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CONTENTS

The Nature and Status of Craft and Industry in Biblical Times: Effect on Present Day Practice.

Dr. Emele K. Ezema

The Relevance of Video and Television for History Instruction in Government Secondary Schools in Plateau State.

L.L. Maigoro

Educators' Understanding of Instructional Liability in Secondary School Business Studies Skill Practices.

Koko, M. N., Ugoji, E. I. and J. N. Ofoegbu

The Place of Business Education in the Implementation of Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Cross River State of Nigeria.

Chris C. Chukwurah

Administrative Strategies Adopted by School Principals for Quality Assurance in School Discipline.

Dr. C. I. Ani

An Ethnographic Study of the Educational Needs of the Indigenous Kambari Children in Kebbi State, Nigeria.

Dr. Muhammad Garba Mahuta

The Need for Enrolment and Participation of Females in Mathematics Learning for Nation's Technological Growth.

Mrs. Popoola, F.R. (M.Ed.)

Gender Influence on Secondary School Students Readiness for Higher Education.

Effiong Victor James & Enunwah Clement Ifeanyi

Causative Factors of Poor Academic Performance Among Secondary School Students in Ondo State.

Mr. Akomolafe M. Jude

The Imperative of Scientific and Technological Literacy for Nigerians.

Nsima B. Akpan & Dr. Godwin A. Ikitde

Attitude of Secondary School Teachers Towards Instructional Supervisors in Owerri Education Zone in Imo State.

Dr. (Mrs.) Chioma Ihebereme

Admission and Welfare Arrangements Evaluation as Means of Refocusing Tertiary Education Aderokun, J. A.	98
Problems and Prospects of Vocational and Technical Education in the Nigerian Secondary Schools J.F.O. Akpomedaye, Dr. E. D. Bestmart-Digbori & Dr. C. C. Agwubike	108
Improvisation of Instructional Materials in Teaching of Mathematics M. A. Yusha'u	118
Concept Mapping: Challenging Orthodox Teaching Methods as an Imperative for Improving Science Teaching in Nigeria. Dr. D. I. Wushishi	125
Integrative Approach to the Teaching of English Language Skills. Mohammed Ibrahim	134
Strategies for Managing Behavioural Problems of Primary School Children. Fuandal, Cornelius Madas (PhD)	142
Problems of Using English Prepositions by Learners of English as a Second Language. Mrs. Amina Gogo Tafida	151
Improving the Performance of Students of Metal Work Technology Towards Attainment of 'Needs' Objectives. Dr B. N. Atsumbe & I. Y. Umar	161
Philosophy and Psychological Rationales for Production and Scoring of Examination Questions in Mathematics and Physics. Etukudo, Udobia Elijah & Ahlakwo, Dimkpa F.	171
The Effect of Instructional Video Package (IVP) on Learning Agricultural Science Among The Nomads: A Case Study of Bosso Local Government Area, Niger State Gbodi, Elizabeth Bimpe (PhD) & Obuekwe, Gloria Manari	185
Towards Effective Funding and Fiscal Management of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Scheme: Issues for Consideration. Y. Y. Sanda	194
The Teacher and the Effective Implementation of the Universal Basic Education Programme (UBE) in Nigeria. Dr. (Mrs.) Idiaghe J.E.	204

PROBLEMS OF USING ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS BY LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract

English is a second language in Nigeria and Nigerians learn English to be able to perform certain social, political, economic, religious and educational functions within and outside the country. It is a language that enables us to be in tune with the developments in the globe as a tool to be taught and learnt properly for that is the only way by which learners would have a better grip of it. However, there are areas of the language where the influence of the first language and at times the nature of the second language rule itself makes it difficult for learners to learn effectively. One of this is Preposition. This paper therefore takes a look at what preposition entails and why learners have problems when using English prepositions. Some of the major problems identified by learners are use of incorrect prepositions, use of preposition where none is needed and absence of preposition where its use is necessary. As a solution to the problems, a detailed analysis of various kinds of prepositions was carried out. In addition worthwhile recommendations that would remedy the occurrence of the problems were also offered. It is therefore hoped that other researchers would take a look at other areas of English where learner have problems so as to facilitate its teaching and learning. It does this by taking a sample of 15 intermediate learners from learners in addition to an extensive review of literature on the topic. Useful recommendations were also offered to remedy the problems highlighted.

