Review

The Use of Prepositions among EFL Learners: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

As a second/foreign language learner, one should understand the rules and convention of the language s/he learns and how to use it. Therefore, s/he needs to master the language to be able to have good communication with others. One aspect that needs to be learned is parts of speech such as nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, and prepositions. Prepositions play a significant role in helping students increase their language skills. However, many students still face difficulties in learning its type of parts of speech. The purpose of this study is to examine the trends and main findings of the studies about the main error types and causes in using prepositions among second/foreign language learner. For this objective, articles from databases comprising Google Scholar, Eric, and Garuda Ristek were reviewed, and overall, selected articles were analysed. As the research methodology, systematic review was performed. A content analysis was used to evaluate the articles. According to the results of the study, the main error type in using prepositions among the learners is the wrong use of prepositions. In the meantime, the main cause of the errors made by the learners in using prepositions is the interlingual interference.

INTRODUCTION

Being a second/foreign language learner comes with the consequence that s/he requires to understand and master the set of rules and conventions of the language. English, in this case, has been one of the significant languages that needs to be mastered. However, a lot of people still have problems learning the language. It happens mostly to those whose first language is not English. One of the most difficult things to be learned is prepositions. As stated in Merriam Webster Dictionary, prepositions are function words that, when combined with a noun phrase, generate a phrase that communicates a change or prediction. There are many kinds of prepositions with different functions, such as prepositions of place, prepositions of time, prepositions of movement, and so forth. For this reason, English learners face difficulties in using prepositions (Saravanan, 2014). According to Takahaski in Yousefi, Soori, and Janfaza, 2014), EFL learners have difficulties using prepositions correctly.

Preposition constructions continue to be a source of difficulties for students whose original language contains either prepositions or postpositions, even as students' competence levels rise (Mansour, 2011). It happens due to the various possibilities and polysemic nature of meaning (Islami, 2015). Swan states that they are difficult to master since most of them have several roles and lack

numerous guidelines to aid in selecting the appropriate prepositions in a given situation (Islami, 2015). Difficulties faced by second/foreign language learners in using prepositions may lead to confusion in using them. This will affect the correctness of conveying messages. As a consequence, errors may occur. The most complicated problem in using prepositions is because the contextual meaning can be different between target language prepositions and the first language prepositions of learners that lead to errors in using prepositions. That is why second/foreign learners cannot rely on their native tongue's prepositional understanding. In this study, the prepositions of English (i.e., by, in, on, to, with, of, from, for, and at) showed to be the most prevalent in usage and the most challenging for learners (Tahaineh, 2010).

Habash in Saravanan (2014) studied the prevalence of errors made by students in the usage of the prepositions and assessed the link between students' academic accomplishment in English and their performance on the diagnostic test. Errors with spatial prepositions were found to be more common than those with temporal prepositions, according to the study. The most common mistakes made by the students are in the usage of prepositions of place (Anjayani and Suprapto, 2016). Fareh and Saeed (2009) revealed that the study clearly indicated that the respondents' total performance in identifying and correctly utilizing prepositions was very poor, indicating that the subjects have significant difficulties recognizing and using prepositions. Based on a study from Yousefi, Soori, and Janfaza (2014), it shows that EFL learners have made errors related to wrong use of prepositions more often compared to errors in relation to the exclusion or inclusion use of prepositions in L2.

According to Tahaineh (2010), the bulk of mistakes produced by the students are due to interference from the learners' native tongue as the primary source. It is in line with a study by Yousefi, Soori, and Janfaza (2014) that the two main aspects that have caused the errors made by the students in relation with the use of prepositions are interference from the students' mother tongue which is Farsi, and other issues of learning. In addition, the findings of a research study from Chelli (2014) indicated that the mistakes were produced by negative transfer of the Arabic language, while the remaining ones were caused by overgeneralization and incorrect concepts. Nghi, Thang, and Phuc (2020) also revealed that Vietnamese intralingual interference had a significant impact on the prepositional meaning presented by Vietnamese EFL learners. Sari (2019) mentioned that some students continued to struggle with using the right prepositions because they did not fully grasp the distinction between the prepositions, which might also be influenced by the students' native language, i.e.

Indonesian. Richards cited in Yousefi, Soori, and Janfaza (2014) stated that there are two kinds of errors in relation to their causes, namely, interlingual, and intralingual and developmental errors. Interlingual errors are caused by the interference of learners' first languages. While intralingual and developmental errors are caused by the lack of knowledge and the difficulty of language. Besides interlingual and intralingual interferences, cultural interference can also cause a problem in communication (Chelli, 2014).

