

On the Iranian EFL Learners' Sources of Errors in the Production of Propositions

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to detect to what extent Iranian EFL learners commit errors attributable to the cross-linguistic differences between their L1 (Target language) and L2 (Source language). Furthermore locating the types of errors in use of prepositions (omission of prepositions, redundant or wrong use of prepositions) is among the objective of the study. In the direction of checking the status of various categories of errors of prepositions made by Iranian EFL learners as a result of the transitional limitations between Persian and English, an error analysis was performed. Therefore, the researcher developed a translation task in order to find out the interlingual preposition errors committed by the participants as a result of transfer between L1 and L2. A total number of 60 male and female students studying English at the intermediate level took part in the study and carried out the translation task. The analysis of the results indicated significant differences between different types of errors made by the participants. The fact of the matter is that Iranian EFL learners had the most problems in terms of the errors related to the redundant use of prepositions. They stood in the second position concerning the errors in the area of wrong use of prepositions and finally they had the less frequent errors with respect to the omission of prepositions in L2 while translating from Persian into English.

Keywords

Contrastive Analysis, Negative Transfer, Intralingual, Error Analysis, EFL, ESL

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1. Introduction

Errors in foreign language teaching and learning are the cases which are difficult enough to avoid. Teachers, linguists and psycholinguists have always been interested in errors produced by second- language learners, either in their speech or writing or both. In fact, learners' errors have been the subject of extensive investigation and heated controversy for quite a long time. Error Analysis is a non-stop area of research (Dessouky, 1990), and will remain so because people will commit errors as long as they participate in language learning process (Mahmoud, 2011). Error Analysis, as a diagnostic tool, contributes to language teaching and learning by answering some questions and proposing

solutions regarding different aspects of language pedagogy. According to Corder (1967), analyzing language learners' errors systematically makes it possible to determine the problematic areas which need reinforcement in teaching. Analyzing EFL learners' errors in their translation performance can be a great help for teachers to become aware of the types and sources of these errors to employ more efficient teaching methods and techniques so that EFL learners can acquire English translation better and enhance their language production competence.

In the early 1950's, language was accepted as a system and second language learning as acquisition of two language systems. Errors were regarded as evidence of language transfer, and were seen as the result of ineffective language

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learning and their elimination became the intension of linguists and language teachers (Khodabandeh, 2007). Sources of language learners' errors tell us why, when, where and how the errors are committed. Without detecting and identifying sources of errors, treatment of EFL learners' errors is impossible. Among different error sources, interlingual and intralingual factors have been considered as two major sources of EFL learners' errors, but researchers haven't reached a unanimous contention on the key role of one of these two error sources with respect to EFL learners' error commitment. The main concern of the present study is to identify and analyze the sources of errors committed by Iranian intermediate English learners in translating the propositions from Persian to English. To this end, an error analysis will be conducted to examine the status of different types of preposition errors made because of the transitional constraints between the SL (Persian) and the (TL) English. The obtained results may be of value to EFL teachers, syllabus designers, and researchers.

2. Review of Literature

In the early 1950's the notion of language as a system, and more importantly, the notion of second language acquisition as the meeting of two language systems gained more acceptance and linguists began to regard errors as evidence of language transfer. It was the time when Contrastive Analysis (CA) emerged. The status of CA as a psychological approach to the investigation of the second language process became unpopular for some reasons and CA gradually lost its validity. Strong criticisms of CA showed that it was not as useful as it claimed to be. CA strongly emphasized that the notion of difficulty was equated with the degree of errors. Namely, the more L2 learners made errors in their acquisition of L2 the more it was assumed to be difficult and consequently the more the target and native languages were different. Another pitfall of CA was its inability in identifying sources of difficulty other than the learners' L1. Additionally CA didn't contribute to language pedagogy effectively.

Because of the drawbacks of CA, in late 1960s and early 1970s, the specialists' attitudes towards errors changed gradually, and the emphasis shifted from the product to the underlying process with respect to ESL/EFL learners' error commitment. The students' errors were not regarded as problems anymore but as normal and inevitable events in language learning process which could contribute to the understanding of the strategies employed by first or second language learners. The first argument for significance of learners' errors was made by Corder in 1967. Corder (1967) mentioned that errors are evidence of the learners' in-built syllabus which show how L1 and L2 learners develop an

independent system of language. In fact, language learners make their own language which is different from their L1 and L2 and has its own set of rules. The term interlanguage was coined by Selinker (1972) to refer to this linguistic system.