Introduction

The learning of English as a second language is a necessity in Nigeria and this will continue to be as long as English is required to serve social, economic, political, religious functions in Nigeria. Socially, English Language is the most acceptable language in most social gatherings in Nigeria; economically it is used to carry out business transactions nationally and internationally. Even interstate traders in our markets strive to communicate in some form of English with their customers. Politically, English Language is the language of the Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria and the affairs of the government are conducted in English. English Language also plays a significant role in religious circles as teaching and preaching are done by the two prominent religions in English.

English is also the language of instruction in schools from nursery to university level. To secure reputable job in this country too, one has to have knowledge of English as interviews are conducted in English. Indeed, it is a unifying force in Nigerian soil in view of the multilingual nature of Nigeria.

As a result of the above, the proper teaching and learning of English is mandatory and any area of the language that could be a problem to learners needs to be highlighted and suggestions for its proper teaching offered. It is in this direction that this paper has decided to delve into Preposition, one of the areas of English where learners irrespective of their educational background have problems as they speak or write.

This paper is concerned with the several mistakes students and even advanced users of English Language make as they speak and write English. One is at times confused as to which of the prepositions to use in certain situations and so, a lot of internal and verbal reasoning are done before one arrives at the correct preposition. Even native speakers of English are not left out of this problem. For instance, Ringbom (1992) observed that, "although we generally agree on prepositions throughout the English speaking world, in some cases we disagree due to difference in dialects".

He then cited the followings as examples.

1. It's quarter to/till three
2. John is competing with/against the rest of the team.
3. That's different than/from usual.

The problems involved in using English preposition are also highlighted by many other writers within and outside Nigeria. Among them are Leung (1990), Swan and Smith (2001), Kudu (2001), Lakkis and Abdulmalak (2007) and Nicholls (2003).

The writer is therefore motivated to write on the topic because Kudu (2001) among others observed that the correct mastery or use of preposition is a main test of a person's ability to speak or write good English.

To begin this paper, a total of 15 sentences with incorrect prepositions were sampled from essays of university students and utterances made by senior colleagues in the academia. The following are the sentences/utterances.

1. go a long way of propagating (of instead of in.)
2. the centre encourages students on their education (on instead of in.)
3. Many students who will apply for the school (for instead of to).
4. This is part of my impression in this school (in instead of of).
5. I was given admission at Federal University of Technology, Minna for remedial centre (for instead of in).
6. It will reduce the level of prostitution in campus (instead of on)
7. The halls are surrounded with flowers (instead of by).
8. I was in lost in my imaginative world (the underlined in is not necessary).
9. I was so impressed by the rate at which students concentrate to answer questions in the class (on answering questions).
10. In this University more than 2,000 students are enrolled for the same course (instead of on).
11. They need job in the earliest possible time (instead of at).
12. I began to imagine what it will be when I step my foot in FUT, Minna (instead of on)
13. He lives by his parents (instead of with)

13. It took place **by** cold weather (instead of **in**)
 14. He was **by** a working (instead of **at**)
 15.

English Prepositions

Preposition describes relationship between some words in a sentence but they are in themselves rather meaningless and hard to define in mere words. For instance when one tries to define a preposition like 'in' or 'between' or 'on', one invariably uses his/her hands to show how something is situated in relation to another. Nevertheless, several authors have defined preposition in almost similar ways. For instance, Ahyi (2007), Kudu (2001), Quirk (1988) etc. have defined preposition as those elements which hardly change in forms and are usually followed by nouns, noun phrase, personal pronouns or noun substitutes. In a more general term, preposition expresses a relationship between two entities one of them being represented by prepositional complement. For example:

