Investigating Learners' Competence in the Acquisition of English Spatial Prepositions: The Case of Moroccan EFL 3rd Year University Students

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Abstract
        Prepositions represent a problematic lexical category for EFL learners. Most of these learners find English prepositions difficult to master. This difficulty stems from the fact that English prepositions are highly polysemous and that they form a unique conceptual category in English. Thus, the usage of prepositions often stands in the way of achieving grammatical fluency and accuracy for the EFL learners. In this respect, the present work attempted to measure Moroccan EFL university students' competence in the acquisition of English spatial prepositions. It further attempted to check whether the target language specificities and Standard Arabic have some influence on the process of learning. For this purpose, a sample of five English locatives was selected: 'on', 'in', 'at', 'above', 'over'. This set of prepositions represents the most common examples of English locative category. In order to investigate the acquisition of these prepositions by Moroccan EFL learners, three main tests were used for data collection. These tests were completed by 80 Moroccan third-year university students. The first test, *Production Task*, was used to measure the degree of mastery of the spatial relational prepositions under study. The second test, *Acceptability Judgment Task*, was devised to examine the receptive knowledge of the students. In this case, the subjects were asked to judge the acceptability of the targeted sentences that contain either correct or wrong prepositions. The third test, *Translation Task*, in which students were asked to translate a set of Arabic sentences into English; the aim of this test was to check the influence of standard Arabic on the acquisition of English spatial prepositions. The findings of the present study proved that Moroccan students have many difficulties in the use of English locatives since they have made many mistakes in their attempt to place the five targeted prepositions in the right place. Concerning the influence of Standard Arabic, the research revealed that it can facilitate the process of learning when the prepositional

systems of both English and Arabic share some similarities. However, it can also be a source of negative transfer, basically when there are noticeable differences between the two languages. In light of the findings of this study, it is recommended that Moroccan teachers should direct the attention of L2 students to the areas of similarities and differences between English and Arabic prepositions. It is argued that the linguistic differences between two prepositional systems are the main factor for committing errors by EFL learners, whereas similarities play a beneficial role in acquiring L2through what is called positive transfer (Lindstromberg, 2010).

Introduction

Among English structures, prepositions represent a major source of difficulty for EFL learners. The source of difficulty and the linguistic problems that EFL students encounter are basically related to the target language specificities. In other words, each language has its own characteristic set of rules that distinguish it from other languages. Generally, when someone is learning a foreign language, he/she will resort to his or her L1 in order to find the counterpart of the target language word. This technique can be very helpful with languages that are etymologically related, but in the case of languages that have nothing in common, many problems will face EFL learners. Hamdallah and Tushyeh (1993).

Before embarking on this thorny issue, one should consider some definitions of prepositions in order to have a clear starting point.

1.2. Defining Prepositions

The fact that prepositions represent a tricky subject, not only to learners but to teachers as well triggers one's curiosity to know more about this thought-provoking category. Broadly speaking, "a preposition expresses a relation between two entities, one being that represented by the prepositional complement, the other by another part of the sentence." (Quirk 1985: 657). There are different labels in the literature that describe the two noun phrases, to name but a few: 'theme vs. reference object', 'located entity vs. reference entity', and 'figure vs. ground'. However, the latter terminology, presented by Talmy (1983), is widely adopted by many researchers. In this regard, the first noun-phrase 'the picture' is described as a figure, that is, the entity being located; while the second noun-phrase is described as ground, that is, the referred entity to which the figure is being located. Along the same line, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: 402) consider that:

English prepositions are free morphemes, not bound inflectional affixes as they are in many other languages. The reason that prepositions have the name they do is that they precede nouns—they are pre-positions. This contrasts with other languages, such as Japanese, that have postpositions, which follow nouns.

In this quotation, Celce-Murcia, & Larsen-Freeman (1999), follow a traditional view by considering prepositions as free morphemes. Furthermore, they see that the name attributed to these grammatical morphemes is due to the position they occupy, that is to say, before nouns.

After presenting some related definitions to English prepositions, now the emphasis will be on the meaning of some English locatives.

