

A Study of the Acquisition of Spatial Prepositions by Selected Nigerian Learners of English

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Abstract

This paper examines the usage of English spatial prepositions by selected senior secondary school students in Nigeria. The participants were 300 students drawn from three schools in Lagos State of Nigeria. The elicitation instrument was a guided essay writing assignment. The spatial prepositions in the scripts were identified and these constituted the data for the study. Our findings showed that only two types of spatial prepositions were used productively while the others were used sparingly. On the basis of the findings suggestions are made to facilitate effective acquisition of English spatial prepositions by the learners.

Introduction

Prepositions are known to constitute considerable difficulties for non-native learners and users of English. Nigerian learners of English usually have no problems with deciding where a preposition should be located in an utterance, but the choice of the appropriate preposition in specific contexts is a major problem. Although much emphasis in the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria has focused largely on grammar and vocabulary, the usage of prepositions does not reflect the effort put in. One major reason for this is the unpredictable nature of the collocational relations that prepositions have with other elements of language. In this respect Taiwo (2004) shows that ESL learners still have collocational errors despite adequate

grammatical and lexical knowledge. In the same vein, Koosha and Jafarpour (2006) in their study of Iranian learners' problems with English preposition suggest that the learners' inefficiency in learning the English proposition "seems to be to some extent, due to the lack of collocational knowledge among Iranian EFL students, and to a large extent, the inadequate emphasis given to collocational patterns in their textbooks and the type of instructions they receive".

In the same way, Nigerian learners of English prepositions encounter difficulties because English prepositions are not governed by predictable rules. It is often difficult to explain to learners why one preposition rather than another is used in certain contexts. It is against this background that the major aim of this study was to examine the usage of English spatial prepositions by the selected participants. In order to achieve this aim, this study had three specific objectives:

- a. to identify spatial prepositions that are used in the written English of the participants,
- b. to find out which of these prepositions constitute problems for the learners, and
- c. to make suggestions, on the basis of the findings, for improvement in the teaching of English prepositions in secondary schools in Nigeria.

Prepositions

Traditional grammarians first established the identification of the preposition as an integral part of English grammar. Butler (1634:51) quoted in Tomori (1977:4) says "Words without number and 'case' are prepositions..." This definition is, however, a loose one as there are words besides prepositions that have neither case or number, e.g. conjunctions, adverbs, adjectives etc. Later theorists such as

structural grammarians used forms and functions as alternative ways of classifying words. According to Akere (1998:106), the primary function of a preposition is to express a relation in space between one thing and another. Bloor and Bloor (2004:27) also assert that "By definition, prepositions occur in prepositional phrases with a nominal group as complement' Quirk et al (1985:657) note that "In the most general terms, a preposition expresses a relation between two entities, one being that represented by the prepositional complement, the other by another part of the sentence". Prepositions may express various relationships between words or phrases in sentences. The relationships include those of time, space and various degrees of mental and emotional attitudes.

The main focus of this study is, however, the usage of spatial prepositions by the participants in this study. According to Quirk et al (1985:673), when we use a preposition to indicate space "we do so in relation to the dimensional properties, whether subjectively or objectively conceived, of the location concerned". Quirk et al (1985) give spatial preposition prominence in their description and it is this work that is used as the framework for this study. Following Quirk et al (1985) the study examined the usage of the following spatial prepositions:

a. Prepositions Expressing Positive Position and Destination (PPD)

These are prepositions referring to movement or position in space in relation to a point or dimension e.g. *at*, *to* and *from*. It should also be noted that between the notions of static position or location and destination there is a cause-and-effect relationship. For example,

Destination	Position
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I travelled *to* Egbeda. I was *at* Egbeda.
Ade poured water *into* the cup. The water was *in* the cup.

b. Prepositions Expressing Negative Position and Destination (NPD)

Adding *not* to the corresponding positive preposition, *out of* can indicate prepositions such as *off*. There is also a cause-and-effect relation with negative position and destination

John is *away from* home = John is *not* at home
He is *out of* the school = He is *not* in the school.

c. Prepositions Expressing Relative Position and Destination (RPD)

Prepositions may also express relative position of two objects or groups of objects. Prepositions such as *above, below, over, under* etc express relative position in a vertical direction while *in front of, behind* and *after* express relative position in a horizontal direction e.g.

The plate is *under* the table - vertical
The ball is *in front of* the table - horizontal

d. Preposition Expressing Passage (PS)

The sense of passage or movement is the primary locative meaning attached to the prepositions in this category e.g. *over, by, under, on, across, through*. The movement can be along a line, across a surface, or through a space. The movement may be towards a place, away from a place or a destination e.g.