1. The boy sits **on** the chair.
2. There is soup **in** the pot.
3. A bird flew past **the** tree.

Lekkerdu (2007) believes that preposition usually indicates the temporal, spatial and logical relationship of its object to the rest of the sentence. According to her, preposition exists only in analytic (non inflectional) languages. In Turkish and in most inflected in the verb. These markers give us an idea about the relationship of the object to the rest of the sentence. e.g. 'on the table'. The pre-position 'on' gives us an idea about the position of the object and it precedes the word 'table'. According to her, the word 'masada' in Turkish, 'masa' means table and 'da' is a case marker. That tells us about the position of the subject. It does not precede the word 'masa' and it is not a separate word as 'on' but it is inflected in the verb. Therefore, in every language, there is a system that deals with this kind of relationship but because languages differ in their syntax, they also have different representations of each concept. This accounts for one of the reasons why preposition is a problem to English as a second language learners.

Types of Preposition

Quirk (1988), Kudu (2001) maintain that a preposition can be simple, compound or complex. According to them, a preposition is simple if it consists of one word e.g. on, in, at, with, by, of etc. A compound preposition combines two simple ones as in within, without, etc. while complex prepositions are those which consist of more than one word. Examples are those formed in one of the following categories.

- a. Adverb or prep + prep: e.g. along with, as far as, as for, out of, up to etc.
- b. Verb/Adjective/Conjunction/etc + prep: e.g. owing to, due to, because of etc.
- c. Prep + Noun + Prep: by means of, in comparison with, in front of, as a result of etc.

Preposition of Place

Berry and Stolley (2006) maintained that, to express notions of place, English uses the same prepositions in the following ways:

1. 'in' is used to talk about the point itself.
2. 'inside' is used to express something contained.
3. 'on' talk about the surface.
4. 'at' talk about a general vicinity.

The prepositions of place especially 'at' and 'in' are confusing to learners. Therefore, it should be noted that 'in' is used for continents, countries, provinces and sizeable territories of all kinds while it is more appropriate to use 'at' or 'on' for villages, cities etc. according to point of view (Quirk, 1973). For example:

in Days in Africa

The preposition 'at' is used for specific addresses and 'on' to designate names of streets, avenues etc. For example:

1. I live at 55, Abdul Street, Minna.
2. My house is on Makera road.
3. I live in Minna, the capital of Niger State.

Preposition of Time: on, in at

Quirk & Greenbaum (1973) believe that preposition of time has only two dimensions. The first one is point of time and period of time. According to them, 'on' is used with phrases referring to dates and days e.g.

- (1) I will come on Tuesday
- (2) The week ends on Saturday

'At' is used for points of time as in noon, night, midnight and clock time. Examples:

1. The plane will leave at noon.

'In' is used to indicate periods of time. It is used for months, years, and seasons.

Examples:

1. He plays in the evening
2. He was born in 1962

Extended Time

To express extended time the prepositions **since, for, by, from - to, from - until, (with) in** are used. For example:

1. She has been here since yesterday (She is still here).
2. I am staying in Jos for only two days (I will spend two day in Jos).

Before, After, Since, Until/till

These are also prepositions of time which are followed by either (a) a temporal noun phrase (b) a subject less v-ing clause or (c) a noun phrase with a deverbial noun (Kudu, 2001). Examples

1. We slept **before** midnight
2. We did not sleep **until** midnight.

Preposition of location

The preposition 'at' is used to express a specific point or location. It is also used to express a specific time.

The car was parked **at** the bus stop.

I was born **at** the time I was born.

'At' is also used to express a point of destination or relative position with a verb.

He was standing **at** his brother's house.

