

Syntactic Analysis of Errors in Iranian EFL Learners' Written Productions

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Abstract

The present study examines the status of different grammatical errors made by intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced students. To meet the goals, two judgment tests and one completion test are conducted. The result of the first judgment test determined that the most common errors committed more frequently by the EFL learners are in the area of prepositions. Then a completion test was taken to determine the type of preposition errors committed by the same participants. The results indicated that the wrong use of errors was more frequent than the omission or addition of errors and that these errors committed due to both inter-lingual and intra-lingual interferences. To investigate which wrong prepositions are used more frequently, another judgment test was taken. The prepositions selected for this purpose were into/to, in/at, with/by, of/from, over/on. These prepositions were selected due to the fact that each pair has one correspondence in Persian. The most frequent errors were examined in the use 'of /from'. This may result from the fact that EFL learners use one preposition for both 'of and from' in Persian language and that some errors are fossilized in the mind of these learners. This study also indicates that there are some developmental errors that will be removed as the result of proficiency levels of students.

Keywords: developmental errors, interlingual and interlingual errors, omission, addition and wrong use errors

INTRODUCTION

Most EFL learners, including Iranians, who learn English as a foreign language, make mistakes and errors in learning the skills of the new language. The present paper attempts to investigate the errors made by Iranian EFL learners due to the cross-linguistic influence of the interlingual, intralingual interferences or other possible problems. To meet the goals of the study, an error analysis was conducted to examine the status of different types of syntactic errors made by 13 intermediate, 13 upper intermediate and 13 advanced learners of English who had participated in the Oxford Proficiency Test. To this end, first, a judgment test of 52 items was developed based on the TOEFL, IELTS, MCHE, TOLIMO and University Entrance Exams. The first judgment

test aimed syntactically at identifying the most common errors committed by the EFL learners under investigation. After collecting and analyzing the data, the corollaries of the study indicated that the Iranian EFL learners commit more frequently the errors related to the use of prepositions as compared with the errors related to the other syntactic errors in L2. This finding made the researcher to conduct another test. A completion test of 40 items was developed to identify the type of preposition errors committed by the same participants. The result indicated that the errors committed by the learners were due to both inter-lingual and intra-lingual interferences and that the wrong use of errors was more frequent than the omission or addition of errors. The result of this latter finding led the researcher to another study to determine which prepositions are used more wrongly. Thus, another judgment test of 40 items was conducted to test the learners' more frequent errors in the mentioned cases. The prepositions selected for this purpose were into/to, in/ at, with/by, of/ from, over/on. These prepositions selected due to the fact that each pair has the same meaning in Persian. The most frequent errors examined in the use of 'of/from'. This may result from the fact that a number of languages, including Persian, use the same preposition for both 'of and from' and that some errors are fossilized in the mind of learners. On the other extreme the whole study implicates that some of the errors are fossilized even in advanced learners but there are also the developmental errors that will naturally disappear through different stages of the language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2013, Reishaan, Barzegar and Ramezani conducted different researches on the majority of errors committed by EFL learners as follows. Reishaan analyzed Iraqi advanced EFL learners' written errors and found out that these errors were basically related to L1 interference. Barzegar carried out an analysis on errors committed by Persian learners of English at intermediate levels and indicated that the majority of errors were Intralingual. Ramezani also investigated pre-intermediate and advanced learners' sources of syntactic errors in their oral performance and revealed that the intermediate learners mostly committed interlingual errors while most advanced learners committed intralingual errors.

In 2012, Sattari, et al. (2012) also conducted the some researches on errors made by different learners at different levels as follows. Sattari analyzed grammatical errors in Persian English learners' compositions and exam papers. and showed that a great number of errors made by the learners at elementary levels could be traced due to the influence of their mother tongue. Rahmani and Bagherzadeh Kasmani in their study of errors made by Persian and Kurdish speaking learners whose major was English Translation also found that interference from learners' mother tongue was the main cause of errors. Moreover, Sabzalipour in the same year conducted an analysis on advanced EFL students' errors in their translation from Persian to English and showed that major errors were intralingual.

Kafipour and Khojasteh were among other researchers in 2012 who analyzed students' errors in their writings and found out that the majority of the errors were developmental while interlingual errors constituted the lowest number of errors.

