

DIFFICULTIES FACING ALGERIAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN TRANSLATING SPATIAL PREPOSITIONS FROM ARABIC TO ENGLISH

Insaf Hind Koudded¹ and Zineb Ouled Ali²

¹Center of Intensive Language Training, Kasdi Merbah University, Algeria
koudded.insafhind@univ-ouargla.dz

²Center of Intensive Language Training, University of Ghardaia
ouled.ali.zineb@univ-ghardaia.edu.dz

Abstract:

This study investigates the major errors made by English language learners in translating Arabic spatial prepositions into English. The data were obtained from a diagnostic test involving Arabic spatial prepositions, administered to third-year university students in order to assess their proficiency in using these forms. The students' errors were examined and classified to identify the types of difficulties Algerian learners encounter in the use of English prepositions and to explore the possible sources of these difficulties. The analysis reveals both similarities and differences between English and Arabic in this domain. The findings indicate that the teaching and learning of English spatial prepositions can be enhanced by explicitly highlighting these cross-linguistic similarities and differences. To this end, the spatial meanings of English prepositions are compared with their Arabic counterparts to determine the extent to which these meanings are conveyed across the two languages. The results point to the need for more extensive comparative illustration in the teaching of prepositions.

Keywords:

Prepositions; spatial prepositions; contrastive analysis; errors; translation

1 Introduction

Translation of prepositions between English and Arabic often reflects a tendency toward direct lexical transfer. The translation of spatial prepositions (i.e. prepositions of place and movement) into English is particularly problematic, as learners' choices are often influenced by literal transfer from the first language. When translating Arabic spatial prepositions into their English counterparts,

students tend to rely on direct lexical transfer, overlooking the linguistic and cultural specificities of English. This tendency appears to stem from the assumption that prepositions are equivalent across languages and that words presented in isolation can be fully translated in terms of their meaning.

This article argues that, although it is commonly assumed that prepositions are the same across languages, their usage can differ when constructing sentences and producing discourse. English frequently employs phrasal verbs, whereas Arabic expresses similar meanings through different syntactic constructions. Translating prepositions requires awareness of their functional use rather than a strictly literal or structural approach. A sample of students from the Department of English was selected to test the validity of this hypothesis, examining differences in their ability to translate prepositions and in their understanding of both immediate and extended meanings.

2. Participants and Data Analysis

The sample consisted of twenty-five third-year undergraduate students of English from the Department of English at Ouargla University, Algeria. The students were randomly selected from the entire class. Third-year students were chosen because they have been studying translation since their second year and have already covered grammatical rules, including prepositions, in their first year.

Participants were asked to read the following Arabic sentences carefully and then fill in the blanks with the appropriate English spatial prepositions that conveyed the same meanings as the Arabic ones:

Sample 1:

صعد الناس إلى السفينة جميعاً.

Ṣa'ida n-nās ilā s-safīna ġamī'an.

All the people went ____ the ship.

Correct answer: All the people went **aboard** the ship.

The most frequent errors were the use of the prepositions *on* or *to*, or leaving the blank empty. These errors occurred because, in Arabic, the same meaning can be expressed in multiple ways, such as:¹

(ascended the people on board the ship)

(ascended the people on the ship)

(ascended the people to the ship)

(ascended the people the ship)

صعد الناس على ظهر السفينة

صعد الناس على السفينة

صعد الناس إلى السفينة

صعد الناس السفينة

¹ For a general overview on the use of Arabic prepositions, see aš-Šamsān 1987.

All of these mean “the people got aboard the ship.”

The students who thought of the first option used either *on board* or the correct preposition *aboard*. On the other hand, the students who thought of the other options used the incorrect prepositions *on* or *to*, or left the blank empty. The use of the preposition *onto* was accepted as another correct answer.

correct responses		incorrect responses									total
aboard	(onto)	above	at	into	of	on	over	to	up	“blank”	
2	1	2	1	1	1	12	1	1	1	2	25 (100%)

Sample 2:

بني جسر آخر فوق هذا النهر.

Buniya ġisr āħar fawqa hādā n-nahr.

Another bridge was built ____ this river.

Correct answer: Another bridge was built **across** this river.

In English, the preposition *across* is used to express the idea of “stretching from one side to the other.” In Arabic, the preposition *fawqa* is used to indicate the same meaning.

A potential problem arises because the Arabic preposition ‘*abra*, which is the literal equivalent of *across*, is not normally used in this context. Students often replaced *across* with *over* or *above*, which are the direct equivalents of *fawqa* in Arabic. The most frequent error observed is the use of *over*, a literal translation of *fawqa*. In Arabic, *fawqa* is commonly used to convey this meaning, while ‘*abra* does not carry the same sense in this context.

correct responses	incorrect responses									total
across	above	along	at	in	of	on	over	“blank”		
0	2	1	1	1	1	1	9	9	25 (100%)	

Sample 3:

لا تتكى على الجدار.