Error analysis, a branch of applied linguistics, emerged in the sixties to demonstrate that learner errors were not only because of the learner's native language but also they reflected some universal learning strategies, as a reaction to contrastive analysis theory, which considered language transfer as the basic process of second language learning as what behavioristic theory suggested. Error analysis, on the other hand, deals with the learners' performance in terms of the cognitive processes they make use of in recognizing or coding the input they receive from the target language. Therefore, a primary focus of error analysis is on the evidence that learners' errors provide with an understanding of the underlying process of second language acquisition. At this point, Keshavars (1999) suggests that the field of error analysis can be divided into two branches: (i) theoretical, and (ii) applied.

The advocates of EA considered it important to draw a distinction between mistake and error, which are "technically two very different phenomena" (Brown, 1994, p. 205). Corder (1967) took notion of Chomsky's "competence versus performance" distinction relating errors to failures in competence and mistakes to failures in performance. According to this notion, a mistake occurs not because of lack of competence but because of processing limitations which indicates learners' inability in utilizing knowledge of TL. An error results an infringement of the rules of TL language and hence experience deviation in grammaticality of TL. Errors arise because of lack of competence. Native speaker can recognize and correct mistakes, but L2 learner need the linguistic competency in TL to identify errors and correct them accordingly. Error analysis focuses on the errors learners make by drawing a comparison between the errors made in (TL) and that TL itself.

The forerunner of EA, Corder (1987) explains the significance of learners' errors in three different ways. "The first to the teacher in that they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed, and consequently what remains for him to learn. Second, they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly, (and in a sense this is their most important aspect) they are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn." Brown (1987) gives the definition of error analysis as follows; "The fact that learners do make errors and these errors can be observed, analyzed and classified to

reveal something of the system operating within the learner led to a surge of study of learners' errors, called 'error analysis'."

A number of different categories for describing errors have been identified. Corder (1978) classifies the errors in terms of the difference between the learners' utterance and the reconstructed version. In this way, errors fall into four categories:

- 1) Omission of some required element
- 2) Addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element
- 3) Selection of an incorrect element
- 4) Misordering of the elements

Ellis (1996) expresses that "classifying errors in these ways can help us to diagnose learners' learning problems at any stage of their development and to plot how changes in error patterns occur over time." this study serves details about errors so it is assumed to utilize Keshavarz's classification(1999):

- 1) Orthographic Errors
- 2) Phonological Errors
- 3) Lexicon- Syntactic Errors
- 4) Morpho- Syntactic Errors

Prepositions as an important area of English grammar are generally found difficult by EFL/ESL learners. According to Pittman (1966), among those who teach or learn English language, prepositions have earned a reputation for difficulty if not downright unpredictability. In a similar vein, Takahashi (1969) argues that the correct usage of prepositions is the greatest problem for learners of English. By definition, a preposition expresses a relationship between entities: it indicates a relationship in space (between one object and another), and/or a relationship in time (between events). In addition to other relationships such as instrument and cause (Quirk et al., 1993), prepositions can be used with different parts of speech of the same root word. Prepositions can be classified according to their form, function and meaning. Concerning form, prepositions can be simple (one-word preposition), or complex (also called two- word, three-word, or compound prepositions). Simple prepositions are closed class. That is, we cannot invent new single word prepositions. However, complex prepositions are open class because new combinations could be invented (Asma, 2010). In English, there are, however, approximately seventy simple prepositions. The most frequently used are: at, by for, from, in, of, on, to and with. With regard to prepositional phrases, Quirk et al. (1993) view that a prepositional phrase is made of a preposition followed by a prepositional complement which is a noun phrase (e.g. at the bus stop) or a WH-clause

