Error Analysis: A Study of Prepositional Errors among Kashmiri ESL Students

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Abstract

The present study will be an attempt to investigate the errors committed in the written English by secondary school students of Kashmir valley. For this purpose questionnaires were prepared for the students to test their writing ability. The test included writing summary of a given passage and a picture based story questions. The sample of the study consisted of 300 students selected randomly from various schools of Kashmir valley. The present study will be discussing errors in prepositions. The findings revealed that these errors are mainly due to first language (Kashmiri/Urdu) negative transfer. This study is important for teachers and educators who should become aware of the types of linguistic errors that their target language learners make.

Keywords: Kashmiri ESL Students, English writing, error analysis, prepositions

1.Introduction

It is a widely accepted fact that English has acquired the status of a world language and it holds its sway in different domains of life. English, though a foreign language, occupies a unique position in the educational system of India. The situation in Jammu and Kashmir is not much different from rest of the Indian union. English has been a dominant language of Jammu and Kashmir and serves as the medium of education in government and private schools.

Learning English requires mastering the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. However writing is considered the most complex skill because it requires thinking and cognitive processes to reach its final product. Despite its complexity, writing is very important for communication. It is the fact that people communicate either orally or in writing.

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"In spoken conversations with others, they make sense of the dialogue in a complex back-and-forth process of negotiation of meaning between speakers. In written texts, this back-and-forth negotiation is not possible. There is no possibility of negotiating meaning of written documents, the problems of misunderstandings are severely increased" (Penman, 1998). Hence, it is evident that writing is an intricate and complex task. In Kashmir, students barely get acquainted with the nature of writing process and teachers also hardly make any conscious effort in this regard. Consequently, students start committing errors and mistakes in writing and these errors/mistakes are not rectified by the teachers. Finally, these errors and mistakes become permanent feature of their writing.

2. Error Analysis

Errors are natural and basic to human beings. Richards (1974:100) claims, "It is matter of common observation that even the most intelligent, motivated learners do make errors even when learning under the best possible conditions. Researchers are interested in errors because it is believed that it contains valuable information on the strategies that learners use to acquire a language (Richards, 1974; Taylor, 1975; Dulay and Burt, 1974). Hence, an error analysis is the best tool for describing and explaining errors made by speakers of other languages in order to know the sources of these errors and the reasons behind their occurrence.

Corder (1967) in his article entitled 'The Significance of Learner Errors' contended that errors are 'important in and of themselves. According to Corder (1974), error analysis has two objectives: one theoretical and another applied. The theoretical objective 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 our 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 present us the learner's state of the language (Corder, 1967) at a given point during the learning process and prognostic because it can inform course organizers to reorient language learning materials on the basis of the learners' current problems. Error analysis (EA) thus became a preferred tool of studying second language learning. It is seen as one of the best types of linguistic studies that focuses on the learners' errors.

Error analysis (EA) thus became a preferred tool of studying second language learning. It is seen as one of the best types of linguistic studies that focuses on the learners' errors. Perhaps, one of the first and most important studies conducted in the field of Error Analysis was the one done by Richards (1971). His study involved learners from different language background (Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, French, Czech, Polish, Tagalog, Maori, Maltese, and Indian and West African Languages) and showed the different types of errors relating to production and distribution of verb groups, prepositions, articles, and the use of questions. Based on this, he distinguished three sources of errors:

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1. Interference errors: errors resulting from the use of elements from one language while speaking/writing another,

2. Intralingual errors: errors reflecting general characteristics of the rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply, and

3. Developmental errors: errors occurring when learners attempt to build up hypothesis about the target language on the basis of limited experiences.

3. Methodology

The sample for this study covered students of Kashmir valley who were selected randomly from government, private and missionary secondary schools. The sample included five districts of Kashmir valley: Srinagar, Anantnag, Baramulla, Pulwama and Ganderbal. It comprised of a total number of 300 students of 9th & 10th classes respectively. For the present study equal number of male and female respondents were taken. In order to achieve the set goal of this study, questionnaires were given to students which tested their writing ability in English language. The test included writing summary of a given passage and a picture based story questions.