On the whole, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis claimed that all the L2 errors could be attributed to 'interference' by the L1. However, this claim could not be sustained by empirical evidence of the mid- and late 1970s and by some identical errors that have been made by learners irrespective of their L1. Therefore, it has become clear that contrastive analysis does not predict all learning difficulties, but has a role in the retrospective explanation of errors (Rustipa, S. 2011). In fact, error analysis has remained as a non-stop area of research due to the fact that people will commit errors as long as they participate in language learning process (Mahmoud, 2011). Regarding to this issue, Khodabandeh (2007) defined error analysis as a kind of linguistic analysis consisting comparison and focusing on errors that made by learners and believed that error analysis identifies, classifies and interprets the language learners' mistakes and associates with hypotheses and theories of language learning. The primary causes of errors that reviewed by Khodabandeh (2007, p. 8) are Interlingual/transfer errors that are attributed to the interference of the mother language when acts as a negative transfer on the performance of the target language learner. And intralingual/developmental errors that are attributed to the language being learned based on partial exposure to the target language. In this case, the learner tries to correspond neither to the mother tongue nor to the target language.

Regarding the mentioned issues, it is also noteworthy to mention Keshavarz's study in (1994). He classified errors in two main categories; the first category as syntactical-morphological errors includes wrong use of prepositions, articles, plural morphemes, qualifier and intensifier, and the use of typical Persian construction in English. The second category as Lexical-semantic errors includes cross association and language switch. Zobl (1980), however, discusses that the main source of both types of errors is processing of properties of L2 input. The mentioned division has become the basis of many studies in the domain of errors analysis and transfer studies.

There is also another widely known division of errors, global vs. local errors. Burt (1975) suggests four aspects of English grammar that often cause global errors: basic word order, sentence connectors, psychological predicate constructions and selectional restrictions on certain types of verbs in sentential complements. Errors of this kind determines that L1 is not the source, rather as proficiency level increases and learners get mastery over correct forms, their errors will be reduce and students get proficient in producing language. Brown (1994) also finds that the cause of a large number of errors is due to the levels of language learners_ due to negative transfer. He concludes that as language learners improve, interlingual errors are substituted by intralingual errors.

Regarding the mentioned issue, the present study aims at answering the following questions:

1. What are the most common errors in English that are committed by the students?
2. What are the most common errors in prepositions that are committed by the students?
3. What types of errors in the use of prepositions (omission of prepositions, addition, wrong use of prepositions) are more likely to be made by Iranian EFL learners?
4. Why do the students commit errors, due to interlingual, intalingual or other kinds of interference?

METHOD

Participants

The participants in the present study are 13 intermediate, 13 upper-intermediate and 13 advanced EFL learners with the age range of 26 to 36 (17 male students & 22 female). These participants were selected based on the results of Oxford Proficiency Test that was conducted to determine the level of university students. These learners are studying post graduate English language degrees at different universities of Isfahan. They were all Iranian and native and they were chosen by random sampling.

Instruments and Procedures

A 52-item grammaticality judgment test was developed by the researcher and 4 other teachers on the basis of IELTS, TOEFL, TOLIMO, MCHE and MA or PhD Entrance Exams. The result was as follows.

Table 1. Common errors committed by the post graduate students

Common Errors	Number of students commit errors		
	Intermediate	Upper-intermediate	Advanced
incorrect use of word order	6	4	2
incorrect selection of adverbs	1	0	0
incorrect use of preposition	11	9	6
incorrect use of article	8	7	4
incorrect plural	3	1	0
incorrect use of tense	5	2	1
incorrect use of pronoun	2	0	0
subject verb agreement	4	2	0
incorrect use of verbs	5	2	0
incorrect use of gerund	3	2	1
incorrect use of auxiliary	5	4	1
incorrect use of voice	3	1	0
incorrect use of part of speech	6	3	1

As it is obvious in Table 1, most students learning English as a foreign language commonly commit mistakes in prepositions. An experienced English teacher is well aware of the fact that English prepositional usage is one of the most difficult areas for

students of EFL (Khampang, 1974: p. 215). As it is said by Mukattash, "Prepositions are an ever-lasting problem for foreign learners of English" (Mukattash, 1976, p. 269).