I usually go to work **at** 9:00.

'By' also expresses the notion of proximity and (abstractly) association. For instance:

I was alarmed **at** his behaviour (either **by** or **at** may be used).

Preposition of movement 'To' is used to express movement toward a place. e.g. They are driving **to** work together. 'To' can also be used to express interested target or goal. e.g. I gave the money **to** my son.

The converse of 'to' is the preposition 'from' which implies the source or origin. Examples: Aichi lent the book **to** me. I borrowed the book **from** Aichi.

Toward and towards are also helpful prepositions to express movement. These prepositions according to Kuchi (2001) are simply variant spellings of the same word and as such, whichever one uses is correct. Example:

1. It is a big step **towards** the completion of the project.

With The preposition 'with' just like 'by' is used to express means or instrumental meaning as in:

1. He caught the ball **with** his hand.

With is also used to express the manner in which something is done. For example:

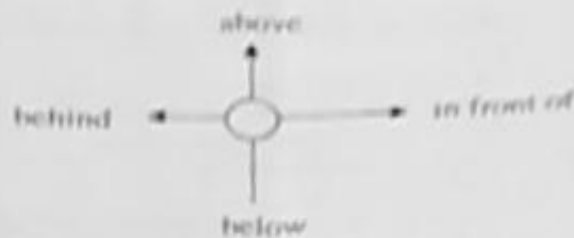
1. I came to school **with** my mother.

Relative position Clark & Greenbaum (1988) believe that apart from simple position, prepositions may express the relative position of two objects or groups of objects:

1. I left the book **with** my purse (in the same place as)

2. I will be standing **by** you (at the side of)

Above, over, on top, under, underneath, beneath, below, express relative position vertically whereas before, in front of, behind, after etc. represent it horizontally. This can be represented diagrammatically.



Some prepositions used to express notions of object lower than a point are underneath, beneath, below

1. The box is underneath the box.
2. It lies below the sea level
3. He sleeps beneath the tree

Moreover, to express notions of object being close to a point, the prepositions near, by, next to, between, among, opposite are used etc.

1. He sits near me.
2. Ali will stand by her.
3. His house is next to mine.

Why is Preposition a problem to learners?

The purpose of this write-up is to confirm the fact that preposition is a problem to English as a Second Language learners and even teachers. The writer has this belief and has had enough evidences from write-ups and utterances of English as a Second Language speakers. The writing is however not alone in this notion. Many writers have also testified to this. For example, Lakkis and Abdul Malak (2001) also confirm that prepositions are difficult to learn and teach. Pitman (1966) even describes preposition as a word class that has the reputation for difficulty if not a downright unpredictability. Takahaski (1969) and Kudu (2001) also agree that the English prepositions are the greatest problem for learners of English. In his own contribution, Macfadyen (2007) asks, is it any wonder that preposition create troubles for students for whom English is a second language? According to him, we say we are at the hospital to visit a friend who is in the hospital. We lie in bed but on couch. We watch a film at the theatre but on television. He then concludes that for native speakers, these little words present no difficulty, but for learners, one will quickly discover that prepositions are troublesome where ever one lives and learns. Why then is preposition a problem to learners of English as Second Language?

Zughoul (1973) believes that the source of the problem is that until recently, linguists have not adequately described prepositions and consequently have not taught them systematically. Little wonder than that Nicholls (2003) observed that , preposition is meaningless and hard to define. Moreover, many languages do not have preposition. Japanese for example, has post positions instead of what looks like pre-position

instead of the noun. Japanese places it after the noun e.g. *De Paato ni jannashita* (which literally means department in was). This means 'He was in the departmental store'. Also, even if languages have prepositions, they do not translate well. For example, Spanish 'on' translates to English - in, on, unto. Also Nupe 'be' translates to