1.3.   The Semantics of English Prepositions

Lindstromberg (2010) presents a detailed analysis of the meaning of more than 90 different English prepositions. However, the main focus of this study will be on the meaning of the five English locative prepositions that concern the present study.

1.3.1. In

The preposition 'in' is used when the landmark is seen as something with a boundary and an interior –like this ☐ -regardless of whether it is two or three dimensional, like in this example:

1. We got in the car.

In this case, the preposition 'in' involves a subject which is enclosed by a landmark on all sides, namely a car. Lindstromberg (2010), further states that 'in' can also be used when the landmark is like a line. This can be seen through the use of 'in' in expressions like *people are standing in a line/queue/row.*

1.3.2. On

The basic spatial meaning of 'on' is contact and support. This "means that the Subject is in contact with a Landmark that is a supporting surface. If the surface were not there, the Subject would fall – given the presence of gravity. The purely geometrical part of this meaning can be represented like this: ◯ as in *the book is on the table*." Lindstromberg (2010: 51).

1.3.3. At

The meaning of this preposition is often very vague due to the different contexts where it is used. Therefore, "Using and understanding *at* in its spatial sense often involves a mental act of 'zooming out' so that the Subject and

Landmark are visualized from such a distance that they merge into a single point." Lindstromberg (2010: 173). By doing so, one can have a clear view about whether the subject is close to the landmark but not touching it; whether it is right by the landmark and touching it; or whether the subject is on, in or among the landmark. In this regard, the preposition 'at' can be used with landmarks that are intersections and junctions of one or another, as in 'he is at crossroads'. It can also be used when speaking of actions or events that take place at points along a route, for instance 'we got off the ship at all ports'.

1.3.4. Above
This preposition entails that the subject and landmark are separated in every sense. In this regard, Lindstromberg (2010: 111) states "above can refer to a path provided that is located entirely within the airspace directly up from the landmark." as in this example:
2. The plane circled above the airfield.
He further explains that "above retains the meaning that the subject is both higher than the landmark and separated from the landmark but does not retain the idea that the subject is *directly* up from it.", for example:
3. The eagle was flying above the house.
1.3.5. Over
This preposition is used to refer to paths that extend from beyond one side of the landmark to beyond the other. 'Over' can be applied to scenes which are either dynamic or completely static. Further, it is also used to refer to scenes in which a path of movement is in contact with the landmark as in:
4. We decided to go for a walk over the hill.
In this sense, the landmark is said to represent an obstacle that needs extra effort to get to the other side. Finally, "*over* can refer to scenes in which a Subject has followed a linear, albeit perhaps curving, path." Lindstromberg (2010). For instance,
5. We plan to install a clothesline over the driveway.
It is worth mentioning that this brief account is mainly about the spatial meaning of the five targeted prepositions. However, there are other temporal and idiomatic usages of these prepositions; thus, for more detailed information, one should see Lindstromberg (2010). Now, in what follows the focus will be on the Arabic prepositional system, presenting some of its distinctive characteristics, as well as, a brief comparison between the English and Arabic prepositional system.

2. Arabic prepositions
2.1. Brief Account of Arabic Prepositions
According to Ryding (2005: 366),"Arabic prepositional expressions fall into two groups, the first group being a relatively small number (ten) of

"true" prepositions, and the other group being a more extensive collection of locative expressions." In this case, the first category is called ḫuruuf al-jarr, 'particles of attractions', because "they 'attract' a substantive (noun or adjective) in the genitive case or suffix pronoun." (Ryding 2005: 366). They are essential markers of location and direction, though they are finite in number. The second group is called ð͡ʕuruuf makan wa-ð͡ʕuruuf zaman 'adverbs of place and adverbs of time'. These words denote location in much the same way as prepositions and in this work they are referred to as semi-prepositions." (Ryding 2005: 366-367).

Ryding (2005) further believes that prepositions and semi-prepositions are fundamental parts in Arabic syntax, in the sense that they have both semantic and syntactic functions. Nevertheless, "their usage can be highly idiomatic and may not necessarily correspond to their English equivalents." (Ryding 2005: 367).

Admittedly, Arabic prepositions are commonly used with many different interpretations. Lentzner (1977:4) states that: "In Arabic there are some widely used prepositions each of which fills a number of semantic and syntactic functions. It is these prepositions in particular which are problematic to students of the language..."