(e.g. from what he said) or V-ing clause (e.g. by signing a peace treaty) (cited in Asma, 2010). According to Delshad, Iranian EFL learners seemingly tend to misuse or omit English prepositions (as cited in Jafarpour & Koosha, 2006). Likewise, in an endeavor to determine the extent to which Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of collocation of prepositions is affected by their L1, Jafarpour and Koosha (2006) conducted a study in which the errors of the collocations of prepositions turned to yield the significance of Iranian EFL learners' L1 transfer. That is, Iranian EFL learners tend to carry over their L1 collocational prepositions to their L2 production. Brown (2000) believes that the occurrence of errors in L2 learners' production is inevitable. He adds that if learners neither make errors nor receive any feedback on their errors, their acquisition process will be impeded. These errors, deemed meaningful and systematic, are of utmost importance to researchers and teachers of L2 writing (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Lin, 2002 ;). Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland, and Warschauer (2003) draw attention to the significance of the study of student text in teaching effectively. According to Yang (2010), if the learner was operating the phonological or the graphological substance systems, i.e. spelling or pronouncing, we say he or she has produced an encoding or decoding error. If he or she was operating the lexico-grammatical systems of the TL to produce or process text, we refer to any errors on this level as composing or understanding errors. If he or she was operating on the discourse level, we label the errors occurring misformulation or misprocessing errors. In a study conducted by Nayernia (2011), written sentences of learners were analyzed to find out what proportion of the learners' errors were intralingual errors and whether the native language plays a significant role in learners' difficulties in learning the target language. Her findings revealed that only 16.7 percent of the errors were interlingual errors and most of errors could be attributed to target language system. This is in contrast with Abbasi and Karimian's (2011) finding. Namvar et al. (2012) analyzed collocations in the Iranian postgraduate students' writings to explore the influence of first language (L1) and the cultural background of learners on the production of collocations. Writing and found out that first language influence appeared to have a strong effect on the learners' production of collocation. In another study Sattari (2012) analyzed Persian English learners' grammatical errors in writing and documented that learners at elementary levels made a great number persistent errors which could be traced to the mother tongue.

3. Statement of the Problem

There is no doubt that compare with other issues in language teaching and learning, prepositions have not received a

considerable attention. Prepositions as a significant area of English grammar are generally found difficult by EFL/ESL learners. Furthermore very little attention has been paid to the impact of negative transfer of Persian linguistic system, specially the case of proposition, on the learners' interlanguage system. Failure to anticipate the common errors committed by learners lead to a sort of fossilization. Consequently it would be difficult for them to get rid of these fossilized items. It is also worth noting that only a few studies have attempted to explore the cross-linguistic influence of English and Persian prepositions on second language learning. Therefore, this study might contribute to enrich the body of cross-linguistic knowledge in comparison with English prepositions versus Persian prepositions. Thus this study was an attempt to investigate the types and the amount of errors in the field of proposition committed by the Iranian EFL learners.

4. Significance of the Study

An appropriate error analysis can help facilitate the achievement of the goals and expectations of secondary schools and private English institutes programs. Considering the related literature in the field of language learning and teaching in Iranian context, the scarcity of research in this area is obvious. The significance of this study originates from the fact that it tried to recognize and set up the Iranian EFL learners in terms of their errors of proposition in the process of translation. In the improvement of students' errors in producing proposition and the way in which teachers treat their errors it is very important to analyze their errors. The present study may also be of significance to educational organizations in the countries with the similar language systems. The study is also important for decision makers in material preparation and curriculum development in the Ministries of Education and Science, Research and Technology. Improving EFL learners' writing and speaking competence requires treatment of their errors. It is possible to treat EFL learners' errors only if the sources of these errors are detected and identified. Regarding the previous studies done on EFL learners' errors, as mentioned in the literature review, with respect to EFL learners' error commitment, researchers haven't reached a unanimous contention on the key role of one of the two major error sources. In other words, some researchers consider interlingual factors as the main source of EFL learners' errors while others believe that errors mostly occur because of intralingual factors. Therefore, the present paper shed some light on the source of errors concerning correct use of propositions during translation from Persian to English.

5. Objective of the Study

Taking into account that Iranian schools and universities offer an EFL not an ESL context for language learning it is obvious that learners face a lot of problems in learning English naturally. The fact of the matter is that in such contexts learning take place within the four walls of the classroom and more probably does not lead to acquisition. Therefore, to detect the area of students' errors and make fruitful actions one of the main objectives of present paper was investigating the extent which Iranian EFL learners make the prepositional errors in the translation task. Also, identifying the types of errors in making use of prepositions committed by the participants was among the objective of the study.

6. Research Questions

According to what has been said so far, the following questions will be addressed in this study:

1. To what extent do Iranian EFL learners make the prepositional errors in the translation task?
2. What types of errors in use of prepositions (omission of prepositions, redundant or wrong use of prepositions) are more likely to be made by Iranian EFL learners via the translation task?