4. Data Elicitation

The respondents were contacted in their respective classrooms and information about the purpose of study was provided to them. After obtaining their consent, the research questionnaire was administered to them. They were asked to write a paragraph on given topic and to attempt a picture based story. The time allocated for writing was 90 minutes. The participants were further asked to write on their own without discussing with friends.

The present study is both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The student's written essays are qualitative instrument from which we read, analyze and describe the nature and the source of prepositional errors. And at the same time, it is quantitative because the number of prepositions which were erroneous are presented through statistical procedures such as tables, figures, pie charts and percentages. Then, each graphic and statistical presentation of data are explained in a qualitative way with detailed interpretations.

All the writing samples were coded with numbers instead of student names to maintain the confidentiality of the learners. After collecting the data from a survey instrument, it was transferred to an Excel spreadsheet for quantification. The quantified data was used for findings and results.

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5. Results and Findings

The findings and the results of the research work is presented within the framework of the research questions, supported by tables and figures to illustrate the results clearly. Since the main objective of the present study was an attempt to investigate the prepositional errors committed in the written English by secondary school students in Kashmir valley. The study also attempted to give plausible explanations to the causes of these errors. The present work also talked about the student's frequency of errors in terms of schooling and the districts they belonged to.

5.(a) Discussion

The detailed interpretation and discussion of the errors are given below. The results are explained and presented in tables and figures.

5(b) Preposition Errors

Prepositions are words that are placed before a noun or pronoun to effectively show relationships between them and actions in sentences. It links nouns, pronouns and phrases to other words in a sentence.

However Prepositions contribute great difficulty for 2nd language learner. Amar Kant Jha (1991) in his paper stated 'The prepositions in English are very limited but they have to serve a variety of relational meanings'. As a result, when students are not sure which preposition to use in a certain sentence, they often compare that sentence with its Urdu/ Kashmiri equivalence,(as Kashmiri being mother tongue and Urdu being first/official language of Kashmir valley) giving a literal translation of that preposition in English. Kashmiri students have access to both Kashmiri and Urdu languages. Another problem of incorrect use of prepositions is that second language learners confuse their meaning by using one preposition instead of another (Fitikides,2002). A good no. researchers in the field of English language teaching generally agree that second language learners are confused about when and how to use prepositions (Zughoul, 1979).

	Anantnag	Baramulla	Srinagar	Pulwama	Ganderbal	Total
Government	33	29	30	43	44	**179**
Private	10	12	9	13	27	**71**
Missionary	12	10	6	12	21	**61**
Total	**55**	**51**	**45**	**68**	**92**	**311**

Table 1: No. of preposition Errors with reference to Schools and Districts

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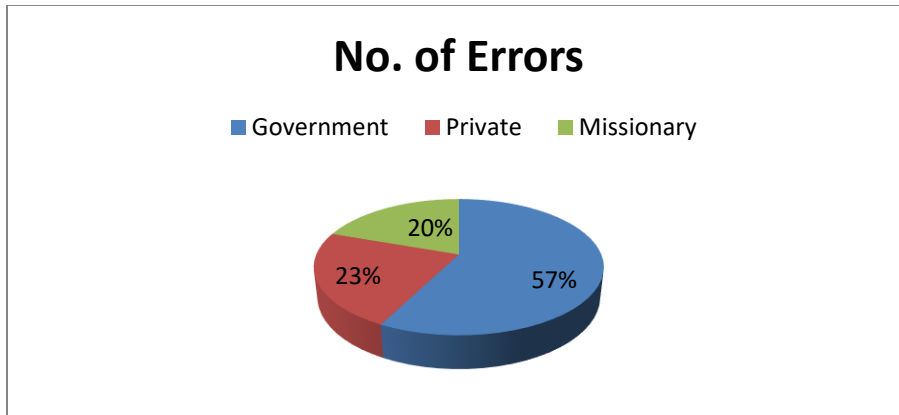
Figure 1