Most of the studies discussed errors in using prepositions by university students and the causes of the errors. However, there are only a few that discuss which kind of prepositions that are often wrongly used by the students and only some of them that mention the causes of the errors specifically. Besides that, the previous studies involved university students only. Thus, the present study can be insightful for exploration of the use of preposition by the students. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to identify the trends and main findings of the studies about the main error type and causes in using prepositions among second/foreign language learners.

METHOD

This research implemented the technique of systematic review, which often comprises a rigorous and complete plan and search method devised a priori, with the purpose of decreasing bias by locating, assessing, and summarizing all relevant research on a specific issue (Uman, 2011). It is different from narrative reviews. Narrative reviews are typically descriptive in nature, do not require a systematic search of the literature, and so frequently focus on a subset of studies in a field chosen for availability or author selection (Uman, 2011).

The data was collected through a systematic search that was undertaken in the databases comprising Google Scholar, Eric, and Garuda Ristek. Since the present study focused on the use of English preposition, the search terms used were 'English prepositions and mistakes', the use of prepositions and EFL', 'errors prepositions', problems in learning English prepositions', and 'interlingual and intralingual errors.

The researchers used the content analysis method, which is widely used for textual analytics and allows for data comparison, contrast, and categorization (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2000). To begin, a form was made in Microsoft Word to record the findings of the analysis. This form included topics relating to the research questions, such as the year of the study, as well as the methods and the results of the studies. Following a thorough reading of each item, the form was filled out with pertinent information. Following the completion of

the form, the analysis was done in Microsoft Excel by organizing codes and categories.

Table 1: Subcategories of research purposes

Research Purpose	Subcategories
RP1: to identify the trends of the main errors type and causes in using prepositions among EFL learners.	· Classification of the research by years · Methods of research applied in reviewed articles · Countries of research
RP2: to identify the main findings of the existing literature.	· Main error types · The causes in using prepositions among EFL learners

As shown in Table 1, the first research purpose and related subcategories contained descriptive information that was directly mentioned in the reviewed publications. Meanwhile, the second research purpose and related subcategories requested specific information about the examined papers.

The researcher found 23 papers to examine after searching three databases (Figure 1). Following a review of the titles and abstracts, 6 of the 25 papers were excluded because they were not related to problems in using prepositions. Four of the remaining 19 papers were found to be unrelated to the causes of errors in using prepositions when they were assessed for eligibility. Eventually, there were 15 papers to be reviewed.
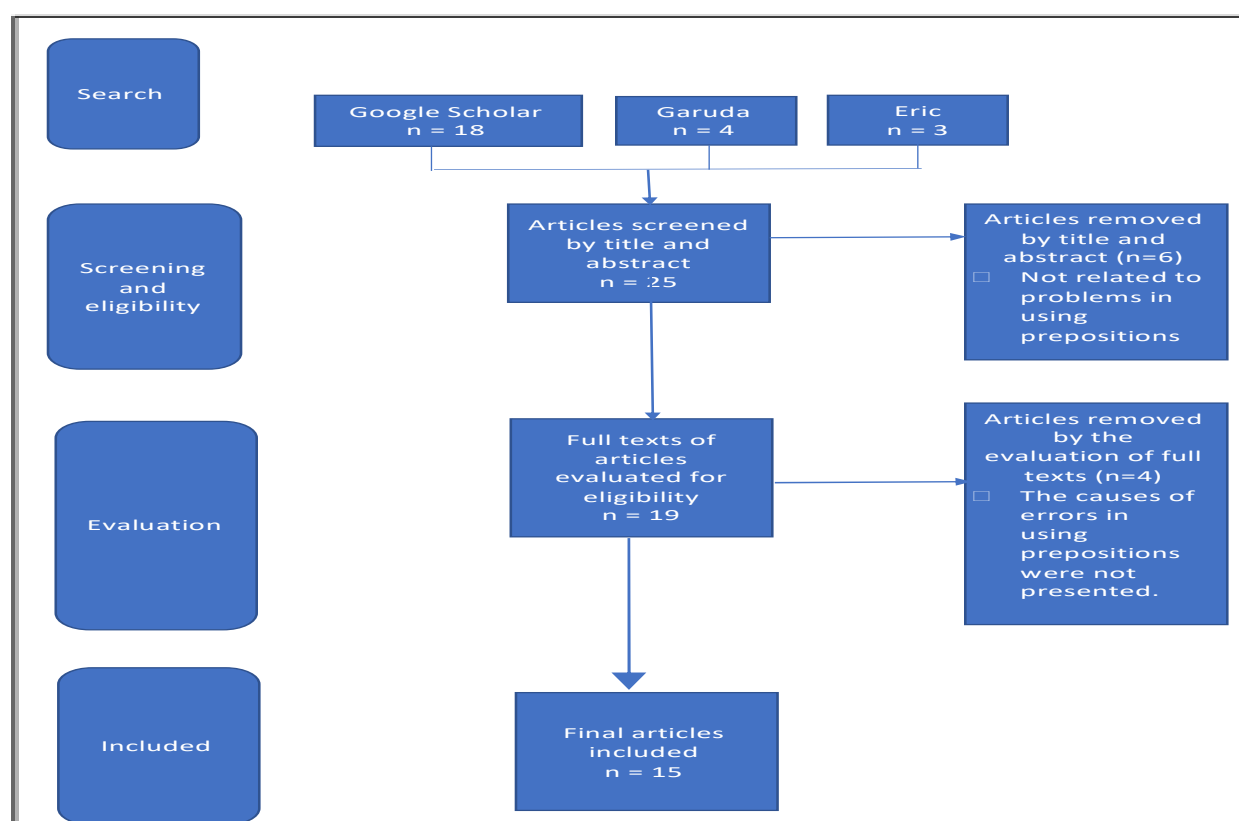