As a result of this finding, a completion test of 40 items was taken in order to diagnose and investigate the most common errors in the use of English prepositions. The three groups of subjects under study commit more errors related to the use of wrong prepositions as compared with errors related to the omission or addition use of prepositions in L2. Table 2 shows these errors.

Table 2. Wrong use of proposition type

Items	Number of errors		
	Intermediate	Upper-intermediate	Advanced
Number of students	13	13	13
Total number of questions	520	520	520
Total number of errors	326	216	108
Total number of wrong use errors	205	134	68
Total number of addition errors	63	43	21
Total number of omission errors	58	39	19
Percent of wrong use errors	62.88%	62.03%	62.96%
Percent of addition errors	19.32%	19.90%	19.44%
Percent of omission errors	17.79%	18.05%	17.59%

Then all the errors were analyzed one by one to determine whether the errors are the result of the interlanguage, intralanguage or other interferences. The result is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Interlingual, intralingual and other types of interference

Types of errors in percent	Intermediate	Upper-intermediate	Advanced
Interlingual	53.7%	29.4%	13.2%
Intralingual and other types of interference	46.3%	70.6%	86.8%

As a result of this finding, most errors are due to the intralingual and other types of interference rather than interlingual interference. Then, the same learners are given another grammatical judgment test of 40 items to test their proficiency of using the prepositions. The prepositions selected for this purpose were into/to, in/ at, with/by, of/ from, over/on. These prepositions selected due to the fact that each pair has the same meaning in Persian for instance 'into' and 'to' mean 'be', 'in' and 'at' mean 'dar', 'with' and 'by' mean 'ba', 'of' and 'from' mean 'az' and 'over' and 'on' mean 'roye'. The result is in Table 4.

Table 4. Common proposition errors

Items	Number of errors		
	Intermediate	Upper-intermediate	Advanced
Number of students	13	13	13
Total number of preposition questions	520	520	520
Total numbers of errors	302	198	109
At/in errors	24	16	8

By/with errors	52	30	17
From/of errors	165	111	67
In/into errors	39	29	10
On/over errors	22	12	7
At/in errors in percent	7.94%	8.08%	7.33%
By/with errors in percent	17.21%	15.15%	15.59%
From/of errors in percent	54.63%	56.06%	61.46%
In/into errors in percent	12.91%	14.64%	9.17%
On/over errors in percent	7%	6.06%	6.42%

RESULTS

Significantly more errors were made due to the fact that learners find some problems in learning English patterns that are similar to, but in some way different from patterns of their own language. The key to this problem may be the fact that learners try to resort to literal translation before they form English patterns. The present study shows that among the most common errors are prepositions as it is shown in Figure 1.

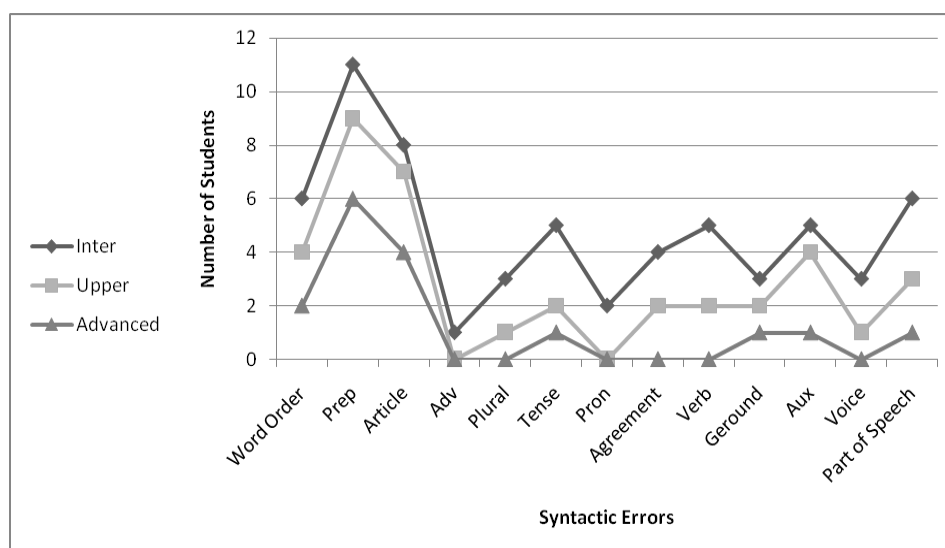


Figure 1. Syntactic Analysis of Errors

Prepositions are difficult because usually the EFL learners compare them with their mother tongue prepositional system. In other word, when learners intend some meaning, verbs and other parts of speech play a great role in the omission, addition or selection of a wrong preposition in English. Figure 2 shows the number of omission, addition and wrong use errors among the students.