7. Method

Leedy, P.D (1993) states that research design is an outline of the phases planned for the total research procedure and the methods utilized in the data collection course, jointly with the steps that will be taken to examine data. This study makes use of a quantitative design.

7.1. Participants

About 100 male and female students studying English at the intermediate level at Sadr Language Institute in the center of Isfahan were initially selected for this study. To determine the homogeneity of the subjects, an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) test consisting of the vocabulary and structure parts was administered. Finally about 60 homogeneous students were selected as the main participants of the study.

7.2. Instruments

The instruments to serve the purposes of this researcher were the followings:

1. An Oxford Placement Test (OPT) comprising of the vocabulary and structure sections to ensure the homogeneity of the subjects.

2. A translation task was developed by the researcher.

With reference to translation technique as an elicited procedure, this instrument was used to collect the relevant data in this study. The purpose of this instrument is detecting the interlingual preposition errors caused by the process of transfer between the target language and the source language. To develop the translation task 18 problematic sentences in Persian were selected based on the most cross-linguistically challenging prepositions. The translation task contained

1. Six sentences for absence of prepositions in L1
2. Six sentences for redundant prepositions in L1
3. Six sentences for different equivalent prepositions in Farsi. (See Appendix)

In order to make sure about the validity of the, three university professors were consulted and they approved that the translation task's items were well-prepared and served the intended purposes.

7.3. Data Collection Procedures

In order to answer the research questions of the present study, the following procedures were followed. First, permission was sought from the authorities. In the second step, before collecting the necessary data, to make the participants sure that the information obtained from them will be kept confidential and the results do not have evaluative purpose, their consents were obtained. Then the translation tasks were distributed among the participants to translate them in to English in a given times. They were allowed to do the task in a limited amount of time, that is, less than one minute per sentence. Therefore, the participants wrote their first immediate response.

7.4. Data Analysis Procedures

After collecting the translation tasks the researcher personally scored the papers. The responses that the participants gave to the translation task were of three kinds: wrong or inappropriate equivalence; omitted prepositions, and redundant prepositions. To categorize the obtained data clearly, the results of frequency of translation errors in terms of the use of prepositions in the translation task were tabulated and presented in the following tables.

Table 1. Frequency of different types of translation errors in terms of the use of prepositions in the translation task.

Error Type	Frequency %	Translation task Items
Redundancy	76.5%	No. 1,2,3,4,5,6
Omission	6.3%	No. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11,12
Wrong use	59.5%	No. 13,14,15,16,17,18

8. Results and Discussion

As it was mentioned the objectives of the present paper was investigating the types of errors in use of prepositions committed by Iranian EFL learners in the process of a translation task. As it can be seen from table the participants of the study had the most errors concerning the wrong use of the proposition (76.5%). Then the errors regarding the redundancy of prepositions were more frequent (6.3%) and the participants committed fewer errors (59.5%) with respect to the omission of prepositions in L2 during the translation task. In terms of redundancy

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for errors in use of prepositions (highlighted in red) related to individual items of translation task.

No.	Proposition Error	Type of Errors	Frequency%
1	Asked from	Redundancy	71%
2	Marriedwith	Redundancy	88%
3	Discuss about	Redundancy	89%
4	Lend to	Redundancy	66%
5	Went to home	Redundancy	77%
6	Enjoyed from	Redundancy	69%
7	Slept--- 2 hours	omission	3%
8	--- Sundays	omission	6%
9	--- 5p.m	omission	5%
10	Watched --- 1/5 hours	Omission	3%
11	--- weekends	Omission	10%
12	---- nights	Omission	11%
13	Similar with	Wrong use	26%
14	Afraid from	Wrong use	45%
15	Died from	Wrong use	65%
16	Believe to God	Wrong use	78%
17	Depend to	Wrong use	71%
18	Swear to God	Wrong use	73% 358