Figure 1. Process of systematic review diagram (adapted from Liberati et al., 2009, cited in Turan & Cimen, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. *Trends of the main error types and causes in using prepositions by second/foreign language learners*

The subcategories evaluated by the researcher of the first research purpose comprise classification of the research by years, methods of research applied in the publications, and countries of research. The descriptions of each will be discussed in this section.

2. *Classifications of the research by years*
The classification of the research related to the main error types and causes in using prepositions by learners is presented in **Figure 2**. During the first 4 years, from 2009, there was very little research about the field of the research (n=4). The biggest

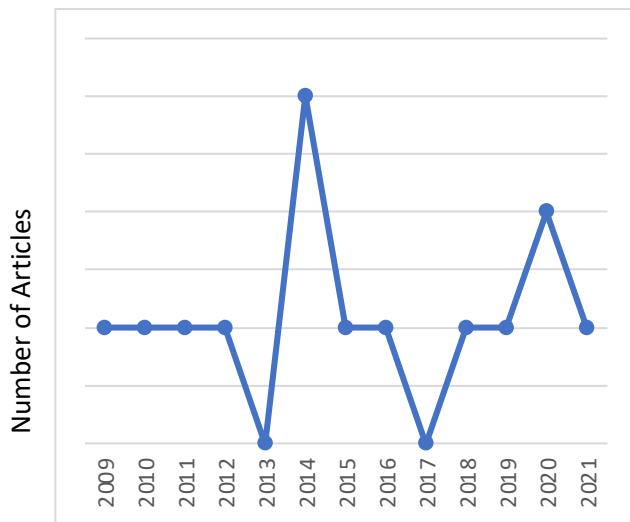number of research concerning the area is in 2014 (n=3).

Figure 2. The number of articles by year

3. Methods of research applied in the reviewed articles
The description of this is shown in **Figure 3**. The method that was most commonly applied is quantitative method (n=12), then followed by mixed method and literature review (n=1 for each method). Qualitative method has never been used to evaluate the area of research.
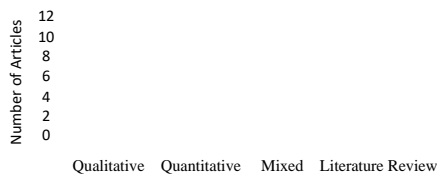

Figure 3. Methods of studies applied in the reviewed articles

4. Countries of research
As shown in **Figure 4**, most of the research was done in Jordan (19%) and Indonesia (19%), then, followed by Iran (13%). The research was also conducted in some other countries such as Vietnam, Algeria, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Kuwait, Kosovo, and India.
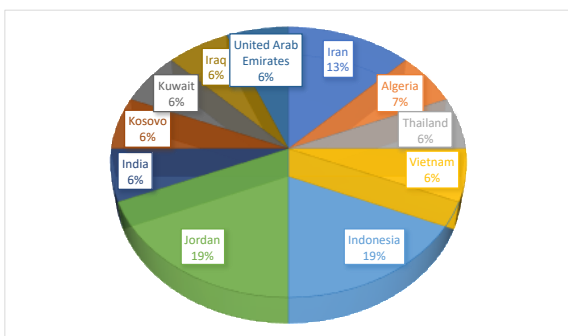

Figure 4. Countries of research

5. The main findings of the error types and causes in using prepositions among second/foreign language learners
For the second purpose of this research, the following subcategories were specified by the researcher: main error types and causes in using prepositions. In this section, the two specifications are explained.