He jumped *over* the wall.
The ball passed *under* the table.

e. Preposition Expressing Direction (DIR)

These prepositions express movement with reference to a directional path using verbs of motion. *Up* and *down* express vertical direction while *along* and *across* express horizontal direction. With *around*, the directional is an angle, while *towards* means 'in the direction of' e.g.

He walked *along* the road.

He ran *across* the road.

f. Prepositions Expressing Orientation (ORT)

These prepositions express orientation from the point of view at which in reality or imagination the speaker is standing (as distinct from a static sense of orientation) e.g. *beyond*, *over*, *up*, *down* etc. E.g.

He lives in the house *down* the street.

g. Prepositions Expressing Pervasive Meaning (PM)

Prepositions such as *over* and *through* have pervasive meaning especially when preceded by *all* e.g.

The boy was running all *over* the garden.

h. Prepositions Expressing Resultative Meaning (RM)

All prepositions that have the meaning of motion can also have a static resultative meaning indicating the state of having reached the destination e.g.

I was able to get *over* the fence.

The man managed to get *across* the river.

i. Prepositions Expressing Intended Destination (INTD)

For, for example, as a phrase of destination answers the question 'where ... for?'

The man left Kaduna *for* Lagos.

These nine spatial preposition types constitute the major thrust of this study. Indeed these spatial prepositions are so important in the language that Michael (1999) opines that if English sentences were deprived of spatial prepositions we would have not only unstructural but also illogical language expressions.

Methodology

The participants for this study were three hundred students drawn, one hundred each from three secondary schools from different zones in Lagos State of Nigeria. The schools are: Lagos State Government College, Ikorodu; Angus Memorial High School, Yaba and Alaro High School, Iraye-Epe and the participants were Senior Secondary Class 1,2 and 3 students.

The elicitation instrument was a guided essay writing exercise and in order to elicit a wide range of prepositions from the participants the following six topics were provided:

- a. How I spent my last holiday.
- b. My first visit to Lagos.
- c. My House.
- d. My School.
- e. A remarkable occasion in my life.
- f. My home town.

Writing papers with the topics pre-written on them were distributed randomly and participants wrote on whatever was on the paper given to him or her.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The scripts of the participants were analysed for occurrences of the nine spatial preposition types identified above. Codes were assigned as indicated earlier to each of these spatial preposition types to make the analysis less cumbersome. Table 1 below presents the overall occurrence of spatial prepositions in the participants' continuous writing.

Table 1: Occurrence of Spatial Prepositions in Participants' Scripts

SCH.	NO OF OCCUR-ENCES	PPD	NPD	RPD	PS	DIR	ORT	PM	RM	NTD	ERRORS
A	934	730	58	41	03	30	05	03	0	03	61
B	709	565	46	24	07	14	02	02	01	04	44
C	568	472	30	19	03	06	01	02	0	0	35
TOTAL	2,211	1,767	134	75	13	50	08	07	01	07	140

As presented above, a total of 2,211 occurrences of spatial prepositions were identified. Of these, 2,211 instances 1,767 or 79.9 were spatial prepositions expressing positive position and destination (PPD). The findings also show that there is no significant influence of school on the results because the same general pattern occurred in the three schools despite varying quantity of the prepositions identified in the scripts of the participants. In all the schools, the results show that the participants used the spatial prepositions expressing positive position and destination (PPD) most. PPD type accounted for 730 out of 934 or 78.2% of the spatial prepositions used by participants from School A, while School B had 565 out of 709 or 79.7% and School C had 472 out of 568 or 83% of the

occurrences being PPD type. The PPD type was followed by prepositions expressing negative position and destination (NPD) accounting for 58 or 6.2% of the occurrences in School A, 46 or 6.5% in School B and 30 or 5.3% in School C. As can be seen in Table 1 above, all the other spatial preposition types were used sparingly or not at all.

The preponderance of PPD and NPD types of spatial prepositions made the written compositions of the participants stereotyped and unidiomatic. The non-usage of spatial prepositions expressing orientation, direction, passage etc seem to show avoidance strategy on the part of the learners since the topics assigned were such that should elicit these prepositions.

Not surprisingly, the bulk of the errors in the usage of spatial preposition types were found in the most frequently used preposition types and from these errors we can identify some of the problems of the participants. Below are some examples from their scripts to illustrate these errors:

- *(1) The Government College is the best school *at* Ikorodu
- *(2) The occasion took place *at* Osun State.
- *(3) My uncle who stays *at* America flew to Nigeria.