The main problem for these learners lies in the fact that there are various prepositions in English that have the same function and meaning in Persian. When students are not sure which preposition to use in a certain sentence, they often compare that sentence with its Persian equivalence; however, prepositions seldom have a one to one correspondence in English and Persian and a Persian usage may have several English translations. Indeed, Iranian learners use, add or omit certain English prepositions as it happens in Persian usage and by literal translation. In other words, when the Persian

context requires a preposition (or requires none), learners make a mistake as illustrated in the following examples:

My brother married *with Parvin. (\emptyset is a correct form)

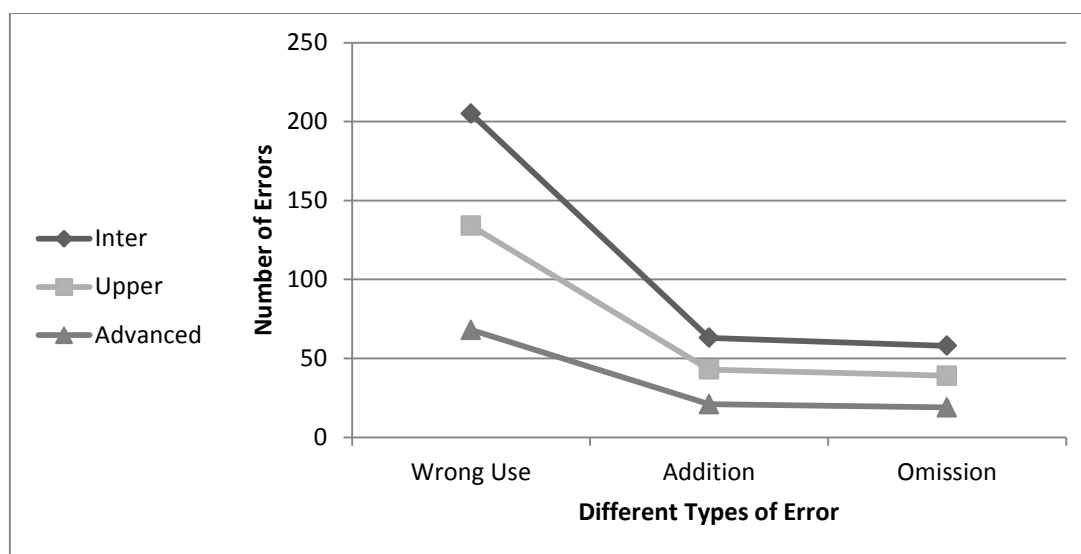


Figure 2. Different types of errors

In Persian, it is necessary to insert 'with' as preposition to make a relationship between marriage and Parvin; otherwise, the Persian sentence will have no sense. Therefore Iranian learners are likely to insert unnecessary prepositions when they want to express themselves in English. Sometimes they may omit necessary prepositions as illustrated by the following example.

I live * \emptyset my father and mother (with is a correct form).

The other type of errors that occurs among all groups of EFL students with different mother tongue is caused by the interference of English itself. The following incorrect response is not due to L1 interference.

She came back *at home.

Based on this research, it is found that the errors made by the subjects are caused by two main factors: inter-lingual errors as a result of transfer from L1 and intra-lingual errors for example as a result of overgeneralization in L2 system. A comparison, as it is shown in Figure 3, shows that at upper intermediate and advanced levels, most of Iranian EFL learners' do intra-lingual errors than inter-lingual type; whereas at the lower level, more errors are made due to interference from Persian than due to other learning problems. This is because students find more difficulty in learning English patterns that are similar to, but in some way different from patterns of their own language.