In what follows, the main focus will be on the crucial characteristics of Arabic spatial prepositions that are considered to be the counterpart of the targeted English ones.

2.2.   The semantics of Arabic Prepositions
2.2.1. 'fi' (in)
The Arabic preposition 'fi' expresses spatial relationships which are more or less similar to those of English spatial prepositions *in* or *at.* In this regard, Lentzner (1977:52) believes that:

"'fi' serves to denote relationships which are paralleled in English by either *in* or *at....* it is evident that 'fi' can convey both a sense of 'being on the interior' of something and also a broader sense of location in less specific terms."

By way of illustration, consider the following examples:

  6. ʔatalamidu Fii ʔal qismi

    The students in the class
    The students are in the class

  7. ʔiltaqaytu ʔiyaad Fii ʔa matari

    I met Iyad in the airport
    I met Iyad in the airport

In this case, 'fi' indicates a three-dimensional relationship, in which students are inside the class. However, in the second example, 'fi' denotes a two-dimensional scene which gives a sense of location in less specific terms.

2.2.2. ʕalaa (on)

The preposition 'ʕalaa ' is used as a locative preposition that corresponds to the English spatial preposition *on.* To this end, the central spatial meaning of 'on' is contact and support. This "means that the Subject is in direct contact with a Landmark that is a supporting surface.

8. waḏˤaʕtu ʔal kitaba ʕalaa ʔal maktabi

   Put-I the book on the desk

   I put the book on the desk

In this example, the book is in contact with the desk.

2.2.3. ʕinda (at)

Most Arab grammarians consider 'ʕinda' a locative adverb. In this regard, Ibn Hicham (1934) claims that 'ʕinda' occurs only as an adverb or as a genitive noun after the preposition 'min'.

9. ʔiltaqaytuha ʕinda ʔal babi

   Met- her at the door

   I met her at the door

In this example,'ʕinda' establishes a spatial relationship of one point to another that represents a dimensionless location, a mere point in relation to which the position of an object can be indicated. The spatial preposition *at* is used to show a particular or exact place of an object.

2.2.4. 'fawqa' (above-over)

'Fawqa' is the equivalent of the English prepositions above and over. This vertical axis adverb denotes place. It may express a point in direct or non-direct line with the human observer; it also may denote contact with the surface of an object.

10. ʔataʔiratu Fawqa ʔassẖabi

   The-plane above the clouds

   The plane is above the clouds

In this instance, *above* refers to a path that is located entirely within the airspace directly up from the Landmark. In other terms, above retains the meaning that the plane is both higher than the Landmark and separated from the Landmark.

11. yuẖaliqu ʔal ẖamamu Fawqa ʔal manzili
Hover the pigeons over the house
The pigeons are hovering over the house

'Over' can be applied to scenes which are either highly dynamic or completely static. Here *the pigeon s*are hovering over the house which is used to refer to paths that extend from beyond one side of the Landmark to beyond the other. The spatial relation is one in which the pigeons are in higher than but within potential contact of the house. That is, it can come close enough to the house under certain circumstances, or could come into contact with it (e.g., pigeons typically land on the roof of houses in order to rest or eat).

3. Interlanguage in Language Learning

According to Selinker (1972:35), interlanguage (IL) is "a separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learners' attempted production of a TL norm". In other words, it is referred to as L2 systematic knowledge independent of both L1 and L2. Richards et al. (1996), states that IL is the type of language which can be produced by FL/L2 learners who are in the process of acquiring or learning a new language. Furthermore, Kumpf (1984) conducted a study on untutored learners; he found that their tense and aspect systems do not match, either with L1 or L2. In this case, learners are assumed to create a unique pattern, meaning and function that fall within universal principles of natural languages. Supporting the UG hypothesis in IL, students, in general, make many mistakes when learning a second language. However, these mistakes are not random, they are said to be rule-governed. In this case, Corder (1967) claims that IL is not a hybrid of the L1 and L2 even though certain elements of one or the other or indeed of both may be present. Thus, when students are learning a new language, they are accessing UG in order to "reset" the parameters of their first language. In other words, while students are learning a new language, they usually apply some rules from their first language (L1) onto the target language (L2). This process, called language transfer, can be divided into two main categories: (1) positive transfer, i.e. when learners use some relevant structures from both languages, this can yield correct language usage; (2) negative transfer which occurs when learners convey some items and structures that are not similar in the two languages. Thus, the study of IL helps in identifying the different learning styles and strategies that learners employ while learning a second or a foreign language.

