



Making use of prepositions: An academic proposal to strengthen writing skills in first level students of English at the Universidad Técnica del Norte of Ibarra, Ecuador

Uso de preposiciones en inglés: Una propuesta académica para fortalecer la escritura en estudiantes de primer nivel de inglés de la Universidad Técnica del Norte de Ibarra, Ecuador

Lic. Rubén A. Congo Maldonado. Msc.¹, Marlen Mishel Congo Cervantes²,
Dillan Steaven Congo Cervantes³

¹ racongo@utn.edu.ec - Universidad Técnica del Norte - <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1592-6370>

² mmcongoc@utn.edu.ec - Universidad Técnica del Norte

³ dscongoc@utn.edu.ec - Universidad Técnica del Norte

Resumen

Este artículo, basado en una investigación, muestra las fortalezas y debilidades que tienen los estudiantes de primer nivel de inglés de la Universidad Técnica del Norte de Ibarra-Ecuador sobre los usos, funciones y significado de las preposiciones en inglés; la metodología de investigación se basó en el enfoque sociolingüístico generativista; se trata de una investigación cualitativa, descriptiva y analítica; se utilizó como técnica de recolección de datos la entrevista semidirigida; las entrevistas realizadas a los estudiantes fueron más bien diálogos coloquiales o entrevistas semiestructuradas de tipo formal, para que los estudiantes se relajen y escriban libremente. Así, el objetivo principal de este trabajo es estudiar los usos y funciones de las preposiciones en un contexto comunicativo situacional con respecto a la habilidad de escribir; seguidamente, describir y explicar por qué los estudiantes principiantes de inglés cometen errores al usar preposiciones en la escritura, y luego contribuir al uso correcto de las preposiciones en inglés para fortalecer no solo las habilidades orales sino también escritas. Los hallazgos mostraron algunos errores que cometieron los estudiantes principiantes al momento de utilizar preposiciones en inglés en la escritura; los principales errores encontrados tienen relación con los siguientes fenómenos: i) transferencia o interferencia de la lengua materna, ii) transferencia de formación, y iii) sobre-generalización de las reglas de la lengua dos. En conclusión, este artículo indica que guiar a los estudiantes en el estudio de las preposiciones es fundamental antes de que se produzca la fosilización; también motiva a los profesores a complementar sus clases con actividades y ejercicios refrescantes que expondrán a los alumnos a la escritura en inglés desde principiantes.

Palabras claves: *Preposiciones, Usos, Funciones, Significado, Escritura.*

Abstract

This research-based article shows strengths and weaknesses that first level students of English at the Universidad Técnica del Norte of Ibarra-Ecuador have on the uses, functions and meaning of English prepositions; the research methodology was based on the Generativist Sociolinguistic Approach; this is a descriptive and analytical qualitative research; the semi-directed interview was used as a data collection technique; the interviews conducted with the students were rather colloquial dialogues or semi-structured interviews of a formal type; so that, students relax and write freely. Thus, the main purpose of this work is to study the uses and functions of prepositions in a situational, communicative context with regard to writing skill, describe and explain why beginner students of English make mistakes when using prepositions in writing, and then contribute to the correct use of prepositions in English to strengthen not only Speaking but Writing skills. The findings showed that there were some mistakes that beginner students committed at the moment of using prepositions when writing; the main errors encountered have relation with the following phenomena: i) Language transfer or interference from the mother tongue, ii) Transfer of training, and iii) Overgeneralization of target language rules. Therefore, this article indicates that guiding students in the study of prepositions is essential before fossilization occurs; it also motivates teachers to supplement their classes with refreshing activities and exercises that will give learners exposure to target writing since beginners.

Keywords: *Prepositions, Uses, Functions, Meaning, Writing*

INTRODUCCIÓN

English prepositions are part of the grammar system; they can occur everywhere in the process. However, as most prepositions have a variety of uses, functions and meanings and, there are not many rules to help beginner students to use them correctly, it is difficult for them to learn to use prepositions (Swam, 1988). Even after having achieved a high English proficiency level, English learners still struggle with prepositions.

So, the queries here are: has the correct use of prepositions in English become an important concern, and are there some methods and approaches which can be considered in the teaching of prepositions in writing to beginners? This article contributes to respond these questions regarding the correct use of propositions in English to strengthen Writing skills in first English level students of the Universidad Técnica del Norte (UTN).