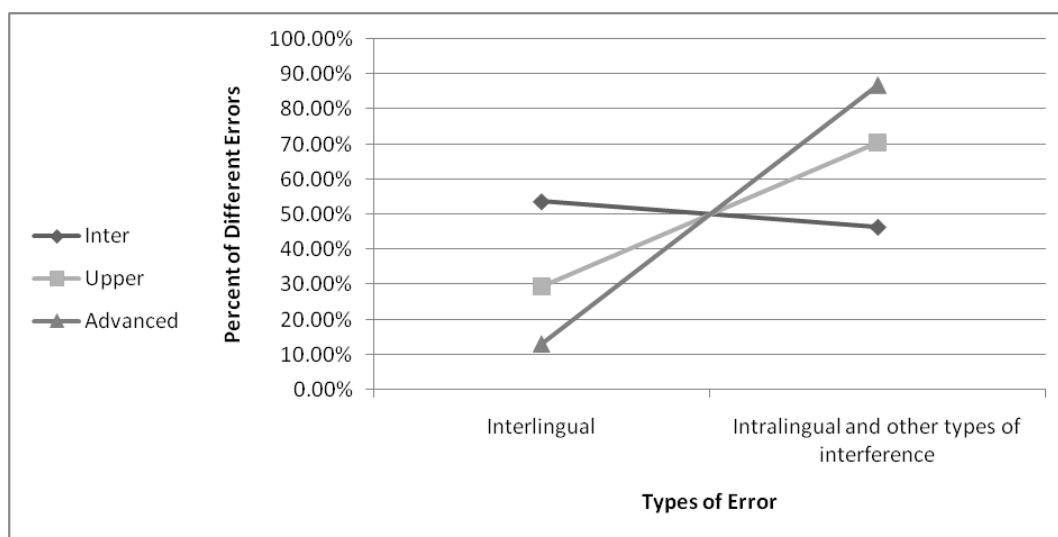


Figure 3. Interlingual, intralingual and other types of error

The key to this problem in the lower level is the fact that students always resort to literal translation before they form English patterns. In other words, they translate the English into Persian and then the Persian back into English, word for word (not phrase by phrase). So, errors made by these learners due to Persian interference occur and due to other learning problems.

Regarding other aspect of preposition errors, the researcher also examined the errors committed by the learners as they use the kinds of prepositions in English that have the same meaning in Persian. The English pairs of prepositions as shown in Figure 4 have one correspondence in Persian and perhaps this is the main reason of errors. In this case, like the other mentioned case, as the result of proficiency level of learners and as the result of the learners' awareness of prepositions type, forms and function, some of the errors will be removed.