4.   Previous Studies

Since the present study is intended to investigate Moroccan students' competence in the acquisition of English locative prepositions, it becomes quite significant to explore some related literature on English prepositional usage. Interestingly, Scott and Tucker (1974) cited in Hamdallah and Yushyeh (1993: 186) conducted a study on the influence of L1 on Arab EFL learners while learning English prepositions. They showed that prepositions 'seldom have a one to one correspondence between English and Arabic'. They also indicate that an Arabic preposition may be translated by several English prepositions while an English usage may have several Arabic translations. Furthermore, the researchers pointed out that approximately two thirds of the errors in the use of prepositions can be traced back to native language (Arabic) interference and one third to intra-English interference. Finally, Scott and Tucker (1974) concluded that Arab EFL learners tend to learn the semantic meaning of the English lexical prepositions before they learn all the restrictions on their usage.

Similarly, Thahir (1987) cited in Hamdallah and Yushyeh (1993: 185) points out that English prepositions create many problems for Arab students in their endeavor to learn English. He also indicates that Arab learners tend to use Arabic preposition instead of the English one. Finally, he concludes by stating that students may not be familiar with some prepositions and their meaning, because they exist only in English (e.g., of, by, and at). Therefore, students are likely to face some problems.

Finally, adopting a prototypical approach, Saqi (2000) conducted a study to define the semantic features of some English prepositions and investigate their polysemies. In addition to that, he tried to account for the Moroccan learners' interlanguage with respect to these prepositions. The results confirmed the influence of L1 in the learning of English prepositions, but not to the extent predicted. However, cultural and perceptual aspects had a much more significant influence on the process of learning. Moreover, the researcher concluded that the polysemous nature of English prepositions made it difficult for Moroccan students to assign the appropriate preposition in the right context.

5.   Methodology
5.1.   Objectives of the Study

The present study is intended to examine the issue of the acquisition of English locative prepositions by Moroccan EFL third year university students. It attempts to explore the extent to which the specificities of the target language can hinder the process of learning. In addition to that, this research is conducted to specifically find out whether Standard Arabic language has some influence on Moroccan EFL students in learning this structure.

5.2.   Research Questions
This study seeks to answer the following questions.
- Do target language specificities hinder the acquisition of English spatial prepositions among Moroccan EFL students?
- Does Standard Arabic have any influence on the use of English spatial prepositions by Moroccan EFL students?

5.3.   Hypotheses
For the purposes of this study, the hypotheses are:
- Moroccan EFL learners will face many problems in the acquisition of English spatial prepositions, due to the target language specificities.
- Moroccan EFL students will have many difficulties in the use of English spatial prepositions, due to language transfer.

5.4.   Respondents
A total of 80 Moroccan third-year university students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at Moulay Ismail University in Meknes constitute the respondents of the present study. These respondents include both males and females in a homogeneous classroom. Furthermore, the main criteria on which the selection of subjects has been established are their availability and their level of study.

5.5.   Research Instruments
When it comes to the investigation of a learner's knowledge of language, more particularly the cognitive one, there is no perfect design. The instruments adopted in this study are varied and complementary, for the sake of more reliable results. Also, such tasks are not designed for a specific level, but rather work as a measurement of the subjects' competence in spatial prepositions, ranging from the complete beginner to the most proficient of English learners. Furthermore, the choice of items is based on the complexity and the spatial nature of the targeted prepositions under study. Thus, considering the thorny nature of the present research, three major tests were used for data elicitation. Recall that the cross-sectional character of the adopted design and the time constraint make the three tests presented below seem to be the most suitable and practical ones.

5.5.1. Test (A): Fill in the Blanks
This kind of test comprises a list of sentences with blanks to fill (e.g., 'the shop is…….. the end of the street'). Here the students were asked, right from the start, to choose the appropriate preposition from the list given to them. Such a test serves as a reflection of the ideal native speaker's competence in prepositions.