Extracts 1,2 and 3 indicate that *at* is used indiscriminately across many of the scripts. *At* is used for big cities, a state in Nigeria and even a country.

- *(4) The shape of the house *at* the front view is like a pentagon.

At in Extract 4 is not also used appropriately as the word *view* suggests that the shape of the house when viewed *from* the front is like a pentagon. *View* in this context collocates with *from* and not *at*.

- *(5) The occasion took place *in* No 16 Acono Street Mushin.
- *(6) My junior brother was playing football *in* the field.

There is also confusion with *in* as shown in Extract 5. *In*, instead of *at* is used where a particular house or residence is mentioned.

In Extract 6, *in the field*, as used here, conceives *the field* as having volume or as an enclosed area, whereas it is more appropriate to treat *the field* as a surface on which football can be played and so *on* would be the appropriate spatial preposition. Similarly in Extract 7,

*(7) *In* their farm they plant crops like maize, yam e.t.c

the preposition *on* should have been used instead of *in* because *in* implies that *the farm* is an enclosed area or a building whereas *the farm* can more appropriately be treated as a surface rather than volume.

*(8) My town is *in* the left side of Nigeria map.

Again, in Extract 8, the preposition *on* should have been used since the writer is referring to some portion of the surface of the map of Nigeria.

*(9) My first visit *in* Lagos was so fantastic.

In Extract 9, *in* is inappropriate because it does not collocate with *visit*. *Visit* involves movement from one place to another or from one direction to a destination, hence the appropriate form is *to*

*(10) Ayedun is *under* the Eko-Ero Local Government Area of Ekun Meje.

In Extract 10, *under* is wrongly used. *Under*, as a preposition can indicate relative position in terms of proximity or can imply something lower in rank than what is mentioned. *In* would, therefore, be a more appropriate preposition in this context. Apart from the problems that the participants have with selecting appropriate spatial prepositions, we also found a few occasions where prepositions are not needed, but added, e.g.

*(11) The window side is painted in brown colour while the rooms and parlours *in* the upstairs are painted in white colour.

Here, the word *upstairs* is an adverb and, therefore, should not take a preposition.

The analysis of the essays shows that despite a lot of grammatical knowledge that the participants have been exposed to on English prepositions their usage is severely limited in terms of the wide range of prepositions available in their language. On the basis of our findings we agree entirely with the position of Littlemore and Low (2006:284) that "Prepositions and particles represent a traditional and recurring nightmare for all learners of English".

Researchers and teachers must, however, devise means to make the task of preposition usage easier for learners, particularly non-native learners of English. Suggestions have been made in this direction (Taiwo 2004; Koosha and Jafarpour 2006; Littlemore and Low 2006). Boers and Demecheleer's (1998) study of *beyond* and *behind* quoted in Littlemore and Low (2006:285) provides a suggestion that "teacher accounts of prepositions having extended metaphorical meanings can facilitate L2 learning" They go on to state that Boers and Demecheleer also suggest that teachers can usefully employ clines in the form of clusters of three or four sentences to teach preposition. E.g.

- a. You can't see Snowdon from here, it's over there, *beyond* those hills.
- b. We cannot buy this house: it's *beyond* our means.
- c. The use of English preposition is *beyond* me.

It, however, appears that this suggestion would be more appropriate for advanced learners of English. Given the level of proficiency of the participants in this study we suggest that some prepositions can be learnt off by heart.

In the teaching and learning of prepositions holophrases can serve as a ready tool at the elementary stage. Indeed, Corder (1973:131) makes a case for holophrases in second-language learning:

Much language may be stored in the early stages of language learning as holophrases and only be utilizable in that form to begin with, but these may later be analysed by the rules, which the learner eventually acquires and cease to be 'holophrastic'.

In addition, learners have to be encouraged to consult the dictionary as often as possible since prepositions can only be learnt within context. Extensive reading is also an important tool for the acquisition of English prepositions and so greater attention has to be given to motivating learners to engage in reading since it is largely through such activities that the learners can become acquainted with correct and appropriate usage of prepositions.

Conclusion

In this paper we have examined the usage of spatial prepositions by some selected secondary school students in Nigeria. The study revealed that their usage of spatial prepositions can be regarded as limited because their usage was restricted mainly to two types of spatial preposition as other spatial preposition types were sparingly used or not at all. Even in those prepositions that the students seemed to use productively a lot of confusion still abound in their usage. This study shows that teachers need to give more attention to the teaching of English prepositions if our learners are to

overcome many constraints that learners are faced with in the learning of English prepositions.

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