The total no. of prepositional errors was found to be 311(see table 1). The above figure shows that majority of errors are committed by government school students (see table 1). And there is not much considerable difference between Private and Missionary schools.
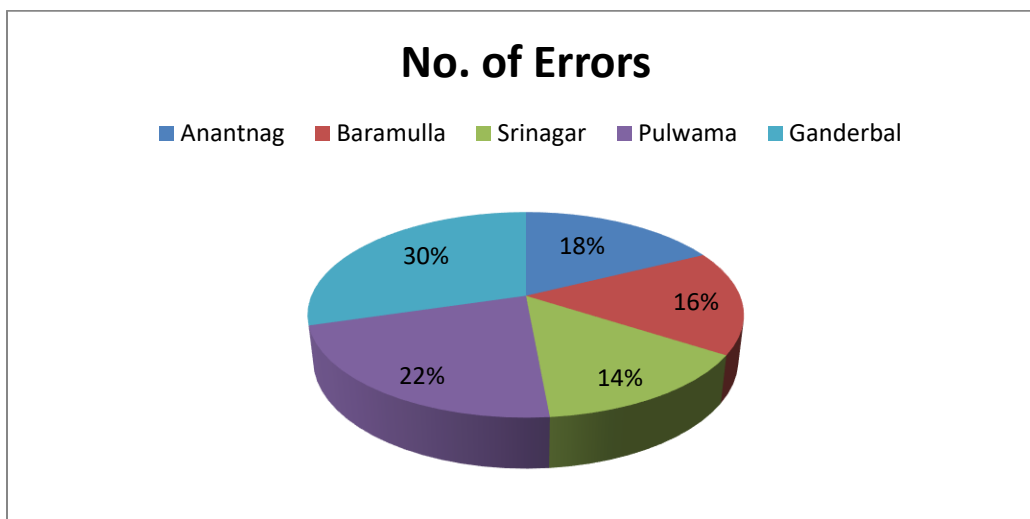

Figure 2

Figure 2 shows district-wise breakage of prepositional errors with Ganderbal district on top (30%) (in terms of errors) and then followed by Pulwama(22%).Districts Anantnag, Baramulla and Srinagar show errors in preposition with percentage 18%, 16% and 14% respectively. There was no significant difference in the number of errors in districts Anantnag, Baramulla and Srinagar.

5.(b. 0) Error Classification

Prepositional errors have been classified into 3 categories: substitution, addition and omission (Dulay, Burt and Krashen 1982 p.150-163). Substitution error means using wrong preposition instead of what is required. Error of addition refers to unnecessary insertion of an

item which is not required. Error of omission are described as absence of preposition in a sentence.

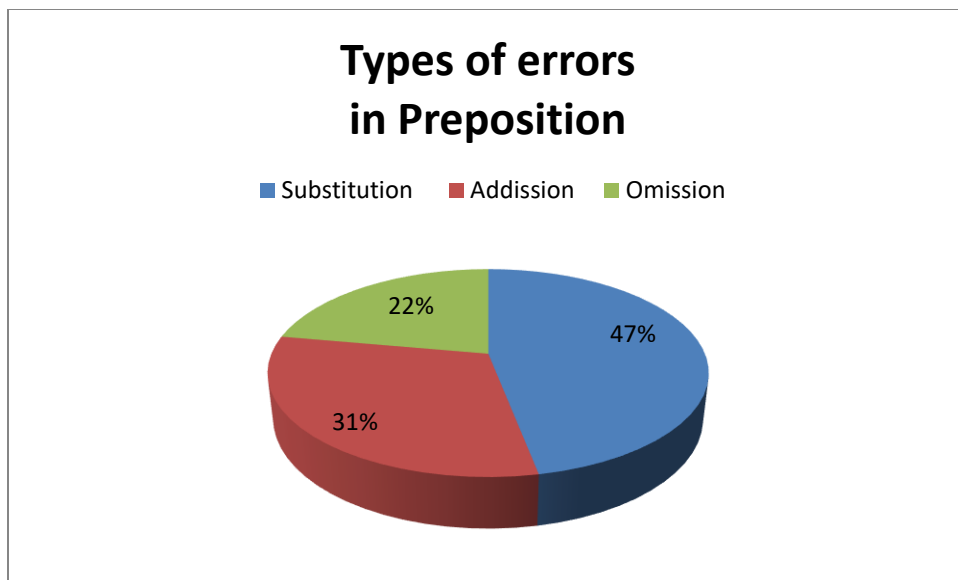| Type of errors	Number of errors	Examples
Substitution	146	I am thankful of God. He sat in the side of the river.
Addition	96	He helped to Sham. There was a pond which was nearby of their house.
Omission	69	She listens ? our problems. She is ? 9th class.