Locally and nationally, there have been no studies regarding the uses and functions of prepositions, and even worse, that they were not in accordance with our reality and needs. “The fundamental building block of every language is the word” (Lester & Beason, 2013); so, since prepositions are considered functional words, they are used to show how other words are connected. The particular function of prepositions is to relate a noun, a pronoun, a verb with -ing or a Wh- clause with another part of a sentence; they generally come before a noun, a pronoun, a verb with -ing used as a noun or a Wh- clause. Prepositions can be simple words like in, on, over, under, after, before, around, etc.; or they can also include several phrases that act as prepositions: in front of, next to, instead of, because of, in reference to, etc. Prepositions are used to express different types of relationships such as time, place, reason, way, means, reaction, etc.

What has been pointed out above frames one of the various writing problems that at the UTN has not been resolved yet (the correct use and functions of prepositions). Remember that a word can belong to more than one class of the parts of the speech. If interjections are included, there are eight functional parts of speech: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, prepositions, verbs, adverbs, and conjunctions. This research work is focused just on one of those functional parts: the particular uses and functions of prepositions in English in order to strengthen UTN students writing skills. The direct beneficiaries of this research are beginner students and also teachers of the English Career

of the UTN. The indirect beneficiaries are ESL and EFL students and teachers of the different courses and majors of the UTN; furthermore, it can also benefit other local educational institutions from Ecuador on the correct use of propositions to strengthen not only speaking but Writing skills in first level students of English.

Types and uses of prepositions

Generally, there are five types of prepositions: simple, double, disguised, special, and appropriate; they are also classified as prepositions of time, place, possession, direction or motion, cause, reason, purpose, agent, manner or method:

Chart 1

Group 1

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <i>Simple prepositions</i> | <i>in, out, on, for, from, ...</i> |
| <i>Double prepositions</i> | <i>into, onto, upon, within, without, ...</i> |
| <i>Disguised prepositions</i> | <i>It is 4 o' clock now.</i> |
| <i>Special prepositions</i> | <i>She is rich but humble. but is used as a conjunction, but when but means except, it is called a special type preposition,</i> |
| <i>Appropriate prepositions</i> | <i>The article was written by Rubén</i> |

Source. Adapted from Prepositions in English Grammar, by Suprity, Acharyya, 2020

Chart 2

Group 2

| | |
|---|--|
| <i>Prepositions of place</i> | <i>in, on, at, in front of, behind, between, around, inside, outside, over, on top of, from, ...</i> |
| <i>Prepositions of time</i> | <i>in, on, at, for, since, by, from, off, away, towards, ...</i> |
| <i>Prepositions of possession</i> | <i>by, of, with</i> |
| <i>Prepositions of motion, direction</i> | <i>at, to, across, around, against, from, ...</i> |
| <i>Prepositions of purpose, cause, reason</i> | <i>for, with, of</i> |
| <i>Prepositions of manner, method, agent</i> | <i>in, on, for, by, through, with, ...</i> |

Source. Adapted from Prepositions in English Grammar, by Suprity, Acharyya, 2020.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methodology used in this work was based on the Generativist Sociolinguistic Approach, because what is intended here is to study the uses and functions of prepositions in a situational, communicative context with regard to writing skill; and then describe and explain why students of English make mistakes when using prepositions while writing.

To carry out this descriptive and analytical qualitative research, focused on generative sociolinguistics, the semi-directed interview was used as a data collection technique. The interviews conducted with the students were rather colloquial dialogues or semi-structured interviews of a formal type so that they relax and write freely and thus the interviewer is able to collect important information for the investigation (Labov, 1969).

In order to get the interview, basic level students of the Pedagogía de los Idiomas Career (PDI) from the Facultad de Educación Ciencia y Tecnología (FECYT) – UTN were selected. In the first place, authorization was requested from the Dean of the FECYT; next, due to COVID – 19, a dialogue was held with the students through Microsoft TEAMS to make an appointment for the interview and fundamentally explain the reason for the interview and so be able to obtain the information required for the analysis.

To collect the information, a simple and basic questionnaire was carried out with questions such as: *Where are you from? / Could you please tell me your address. Where exactly do you live? / Could you tell me how to get to your house? / Is there a supermarket near your house?* What else is near your house? Finally, students were shown 10 pictures with objects for them to tell the location of each one.

In order to obtain relevant information from the interviewees, they were asked to respond with full sentences that would help detect the incorrect use of prepositions, which is the main objective of this research. Despite the various errors found in the corpus regarding the answers that students gave to the use and functions of prepositions, only the ones which appeared most frequently and seem to be most common were chosen (prepositions of place: near, behind, in). However, for future research, the rest of the information (corpus) provided by the interviewees may also be considered.