6. Main error types in using prepositions
Error types in using prepositions in the reviewed articles are categorized as wrong use, addition (redundancy), omission, and other error types of prepositions. As shown in **Figure 5**, wrong use of prepositions was mentioned in 12 reviewed articles, while addition or redundancy of using prepositions was discussed in 8 reviewed articles. Another error type described in the articles was omission that was stated in 6 articles. Three articles mentioned other error types.
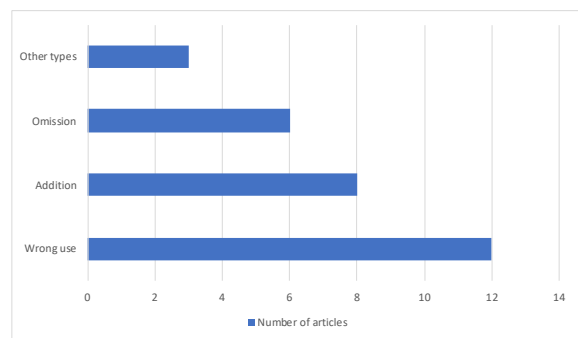

Figure 5. The main error types in using prepositions

7. Causes of the main errors in using prepositions

According to Richards and Sampson in Yousefi, Soori, and Janfaza (2014), they identified two essential causes of error analysis: interlingual and intralingual. It is shown in **Figure 6** that interlingual has become the main cause of errors EFL learners made in using prepositions (n=7), followed by intralingual (n=5), and both (n=3).
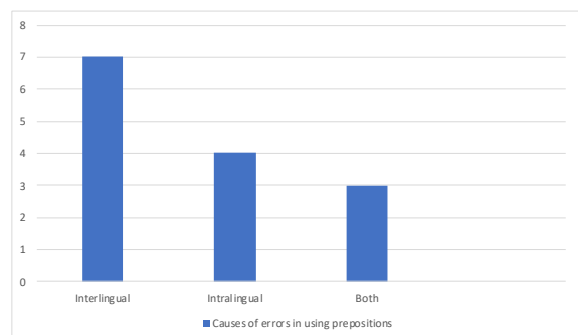

Figure 6. Causes of errors in using prepositions

In this research, 15 articles were analysed in terms of trends and main findings from web Google Scholar, Eric, and Garuda Ristek. It shows that research about problems in using prepositions among second/foreign language

learners is little. However, there is a lot of research about the kinds of error analysis itself. It is probably due to little interest in prepositions. As it has been known that prepositions are an ongoing issue (Mukattash in Yousefi, Soori, and Janfaza, 2014). The method used in the reviewed articles is mostly quantitative. It might be because most of the research used kinds of written tests, such as multiple-choice tests and completion. A Study from Sari (2019) used both quantitative and qualitative methods to measure the learners' mastery profile to use prepositions and to explain the problems they encounter while using prepositions.

This systematic review found that the reviewed research about prepositions is from various nations, having Jordan and Indonesia the most studies. More studies on using prepositions among EFL learners in countries with different cultures and educational backgrounds could provide more useful information. In addition, research on this topic is needed with participants of different educational levels of EFL learners. As stated by Cranmer in Alwreikat and Yunus (2020), errors made among learners are categorized into three: omission, addition, and wrong use. Wrong use of prepositions has become the main problem that learners face. They may know some prepositions, but when they have to use the prepositions in context, they are still confused. The next error that has often been made by learners when using prepositions is addition. It means that students use more unnecessary prepositions. It shows that students knew prepositions. However, they used them redundantly. It caused errors. Another error discussed is omission where prepositions are taken away. The other kinds of errors are categorized as others, such as generalization. Based on the reviewed articles, these errors are caused by the interference of L1. As mentioned in the study of Nghi, Thang and Phuc (2020), students who learn English as foreign language have problems with the use of prepositions.

Interlingual interference has become the most problem in relation to errors in using prepositions among learners. Errors caused by this factor are related to their first languages. It has been known that learners tend to translate the words or sentences into their mother tongue before they finally use English in their communication. However, it's different from a study by Nentis and Syafei (2020) that errors made by students were due to the intralingual transfer. It may be because the students majored in literature, so they have more knowledge about prepositions, but they are still confused in using them.

CONCLUSION

Based on the previous discussion, it can be said that in general, students of second/foreign language learners, English in this case, still have difficulties in using prepositions. The dominant error was the wrong use of prepositions. This is related to the influence of their mother tongue. According to Jewad (2014), the majority of research reveals that there are two kinds of difficulty that make the learners misuse prepositions. The first problem is the number of possible meanings for each preposition. The second issue is that most of the teaching techniques in the past led the students to translate the languages into their native ones.

It is recommended for students to read more texts and to have more practices. It will help them identify the use of prepositions. Besides that, the writer hopes that future research can be conducted in more various countries with different cultural backgrounds, and to different levels of EFL learners. One of the biggest problems learners' encounters is that prepositions describe different senses and that they belong to different syntactic-semantic relations to their native languages' prepositions (Mukattash, 1984). Hence, more research also needs to be done so that it can help teachers find more resources to help learners understand better and easier of using prepositions without having to transfer them to their first languages. Finally, it will help teachers find more effective teaching methods.

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