In a nutshell, according to the present data, it can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners are more probably undergo some difficulties in the production of English prepositions which are redundant in English as well as those proposition that they use wrongly in production (writing, speaking or translation). Delshad (1980) conducted a contrastive study of English and Persian prepositions and found that Iranian EFL/ESL students have difficulty in the use of English prepositions. According to Delshad, Iranian EFL learners seemingly tend to misuse or omit English prepositions (as cited in Jafarpour & Koosha, 2006). Similarly, in an attempt to determine the extent to which Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of collocation of prepositions is affected by their L1, Jafarpour and Koosha (2006) conducted a study in which the errors of the collocations of prepositions turned to yield the significance of Iranian EFL learners' L1 transfer. That is, Iranian EFL learners tend to carry over their L1 collocational prepositions to their L2 production. It can be explain by the fact that Iranian language learners tend to negatively transfer the

formal features of their L1 to their L2 utterances. Following structural linguists it is necessary to identify areas of difficulty for second language (English) and create suitable teaching materials to overcome these linguistic obstacles. Also, it seems more logical to present first the items in learner's L2 which are in line with the similar items in learner's L1 (positive transfer) so as to facilitate language learning process. Furthermore the areas of asymmetry between Farsi and English (negative transfer) and the predicted the areas of learning difficulties which more likely lead to interference and believed to seriously hinder the process of second language learning should be identified. To sum up EA could give important additional source of information for the selection of items to be incorporated into syllabuses. In principle, EA can pave the way for teachers to ameliorate their teaching methodology and maintain a state of alert in terms of what parts of their syllabus have been inadequately learned or taught and need further attention (Corder, 1981).

9. Suggestions and Implications

Iranian syllabus designers and material developers can benefit from the results of the present study in grading and selecting materials and course books in terms of proposition. Also, considering the various theories and hypotheses concerning error correction, Iranian language instructors may utilize the findings of this paper to supply learners with suitable corrective feedback whenever the learners commit errors in the area of proposition. It further shows that classification of errors provides information on common problems in process of language learning. Also, by being able to describe and predict errors, teachers can inform their students to know or surmount their errors in process of language learning. Therefore, English language teachers can reduce the difficulty of acquiring second language prepositions. It can be concluded that language educators and stake holders investigate thoroughly the topic of prepositional corrective feedback and try to offer corrective feedback concerning the cross-linguistic error seriousness of the particular prepositions in speaking, writing and translation. Additionally, the results of the study may add to the corpus of preposition errors committed by Iranian EFL learners. Nevertheless, external validity of the results is not high due to sample size of the corpus. Therefore, in order to improve the speaking and writing ability of the learners in terms of preposition, teachers should pay more attention to the two language systems and rules. To meet this purpose, teachers' knowledge of both L1 and L2 languages can be helpful.

Appendix

* Please translate the following sentences. The result of your translation has no effect on your class performance or your final examination grade. Allotted time: 10 minutes

1. معلم از دانش آموزان خواست که بیشتر مطالعه کنند.
2. هفته پیش امیر با سارا ازدواج کرد.
3. معمولاً او اجازه میدهد به دانش آموزان که بحث کنند در مورد موضوع انشا.
4. مینا بعد از تمام کردن کارش به خانه رفت.
5. تام کمی پول به دوستش قرض داد.
6. کودکان از تماشای کارتون لذت میبرند.
7. جک اغلب دو ساعت بعد از کار میخوابد.
8. یکشنبه ها ما به کلیسا میرویم.
9. همیشه ساعت 5 بعد از ظهر پیاده روی میکنم.
10. دیروز دو ساعت تو مدرسه فوتبال بازی کردیم.
11. آخر هفته ها شنا میرم.
12. داوود همیشه شبها مسواک میزند.
13. نظر من کاملاً شبیه نظر تو است.
14. بچه ها از سگ میترسند.
15. تعداد زیادی از مردم به علت تصادف با ماشین فوت کردند.
16. این مردان به خدا ایمان (باور) دارند.
17. یادگیری انگلیسی بستگی دارد به خواندن و نوشتن.
18. امیر سرانجام به خدا قسم خورد.

* Correct equivalents of the above Persian sentences translated into English.

1. The teacher asked the students to study more.
2. Amir married Sara last week.
3. He usually lets the students discuss the topic of the composition.
4. Mina went home after finishing the work.
5. Tom lent his friend some money.
6. Children enjoy watching cartoons.
7. Jack often sleeps for two hours after work.
8. We go to church on Sundays.
9. I often go walking at 5 p.m.
10. We played football for two hours at school yesterday.
11. We go swimming on weekends.

12. David always brushes his teeth at night.
13. My idea is absolutely similar to your idea.
14. Children afraid of dogs.
15. Lots of people died of car accident.
16. These men believe in God.
17. Learning English depends on reading and writing.
18. Finally Amir swore by God.

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