Table 3

Figure 3

The above figure shows the percentage in terms of frequency of errors with regard to type of error. The figure clearly revealed that the substitution errors(47%) are the most predominant among the three followed by addition(31%) and then finally omission(22%).

5.(b.1) Explanation of Errors

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It is not easy to specify the sources of errors. Sometimes errors are so complex and ambiguous that it becomes difficult to explain the source or origin of error. It is equally strenuous to regard one particular source as responsible for that error. However it is essential to explore the source of learner's errors for arriving at some conclusion in order to eradicate them.

5.(b.2) Substitution Errors

The above sentence 'I am thankful of* God' is due to lack of knowledge of grammar and confusion regarding the use of prepositions. The learner in this case also seems to have limited exposure and limited experience of using prepositions in target language. In this particular sentence instead of 'to' preposition 'of' is used. This type of error is attributed to the respondent's lack of knowledge in the use of preposition. In process of learning a target language, the learner adopts a strategy to simplify the system of target language by mingling two or three rules into one and forming an overgeneralization.

In another example 'He sat in* the side of the river' when the learner uses wrong preposition after verb. The source of error seems to be mainly of L1 as the learner translates the whole sentence into his/her first language (Kashmiri). The above construction after literal translation should be 'He sat on* the side of the river'. But again learner has limited prepositional knowledge in the target language and Instead of using 'by' the learner gets confused between 'in' and 'on'.

Another possible explanation for the occurrence of this error can be literal translation from L1(i.e. Urdu which holds a position of first language in Kashmiri society) to L2. This transfer of Urdu postpositional knowledge to English also failed to use the correct preposition.

5.(b.3) Addition Errors

In the sentence 'He helped to* Sham' revealed that addition of a preposition is due to the Urdu interference. The preposition "to" in the above sentence is a literal translation of L1 into L2. The above sentence shows that the preposition 'to' was inserted unnecessarily in a position where it is not required. Native users of the language are familiar with zero prepositions, whereas here the error is caused due to the translation method used by second language learners. This particular error took place in the form of literal translation from L1 to L2.

In example 'There was a pond which was nearby of* their house'. The error is due to confusion brought out by the use of addition while framing this construction. The response elicited from this sentence gives a clear picture that the respondents have written unnecessary preposition in their writing. As the learner had already used a preposition 'nearby' in the sentence, preposition 'of' was not required. However, the error seems that neither the learners L1

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influence, nor the influence of the target language is responsible. But it clearly indicates learners' lack of attention and carelessness may be the reason to produce such flawed constructions.

5.(b.4) Omission Errors

The above sentence 'She *listens ?* our problems', the appropriate preposition 'to' is obligatory, but the respondent fails to use the preposition. The above construction revealed the omission of prepositions that seemed to be caused by the respondent's first language (Kashmiri/Urdu). The learner's error occurs because the verb 'listen', always requires the prepositional phrase introduced by 'to', cannot be immediately followed by a noun. The above example clearly shows the spoken form of Urdu practiced in schools has given rise to this kind of particular error. Thus while translating such constructions, the learner usually drops a preposition.

The next sentence '*She is ? 9th class*' is clear cut example of mother tongue interference. In Kashmiri while speaking, this type of construction doesn't not need a preposition. Another reason can be that there is no one-to-one correspondence between Kashmiri postposition and English preposition. Moreover, the respondents find difficulty not knowing when to use a preposition and when to omit in a particular context.

6. Conclusion

➢ The main finding of this study revealed that substitution errors are most common among Kashmiri students. Learners usually find difficulty in choosing the appropriate preposition.

➢ The present study depicted that the source of majority of prepositional errors are interlingual than intralingual. The findings of the study revealed that students tend to transfer their intended meanings of prepositions in English in the same way they are expressed in Kashmiri/Urdu. There are very few errors in present study which are attributed to target language interference.

➢ The study also showed that least number of errors are committed by learners studying in missionary and private schools. While as Government school students commit errors on larger scale.

➢ Among districts, Ganderbaland Pulwama districts showed highest no. of errors in prepositions.

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