5.5.2. Test (B): Acceptability Judgment Test

This test is devised to examine the receptive knowledge of the students. The subjects were asked to judge the acceptability of 30 sentences that contain, either correct or wrong prepositions (e.g., 'The bird is <u>on</u> the air'). In case a sentence is judged unacceptable, the students are required to provide the alternative preposition which they believe appropriate.

5.5.3. Test (C): Translation Task

This test contains a list of Arabic sentences which the students are asked to translate into English. The test is meant to check the influence of standard Arabic on the acquisition of English spatial prepositions.

5.6. Procedure for Data Collection

Based on the validation and adjustment of the tests from the pilot study, students were asked to sit for the test and answer the questions individually. Prior to the day of the test, the students were not informed whether or when they would be taking it. This aimed to prevent any preparation and to have an authentic representation of their real competence. As in the pilot study, the administration of the test took approximately 20 minutes. In brief, every effort was made to minimize misunderstanding as much as possible.

5.7. Data Coding

One important line that connects the data collecting process and data analysis is the data coding. It is the process of assigning numbers to the values or levels of the variables investigated (Morgan, Leech, Gloeckner and Barret, 2004). In this regard, the researcher used a binary scale coding (correct/incorrect). To this end, a correct answer was awarded one point, whereas an incorrect answer was given zero. If a participant left any item blank, he\she was given zero. Providing no answer means that the participant lacks the knowledge about the correct use of the preposition for that item.

5.8. Data Analysis

To substantiate the analysis and discussion of the tests, the data were processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPPS) version 17. The findings of the tests are calculated via descriptive statistics (frequencies, means and standard deviations). In this regard, descriptive statistics are used to describe the properties of a sample or the relationship among variables that have been investigated in the study (Rubin and Babbie, 2009). Thus, the researcher uses frequency distribution. It is worth mentioning that the main objective of this research is to measure students' achievement. This could be attained by presenting total percentage errors of their answers in the three different tasks.

6.   Results and Discussion
6.1.   The Effect of Target language Specificities on the Acquisition of English Spatial Prepositions among Moroccan EFL Students

The results of this study show that Moroccan students have many difficulties in the use of English spatial prepositions, at least with reference to the five targeted prepositions that have been used in this piece of research. Accordingly, such difficulties stem from students' inability to assign the right characteristics to the right preposition, such as dimensionality, dynamicity or staticity, structural properties and the like. To demonstrate this claim, one should consider the following examples:

12. I prayed at Hassan II Mosque.

In this example, most respondents have inserted the preposition 'in' instead of 'at' believing that the mosque presents a three-dimensional conceptual structure of the place. This can be true if we talk about the concept of a mosque in general, but the addition of the phrase 'Hassan II' which functions as an adjective modifying the word Mosque necessitates the use of 'at' since we talk about a specific point in a landmark.

Moreover, the subsequent instance shows that the targeted respondents do not have good command in the use of English locatives due to target language specificities.

13. The people are on the bus.

In this case, most respondents have inserted the preposition 'in' instead of 'on'. Hence, they consider the bus as a three-dimensional conceptual structure. However, the bus in this setting is perceived as a surface. That is, it does not refer to the whole entity, which is three-dimensional, but rather to its two-dimensions. Particularly, the semantic characteristics made by the target language with regard to any spatial milieu do not automatically correspond to the entity's real spatial extension. Consequently, the appropriate preposition in this context is 'on' but not 'in'.

Furthermore, the following examples show that Moroccan students do not know the distinctive features that characterise the usage of the English locative prepositions 'above' and 'over'.

14. The bird is flying above my head.
15. I walked over the bridge.

In the first case, a great number of students have put the preposition 'over' instead of 'above'. Though the two prepositions look similar, they are different, in the sense that 'over' usually tends to indicate a direct vertical relationship and/or spatial proximity. However, 'above' refers to a path; provided that it is located entirely within the airspace directly up from the landmark, but not necessarily in a vertical way. Accordingly, inserting the preposition 'above' in that case is the appropriate usage, since it retains the meaning that the bird is both higher than the landmark and separated from it.