Lā tattaki ‘alā l-ġidār.

Don’t lean ____ the wall.

Correct answer: Don’t lean **against** the wall.

In English, the preposition *against* is used to denote the idea of being “in contact with.” In Arabic, the preposition *‘alā* is used to indicate the same meaning.

A substitution problem may occur here, since the Arabic prepositions *‘aksa* and *‘didda*, literally meaning *against*, are not used to express this meaning. Students may therefore use the preposition *on*, the literal translation of *‘alā*, instead of *against*.

correct responses	incorrect responses								total
	at	beside	by	of	on	to	upon	“blank”	
0	4	2	1	5	9	1	1	2	25 (100%)

Sample 4:

بنى صديقي دارا بين الأشجار.

Banā ṣadiqī dāran bayna l-ašğār.

My friend built a house ____ the trees.

Correct answer: My friend built a house **among** the trees.

The distinction between the prepositions *between* and *among* depends on our perception of things. *Between* is used when we see the surrounding objects separately, that is, when each one is clearly distinct from the others (Koffi 2010:27). *Among*, on the other hand, is used when there is a collection of things that we do not perceive separately, e.g., *He built a house among the trees*. Otherwise, *between* is used in reference to two or to more than two entities when expressing the relation of a thing to other surrounding entities individually. *Among* is used to express a relation to them collectively and vaguely.²

The most frequent error made by the participants is the use of *between* instead of *among*, or vice versa. The main cause of this error is twofold. First, in Arabic, there is only one preposition, *bayna*, which is used to denote all the senses expressed by both English prepositions. The second reason is the overlap in English between the two prepositions when referring to more than two entities.

correct responses	incorrect responses				total
	between	inside	through	“blank”	
5	5	6	4	5	25 (100%)

² Therefore, we would not say “the space lying among three points” or “a treaty among three powers” or “the choice lies among the three candidates”.

Sample 5:

كانت فاطمة تدرس في جامعة ورقلة.

Kānat Fāṭima tadrus fī Ġāmi‘at Warqla.

Fatima was studying ____ Ouargla University.

Correct answer: Fatima was studying **at** Ouargla University.

The most frequent error in this sample is caused by the overlap between the prepositions *in* and *at* when used in addresses. The highest number of errors made by the students is the use of the preposition *in* instead of *at*. Although the two prepositions *in* and *at* are sometimes interchangeable, the use of *in* instead of *at* in this example is generally not acceptable in standard English.³

correct responses	incorrect responses	total
at	in	
12	13	25 (100%)

Sample 6:

اشترينا تذاكرنا من محطة العاصمة الرئيسية.

Ištaraynā tadākiranā min maḥaṭṭat al-‘āšima ar-ra’iṣiyya.

We bought our tickets ____ the capital’s Central Station.

Correct answer: We bought our tickets **at** the capital’s Central Station.

In the sixth sample, only four of the twenty-five participants used the correct preposition. Most students used the preposition *from*, the counterpart of the Arabic preposition *min*, to express this meaning. Twenty-one students used the preposition *from* instead of *at*.

correct responses	incorrect responses	total
at	from	
4	21	25 (100%)

Sample 7:

سقطت الكتب من على الرف.

Saqat al-kutub min ‘alā r-raff.

The books fell ____ the shelf.

Correct answer: The books fell **off** the shelf.

³ On these prepositions, see Inezan and Najim 2010/2022.

There is a substitution problem here since, in Arabic, there is no exact equivalent of the preposition *off*. The students may use *from*, the literal translation of *min*, instead of *off*. Sometimes, to denote a similar sense in Arabic, the compound preposition *min 'alā* (*from on*) is used. Thus, if the students think of this option, they will use the incorrect compound preposition *from on*, the literal translation of *min 'alā*, instead of *off*.

correct responses	incorrect responses (100%)			total
off	from	from on	of	
0	20	2	3	25 (100%)

Sample 8:

يرتكز السقف على أربعة أعمدة.

Yartakiz as-saqf 'alā arba'at a'mida.

The roof of the building is supported ____ four pillars.

Correct answer: The roof of the building is supported **on** four pillars.

In English, the preposition *on* is used to convey the idea of “a means of support from beneath.” In Arabic, the same meaning is conveyed by the preposition *'alā*. No problems were expected or encountered here, since the two prepositions *on* and *'alā* are equivalent.

Sample 9:

سقطت من مهدها.

Saqāṭat min mahdihā.

She fell ____ her cot.

Correct answer: She fell **out of** her cot.

In English, the preposition *out of* is used to express the meaning “from within” or “from inside.” In Arabic, the preposition *min* can indicate the same meaning. A substitution error may occur here since, in Arabic, there is no exact equivalent of the preposition *out of*. Instead of *out of*, the students may use *from*, the literal translation of the preposition *min*, which is used to indicate this sense.

correct responses	incorrect responses		total
out of	from	“blank”	
7	7	11	25 (100%)

Sample 10:

خرج السارق من الباب.