The corpus of this research has been formed by 33 interviews that make up the data under analysis. In the corpus, three frequent and common mistakes made by students from basic levels were evidenced when they use prepositions in English.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Based on the corpus, relevant information was evidenced that help detect the incorrect use of prepositions. When it comes to giving addresses and locations, the prepositions of place like near, behind, and in are the three prepositions that appear most frequently and constitute the most common mistakes committed by basic level students in their answers at the time of writing; in the order, the following errors are noted:

1. To the question: *Is there a supermarket near your house? / What else is near your house?*

Students respond:

- *Near to* my house there is + the object. (this is how 6 students respond)
- *Near of* my house there is + the object. (this is how 8 students respond)
- *Near at* my house there is + the object. (this is how 1 student respond)

> Phenomena found: *Language transfer, or interference from the mother tongue*

2. To the question: *Could you please tell me your address. Where exactly do you live?*

Students respond:

- I live *in* the street + street names. (this is how 11 students respond)

> Phenomena found: *Transfer of training and also over-generalization of target language rules.*

3. To the question: *Where is the + object name? (a picture was shown to the students for them to tell the location of the object ...)*

Students respond:

- It is *behind of* the sofa. (this is how 15 students respond)

> Phenomena found: *Language transfer, or interference from the mother tongue.*

DISCUSSION

There is no doubt that many of the errors committed by basic English level students of the UTN regarding the uses and functions of prepositions is systematic. But, “where do they come from? How and why do they fossilize? What processes prevent students from creating and adequate grammar of the target language?” (Corder, 1974).

(Selinker, 1974) identifies “five processes central to second language learning and acquisition, each of which can force fossilizable items, rules, and subsystems to appear and possibly remain in the interlanguage indefinitely”. They are: i) *Language transfer*, or interference from the mother tongue; ii) *Transfer of training*, or errors due to the nature of the language-learning materials and approaches themselves; iii) *Strategies of second language learning*, or

errors due to the learner's own approach to the material to be learned; iv) *Strategies of second language communication*, or errors due to the way in which the learner attempts to communicate; and v) *Overgeneralization of target language rules*, or errors due to the way in which the learner restructures and reorganizes linguistic material.

Regarding the answers that students give to question 1 (*Is there a supermarket near your house? / What else is near your house?*) and, question 3 (*Where is the + object name?*), it was found the phenomena of Language transfer, or interference from the mother tongue. When it comes to language transfer, there are errors "that can be attributed to language transfer (interference from the native language); those errors can be found at different levels: pronunciation, morphology, syntax, vocabulary and meaning" (Omaggio, 1986). The L1 of every learner is really an important factor in the acquisition of a new language; native languages are considered as interfering effects on the L2. "The majority of a learner's error in producing the second language, especially in the beginning levels, stem from the learner's assumption that the target language operates like the native language" (Brown, 1994).

On the subject of this specific analysis (*answers that students give to questions 1 and 3*), interference from the native language in "vocabulary and the encoding of meaning can occur when learners use strategies such as literal translation or language switch (the use of a native language term without translation) to solve their communication problems" (Omaggio, 1986). For instance, Spanish native speakers, who are also basic level students of English at the UTN, use the words translation *cerca de* or *detrás de* to convey the meaning of near and behind respectively. In fact, L1 interfere in L2 when they assume that the equivalent idea in Spanish requires the use of the words *of*, *to*, *at*, after the single word prepositions *near* and *behind*, incorrectly encoding it in English.

In regard to the answers that students give to question 2 (*Could you please tell me your address. Where exactly do you live?*) it was originally found the phenomena of *Transfer of training* and later also the phenomena of *Overgeneralization of target language rules*. When it comes to *Transfer of training* Selinker (1974, p.122) points out that "some fossilizable errors may be due to the nature of the learning materials or procedures used in formal second language learning". The fact is that L2 learners who are in basic levels of English at the UTN practice the preposition *in* in drills and exercises without distinguishing the ample repertoire that this preposition *in* has. For example, regarding the uses and functions of the preposition *in* when giving addresses, students regularly just use *in* for the following three situations: a) I live *in* Ibarra; b) I live *on* Bolivar and Mejía; and c) I live *at* 2-20 Bolivar and Mejía. In fact, they do not make the distinction on the different uses of *in* in order to communicate.

In Spanish, indeed, L2 students use the same preposition *en* for the three aspects mentioned above: a) Vivo *en*

Ibarra; b) Vivo *en* la calle Bolivar y Mejía; c) Vivo *en* la calle Bolivar 2-20 y Mejía).

