and the protocol on checking the test papers.

Data Analysis
To analyze the scores of the students, the researchers used the measure of central tendency, particularly the mean. The mean was used to analyze the rate of error of each preposition and type of preposition from each type of test. The passing score of 60% in the test was based on the standard pointing system of the participating school.

The researchers tallied the number of students who answered easy or difficult. The number of checks for each of the four options in question 2 of the perception test was also tallied.

C. Results and Discussion

Common Errors in the Use of Prepositions
      Table 1 shows the mean scores of the students for each type of preposition for each type of test. For Test I, the type of preposition that is most erroneous is under the other type of prepositions (agent, instrument, etc.). Second was the preposition of direction. For Test II, most of the students had errors in prepositions of time. For Test III, most errors were under the prepositions of direction, followed by other prepositions, and then prepositions of time. The students committed least mistakes on prepositions of place.

TABLE 1
MEAN SCORE FOR EACH TYPE OF PREPOSITION FOR EACH TYPE OF TEST

Type of Preposition	MEAN Test 1	Erroneous Prepositions	MEAN Test 2	Erroneous Prepositions	MEAN Test 3	Erroneous Prepositions	General Mean
Time	86.36%		58.03%	at	45.45%		63.28%
Place	87.88%		69.55%		42.42%		66.62%
Direction	70%	down			18.18%	toward/to	44.69%

Others	69.44 %	about, with		21.21 %	with	45.33 %

The research findings are different from the previous findings of Saravanan's (2014) study. In his study, the respondents had more errors in using the prepositions of place which ranked the lowest in error in the current study. However, the findings in the present study indicate that the students have more errors and difficulties in using the prepositions of direction. Test I and Test II proved that if students were given choices in using prepositions, they were more likely to answer the test correctly. However, for Test III, since no choices were given, most of the students failed to get the correct answer for the test items.

In Test I, item 16 'down' got the highest number of errors. The sentence "*We strolled _____ the path into the woods"* caused confusion among the students in choosing between 'along' and 'down'. There were 77.27% of the students who failed to choose 'down' and chose 'along' instead. Although 'along' is accepted in situations referring to the length of a place to go through, the word 'into' in the sentence shows that the action is done further along, which is the rule of the preposition 'down'.

Item 9 'about' was one of the items that gained the second highest number of errors. Most of the students answered 'around' which is also a preposition used for estimation. However, in the choices, 'about' is more appropriate to use. According to AMA Style Insider (2012), 'around' and 'about' are both used to refer to inexact values in casual conversations. However, 'about' is the best choice when referring to estimated value in nontechnical writing. 'Around' is more informal when used in the context.

In Test II, the preposition "at" of item 15 gained the most number of errors, followed by another "at" and "in" of items 5 and 11, respectively. All these items fall on the prepositions of time. This proves that in using the prepositions in, on, and at, students more likely commit errors when they are used as prepositions of time. The study of Loke et al. (2013) also showed that students had difficulties in using prepositions of time in writing. In their analysis, one possible explanation is that the students do not understand how to use the prepositions of time especially in 'on' and 'at'.

One error that is evident in Test III is the deviation in appropriateness. Corder (1987) states that analysis of errors is examined either only on their correctness or should appropriateness of usage be included. In Test III, although students can use some prepositions correctly, they were not able to use them in alignment with the original context of the paragraph. In the sentence, "*The van headed down the highway at the base of the mountain. After an hour, we had arrived at the foot of the mountains"* the underlined preposition is a sample answer from one of the respondents. If the first sentence is read, the answer is correct. However, as the paragraph unfolds, the whole context of the paragraph will be seen. The more appropriate preposition for this is 'toward' or 'to', since it is mentioned in the second sentence that *after an hour, they had arrived at the foot of the mountains*, with 'foot of the mountains' synonymous to 'the base of the mountain'. This implies that upon answering the test, some students only focused on the correctness of the prepositions to use and did not pay attention to the appropriateness of the preposition in the context.

Another error in Test III is the use of preposition that shows redundancy in the text. In the sentence, "We began our ascent up the summit*",* the use of 'up' is incorrect since the previous word 'ascent' already shows that the movement is upward. Therefore, the more appropriate preposition here is 'to' or 'toward'.

Causes of Errors and Difficulties Based on the Perception of the Students
Table 2 presents the perceptions of the students about the test. Based on the answers of the students in Test IV, most of the students (38 out of 44) found the test difficult, while only few (6 out of 44) found the test easy.

TABLE 2
PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS ON THE TEST USING PREPOSITIONS

	Mean
Easy	13.64%
Difficult	86.36%

Out of the 38 students who found the test difficult, almost all of them agreed that one of the causes of difficulties in answering the test was their confusion with the multiple functions of the different prepositions followed by their unfamiliarity with the different rules of prepositions. One student added that he forgot how to use the prepositions.

TABLE 3
PERCEPTIONS ON THE CAUSES OF DIFFICULTIES OF STUDENTS WHO ANSWERED DIFFICULT ON THE TEST ON PREPOSITIONS

Cause of difficulty	No. of Students who chose the cause of difficulty	Rate
Intervention of the mother-tongue with the comprehension in English	6	15.79%
Confusion with the multiple functions of prepositions	36	94.74%
Unfamiliarity with the different rules in using prepositions	23	60.53%
Others	1	2.63%

Based on the results of the survey, the students found the test on prepositions difficult because of their confusion with the multiple functions of prepositions, followed by their unfamiliarity with the different rules of prepositions. (Though there are similarities between these two causes, there is a difference between them.) Students saying that they are confused with the functions show that they have a general idea on the use of prepositions. However, they could not grasp the specific functions and distinctions of the prepositions. For those who said they were unfamiliar with the different rules, their ideas on prepositions are much less than what they need to know.

Six (15.79%) out of 44 students said that the mother-tongue plays a part in causing difficulties in using English prepositions. This shows that only few of them have difficulty in preposition usage due to their native language.

Pedagogical Implication
The research findings were used to derive the implications of the results for teaching. The results show that most of the students found the test difficult. With this, teachers should develop more student activities in the use of prepositions to improve the students' proficiency in the use of prepositions. Students need to be clarified on how to appropriately use these prepositions not only in individual sentences, but also in constructing paragraphs to provide consistent context. Since the use of prepositions of direction was shown to be the most problematic in use among the grade 9 students, teachers are suggested to give more emphasis on teaching the prepositions of direction.

A large proportion of the causes of difficulties in using prepositions lies on the students' confusion with the multiple functions of prepositions. In this case, teachers must provide direct instructions to the students on how to make distinctions among the different rules of prepositions and which prepositions are used in which situation. This will help the students lessen if not to eliminate the confusion among the multiple functions of prepositions, and eventually improve their writing.

The second cause which is the unfamiliarity with the different rules suggests that these students need a major review on the rules and functions of prepositions.

D. Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, the researchers conclude the following:

1. Students have more errors in the use of prepositions of direction.
2. The cause of errors and difficulties was because of the students' confusion with the multiple functions of prepositions.
3. Teachers need to spend more time in teaching prepositions and on how to use them in different situations and contexts.

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