English	with, in, by and on. Consider the following examples:	
1.	Ah e gi je be ewagi I do eat food with spoon	(Nupe)
	I eat food with spoon	(DT)
	Mi e lo tun be yigidi I do go work in sun	(English)
2.	I work in the afternoon	(Nupe)
	Mi e lo zhi be male I do go town by car	(DT)
3.	I travel by car	(English)
	Mi dazan be bichi I walk on leg	(Nupe)
4.	I walk on leg	(DT)
	I walk on foot	(English)

At times, prepositions are disregarded in some Nupe sentences even when they are necessary in similar English constructions. For instance,

I gave the book to him	-	English
Me a takada la yiu	-	Nupe
I do book take him/her	-	DT

Writing along the same vein, Leung (2001) also added that English prepositions pose a perennial problem for many English as a Second Language learners because the same lexical item e.g. the word 'over' may have a variety of functions as preposition, noun, adverb, adjective, and participle) and meanings. Drawing heavily on Lakoff's (1987) summary and discussion of Brugman's (1983) study of 'over', the following sentences are given

1. The paintings are over the mantle.
2. The plane is flying over the hill.
3. Sam is walking over the hill.
4. Sam lives over the hill.
5. The well fell over.
6. Sam turned the page over.
7. Sam turned over.
8. She spreads the table cloth over the table.
9. The guards were posted all over the hill.
10. The play is over.
11. Do it over, but don't over do it.
12. Look over my corrections but don't overlook any of them.
13. You made over a hundred errors (Lakoff, 1987 : 418-419).

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L1 interference whereby learners transfer the language habits and grammatical structures of L1 to the target language
Intra lingual factors which are the problems inherent in the target language itself.
Improper teaching

Recommendations

1. The following recommendations should be taken in to consideration in view of all the evidences of difficulties that preposition can cause to learners.
2. Prepositions should be taught in chunks rather than in isolation. For instance, prepositions of time, place, manner etc. should be taught separately to avoid unnecessary confusion.
3. Too many prepositions should not be taught at a time and students should be trained to put the prepositions in context where their use is natural
4. The only way through which learners can master the intricacies of preposition usage is through constant practice and paying attention to speech and written word. They should also make use of good dictionary if the situation demands.
5. Students should be taught not to use too many prepositions in a sentence and not too many of same prepositions e.g. He dressed himself in a coat in his house in the morning in a hurry (four prepositions).
6. Students might also be provided with diagrams and fill-in exercise or cloze passages where they would learn to use prepositions correctly. Such passages might be those which make reference to dates, location or directions of movement.
7. Also, the teaching of pure prepositions should be differentiated with collocations or phrasal verbs. Such phrasal verbs or collocations should be dealt with as they crop up in spoken and written texts rather than give learners a list of them. This would help learners not to be unnecessarily confused.
8. Generally, the teacher should expose the students adequately to the language to enhance appropriate language habits. The use of the language both at home and in the school should be encouraged so that it becomes part of the students. In the class, each structure of the language should be taught gradually through constant repetition to ensure remembering and to minimise the problems of rule generalisation and misapplication.
9. Students should be exposed to drills, dialogues and exercises so as to enable them make functional use of the language. These drills and exercises should reflect the day to day activities in the society.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at prepositions and the problems surrounding their proper usage in teaching and learning English as a second language. The fact that learners and some teachers of English as a second language have problems with the proper use of preposition has been established in this study after series of instances. Three major causes of the problems have been identified which includes first language interference, the inconsistent nature of English Language rules and improper teaching. Some of the major problems identified as regards the use of preposition by learners are use of

incorrect prepositions, use of preposition where none is needed and omission of preposition where its use is necessary. As a solution to the problems, a detailed list of various kinds of prepositions was carried out.

In addition worthwhile recommendations that would minimize the occurrence of the problems identified in this paper were also offered. It is therefore hoped that researchers would take a look at other areas of English as a second language where learners have problems so as to facilitate its proper teaching and learning.

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