When it comes to *Overgeneralization of target language rules* Selinker (1974, p. 122) states that "...Errors derived from overgeneralization result when a previously available strategy or rule is used in new situations where that rule does not apply". "Over generalization is one of the strategies used in reorganizing linguistic material and is sometimes a valuable acquisition tool, but when rules are misapplied and never later refined, this strategy can be an important source of fossilization material in interlanguage" (Omaggio, 1986). For instance, Spanish speakers in general usually use the preposition *en* in Spanish, when giving addresses, to refer to the three situations mentioned above (*in*, *on*, *at* when giving addresses in English); indeed, they are overgeneralizing the target language rules when they want to give addresses in English.

CONCLUSIONS

Prepositions are part of the grammar system; they can occur everywhere in the process of writing; however, as most prepositions have a variety of uses, functions and meanings and, there are not many rules to help beginner students to use them, it is difficult for them to get to use prepositions correctly.

Even after having achieved a high English proficiency level in, EFL and ESL learners still struggle with using prepositions correctly.

First English level students of the UTN show weaknesses on the uses, functions and meaning of English prepositions. Many of the errors committed by L2 basic level students when writing prepositions in English is systematic; the main errors encountered have relation with the following phenomena: i) *Language transfer or interference from the mother tongue*, ii) *Transfer of training*, and iii) *Overgeneralization of target language rules*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

English teachers of the UTN should contribute seriously with beginner students, so as they can get to use prepositions correctly and strengthen not only Speaking but Writing skills.

Teachers should guide students in the study of prepositions essentially before fossilization occurs.

Teachers should also supplement their classes with refreshing activities when teaching English prepositions; it will give learners exposure to target writing since they are beginners.

Teachers should persuade students into thinking directly in the target language; this indeed will help students to reduce language interference from their mother tongue (Brown, 1994).

REFERENCES

- Bolton, D., & Goodey, N. (1996). *English Grammar in Steps*. London: Richmond Publishing.
- Brown, H. D. (1994). *Teaching by Principles. An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. San Francisco, California: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Corder, S. P. (1974). *The Significance of Learners' Errors*. Newbury: Rowley Mass.
- Gear, J., & Gear, R. (2009). *iBT Cambridge Preparation for the TOEFL Test*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hacker, D. (1988). *Rules for Writers a Concise Handbook*. Boston: St. Martin's Press.
- Hall, E. J. (1982). *Dictionary of Prepositions for Students of English*. New York: Minerva Books.
- Kesner Bland, S. (2003). *Grammar Sense*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kroll, B. (1990). *Second Language Writing: Research Insides for the Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Labov, w. (1969). *The Logic of Nonstandard English*. Georgetown: Georgetown University Press.
- Larsen Freeman, D. (1997). *Grammar Dimensions Form, Meaning, and Use*. Boston, Massachusetts: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Lester, M., & Beason, L. (2013). *English Grammar and Usage*. NY, USA: McGraw-Hill.
- Lester, M., & Beason, L. (2013). *The McGraw-Hill handbook of English Grammar and Usage*. USA.: McGraw Hill.
- Longman Group UK. (1989). *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. Uk: Richard Clay.
- Morenberg, M. (1997). *Doing Grammar* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Omaggio, A. C. (1986). *Teaching Language in Context. Proficiency - Oriented Instruction*. Boston, Massachusetts: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Raimes, A. (1988). *Grammar Troublespots An Editing Guide for ESL Students*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Selinker, L. (1974). *"Interlanguage"*. Newbury: Rowley Mass.
- Suprity, A. (2020, May 9). *Prepositions in English Grammar*. Retrieved from <https://englishcompositions.com/preposition-in-english-grammar/>
- Swam, M. (1988). *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thomson Corporation. (2007). *Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary of American English*. Thomson Heinle.
- University of Oxford. (2006). *Oxford Dictionary of American English*. UK.: Oxford University Press.
- Ur, P. (1988). *Grammar Practice Activities: A Practical Guide for Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wright, T. (1987). *Roles of Teachers and Learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- <https://englishcompositions.com/preposition-in-english-grammar/>
- <https://www.uvic.ca/learningandteaching/cac/assets/docs/Prepositions%20Final.pdf>
- <https://www.nova.edu/tutoring-testing/study-resources/forms/prepositions.pdf>
- <https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/files/PrepositionChart.pdf>
- <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/rwc/repository/files/grammar-and-mechanics/Using-Prepositions.pdf>
- <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/images/206277-cambridge-english-prepositions-andclassroom-ideas-document.pdf>
- <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1083708.pdf>

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- UTN: Universidad Técnica del Norte
 FECYT: Facultad de Educación Ciencia y Tecnología
 PDI: Pedagogía de los Idiomas
 EFL: English as a Foreign Language
 ESL: English as a Second Language
 L1: Mother Tongue
 L2: Target Language
 Microsoft TEAMS: Center for Team Work
 COVID – 19: Coronavirus Disease of 2019