Ḥaraġa s-sāriqu min al-bāb.

The burglar came _____ the door.

Correct answer: The burglar came **out of** the door.

In English, the meaning indicated by the preposition *out of* here is “from” or “through something to the outside.” In Arabic, the preposition *min* indicates the same meaning.

correct responses (100%)
out of
25

Sample 11:

هل تستطيع استخراج له من الثلاجة؟

Hal tastaṭī' istihrāġahu lī min at-tallāġa?

Could you take it _____ the fridge for me?

Correct answer: Could you take it **out of** the fridge for me?

In English, the preposition *out of* is used to express the idea of “removing something from the place where it is enclosed or stored.” In Arabic, the preposition *min* preceded by the verb *aḥraġa* can convey the same meaning.

correct responses	incorrect responses (100%)	
out of	from	of
0	22	3

Sample 12:

السماء فوق رؤوسنا.

As-samā' fawqa ru'ūsina.

The sky is _____ our heads.

Correct answer: The sky is **over** our heads.

In English, the preposition *over* is used to indicate the meaning “directly above.” In Arabic, the same meaning is indicated by the preposition *fawqa*. No difficulty is expected if students interpret *over* and *fawqa* as equivalent. However,

the students may be confused about whether to use *above* or *over*. This confusion is due to the overlap between these two prepositions in English, as well as the fact that the Arabic preposition *fawqa* represents both of them.

correct responses	incorrect responses (100%)
over	above
0	25

Sample 13:

فرشت قطعة قماش فوق المنضدة.

Faraṣat qiṭ'at qumāš fawqa l-minḍada.

She spread a piece of cloth ____ the table.

Correct answer: She spread a piece of cloth **over** the table.

Apart from the problem mentioned above, a substitution problem may arise if the students think of the preposition '*alā*. They may use the preposition *on*, the literal translation of '*alā*, instead of *over*.

correct responses	incorrect responses	total
over	on	
14	11	25 (100%)

Sample 14:

وضع اللص قناعا على وجهه.

Waḍa'a l-liṣṣ qinā'an 'alā waḡhihi.

The burglar put a mask ____ his face.

Correct answer: The burglar put a mask **over** his face.

In English, the preposition *over* is used to indicate the meaning “in front of” and “covering.” In Arabic, the preposition '*alā* is used to denote the same meanings. A substitution problem may arise here since the preposition *fawqa* is not used to convey these meanings in Arabic. Students may use the preposition *on*—the literal translation adopted for '*alā*—instead of *over*.

correct responses	incorrect responses	total
over	on	
12	13	25 (100%)

3 Discussion of the findings

Most of the errors identified in this study are due to interlingual interference. Interlingual interference is a major source of error among language learners, referring to errors that result from language transfer.

Language transfer is the effect of one language on the learning of another. One form of language transfer is negative transfer, or interference, which is the use of a native language pattern or rule that leads to an error or inappropriate form in the target language.⁴

The results of this study indicate that students make errors in the use of spatial prepositions, including both prepositions of place and movement. Differences between the source language and the target language make the correct use of prepositions challenging for students. One reason why students make errors is their limited knowledge of the use and functions of prepositions. Therefore, students tend to repeat the same errors because of insufficient instruction at both school and university levels (Levin 1993:62).

Analysis of the test results shows that the sample consisted of twenty-five students and that a total of 243 errors were recorded across the fourteen test items, yielding an average of approximately 17 errors per item and indicating a high overall error rate. These results indicate a low level of mastery among students in the use of spatial prepositions. The errors observed in the students' translations can be attributed to several causes, two of which have already been mentioned. One results from interference from the native language, and the other from interference from other structures in English. Prepositions are especially difficult for EFL learners because they tend to understand them through the prepositional system of their mother tongue, in this case Arabic.

4 Conclusion

The findings of this study show that translating spatial prepositions between Arabic and English remains difficult for third-year Algerian EFL students. The results reveal two major types of prepositional problems: the use of an incorrect preposition and the use of an unnecessary one. In some cases, students also omitted prepositions where they were required. These errors were especially common when learners assumed that Arabic and English prepositions correspond directly.

The results further suggest that most difficulties stem from negative transfer from Arabic, together with limited awareness of the semantic and idiomatic uses of English prepositions. Because a single Arabic preposition may express several

⁴ A brief overview of the language transfer together with other factors affecting second language acquisition was given by Richards and Sampson (1974).

meanings, learners often rely on literal translation, which can lead to inaccurate or unnatural English expressions.

These findings indicate that prepositions deserve greater attention in EFL teaching, even at advanced undergraduate levels. Rather than relying mainly on memorization, instruction should emphasize contextual use, comparison between Arabic and English, common collocations, and regular practice in translation and communication. Such an approach is likely to improve both translation accuracy and general fluency.

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