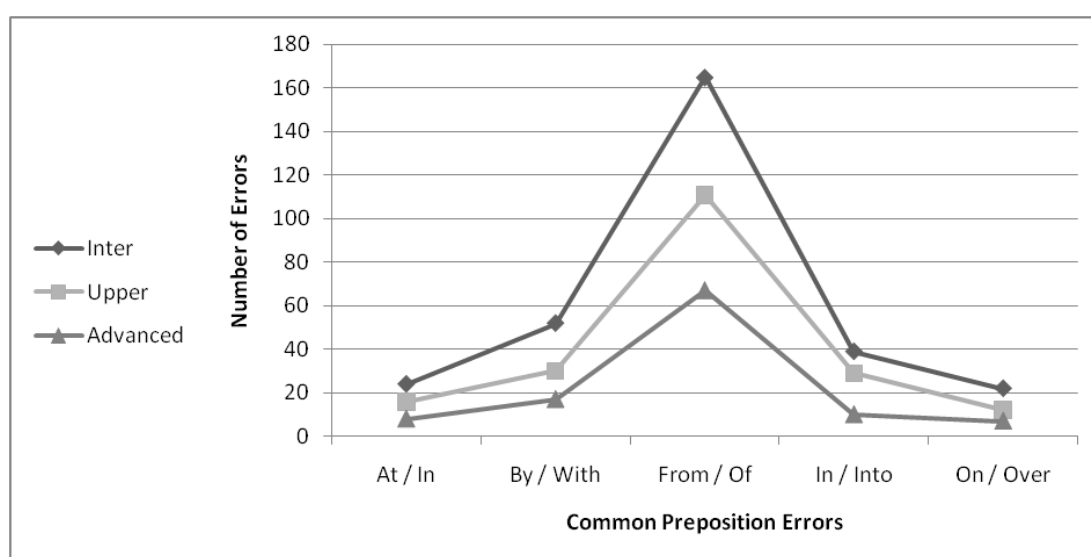


Figure 4. Most frequent preposition errors

Figure 4 shows that even at advanced levels, students have still some problems with a specific pair, for example 'of, from'. 'Of/from' are used in a wide variety of situations, but they are often confused and many English learners have difficulties to correspond them in English. This comes from the fact that a number of languages, including Persian, use the same preposition for both 'of and from'. Of course, the same errors committed by Persian speakers while they want to use other pairs; however, there is a slight distinct difference between 'at/in', 'into/in', 'on/over', 'by/with' and 'of/from' in Persian and more acceptable justification for Persian speakers as they implement the latter pair.

The mentioned findings are in line with Henning (1978), Koosha and Jafarpour (2006) who claimed that the learners' proficiency level had a significant impact on their prepositional errors. But it is noteworthy to mention that despite the fact that the prepositional errors gradually disappear from students' writings, there are error types which are placed in the fossilized category, even at the advanced level. Thus, teachers need to be well conscious of these consequences in order to prepare appropriate exercises and help learners to avoid further repetition of these problems. In so doing, it is not enough just to teach the learners that there is no one to one correspondence between English and Persian prepositions but to raise learners' awareness of the most common errors types and the reason behind them. Besides, the learners should be well informed of the fact that 'practice makes perfect' that is practice is a key that enriches their language skills.

DISCUSSION

Error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make. It consists of a comparison between the errors made in the Target Language (TL) and that TL itself. Pit Corder as the "Father" of Error Analysis in his article entitled "The significance of Learner Errors" (1967) indicated that errors used to be "flaws" that needed to be eradicated. Corder presented a completely different point of view. He contended that errors are 'indispensable,' since the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn. In 1994, Gass & Selinker defined errors as "red flags" that provide evidence of the learner's knowledge of the second language. Researchers are interested in errors because they are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language (Richards, 1974; Taylor, 1975; Dulay and Burt, 1974). Moreover, according to Richards and Sampson (1974, p. 15), "At the level of pragmatic classroom experience, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines priorities for future effort." According to Corder (1974), error analysis has two objects: one theoretical and another applied. The theoretical object serves to "elucidate what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language." And the applied object serves to enable the learner "to learn more efficiently by exploiting the knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes."

The investigation of errors can be at the same time diagnostic and prognostic. It is diagnostic because it can tell us the learner's state of the language (Corder, 1967) at a given point during the learning process, and prognostic because it can tell course

organizers to reorient language learning materials on the basis of the learners' current problems.

In this paper, we defined interlingual/transfer errors as those attributed to the native language (NL). There are interlingual errors when the learner's L1 habits (patterns, systems or rules) interfere or prevent him/her, to some extent, from acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language (Corder, 1971) and interference (negative transfer) as the negative influence of the mother language (L1) on the performance of the target language learner (L2) (Lado, 1964). Many researchers have attempted to explain the mentioned phenomenon. Meanwhile, many have attempted to discover why fossilization in the errors occurs, what kind of linguistic material is likely to be fossilized and what type of learners are more prone to fossilize. However, there has been almost no investigation by SLA theorists on the possibilities of preventing or overcoming fossilization. Indeed, there is a lack of needed research, especially considering that fossilization can be considered the most distinctive characteristic of adult SLA.

CONCLUSION

The present study gives an overall picture of the most frequently occurring prepositional errors in students' writings. It also presents that some of the errors are fossilized even in advanced learners and that the developmental errors will naturally disappear through the stages of the language. Depending on the proficiency achievements of the learners, the sources of these errors can be interlingual, intralingual, etc.

As for the pedagogical implications of the present study, it is worth mentioning that teachers should focus on common preposition errors that the students make in L2 grammar and help them reach a development where L1 interference does not occur. As for the language testers, the results of the present study suggest that all preposition errors influenced by L1 interference should not be rated in the same way for learners at different levels of language acquisition in assessing their L2 preposition knowledge. The results of this study help the materials developers and syllabus designers to decide when a particular preposition point should be introduced, as the order of acquisition of each preposition point affected by L1 interference differs.

We consider this study a preliminary one that just gives an idea of those students' sources of errors. It should set the pace for other studies which would be much more comprehensive, covering a bigger number of students and a wider range of materials.

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