Nevertheless, this does not retain the idea that the bird is flying directly up from the landmark.

Alternatively, the second example indicates that most of the students have faced some problems in placing the right preposition in the required place since they have put, either 'above' or 'on' instead of 'over'. As a matter of fact, those who have used 'above' do not know that this preposition necessitates a conceptual spatial relation in which the trajector is higher than but not within reach of the landmark. In this case, most native speakers would not accept the use of 'above' in such context excluding any possible contact between trajector and Landmark. Evans and Tyler (2005:30) state that in the case of 'above the bridge', "The TR might constitute a ghostly presence capable of levitation, or the TR might be on a second bridge higher than the first, but generally English speakers would not interpret the bridge as the surface being walked upon." Thus, the appropriate preposition in that context would be 'over' since it refers to a scene in which a path of movement is in contact with the landmark.

On the other hand, those who have inserted 'on' instead of 'over' are completely affected by the negative transfer from standard Arabic. That is to say, Arabic allows the use of 'on' in such context; therefore, when students are asked to place the right preposition in that setting, they have put 'on' as the appropriate choice believing that English is similar to Arabic in this prepositional usage.

In the same vein, knowing that Arabic and English constitute two different languages, it is not surprising that Moroccan learners are likely to face some problems in learning the English language in general, more specifically, the English prepositional system. In this regard, the language specific characteristics of English prepositional system include the absence of equivalents of some English prepositions like 'at'. Thus, in learning such prepositions, Moroccan EFL learners are often confronted with confusion when deciding which preposition to use. For the sake of illustration, consider the following examples:

16. We sat at the table to eat dinner.
17. Write your name at the bottom of the page.
18. I prayed at Hassan II Mosque.
19. I met Jihane at the party.

As shown by the results of this study, most learners have faced real problems in placing 'at' in the above cases. Obviously, such results indicate that Moroccan students do not have good mastery and adequate knowledge in the use of the preposition in question. Furthermore, in Arabic, there is no equivalent for the preposition 'at'. This fact pushes learners to make errors when they try to substitute 'at' by other prepositions that exist in the Arabic prepositional system like 'on' and 'in'. For instance, in the first sentence

above, the students have substituted 'at' by the preposition 'on' because in the Arabic language it is possible to use 'on' in this context. Besides, in the other three instances, learners have substituted 'at' by the preposition 'in'. It is worth mentioning that the errors students have made in the previous examples are called "errors of substitution". They are the outcome of the influence of the standard Arabic prepositional system. As a matter of fact, the subsequent section will closely probe the impact of Arabic on the acquisition of the English locatives.

6.2. The effect of Standard Arabic on the use of English Spatial Prepositions by Moroccan EFL Students

The results of this study have proved that the use of the English spatial prepositions represent a real problem for Moroccan EFL university learners since they have encountered many difficulties in their attempt to insert these prepositions in the right place. As it has been said before, the target language specific characteristics, like dimensionality, dynamicity, and some structural properties play a crucial role in the students' failure to use locative prepositions appropriately. However, the outcome of the present work has provided evidence that a great deal of errors - the biggest one - in the use of English spatial prepositions is caused by interference from standard Arabic. In other words, Moroccan students usually tend to unconsciously impose the patterns and structures of the Arabic prepositional system on English, because of their insufficient mastery and inadequate knowledge of the correct prepositional usage of English locatives.

Needless to say, that test (c) is considered to be the main instrument devised to check the influence of standard Arabic on Moroccan EFL university students in their endeavor to acquire Locative prepositions. To this end, let's consider some concrete illustrative examples of negative transfer from the Arabic prepositional system.

20. *If your name is in the list, this means you are accepted**.**

In this case, it is apparent that students have been affected by the prepositional system of Arabic, in the sense that most of them have used 'in' instead of 'on'. In other words, when students have been asked to translate the Arabic sentence into English, most of them have kept the preposition 'in' believing that English uses the same preposition in that context.

21. *Open the book on page 26.

Here, when respondents try to translate the Arabic sentence (see the appendix), they have kept the preposition 'on' which is a wrong choice in English since the appropriate preposition in such a setting is 'at', for there is an emphasis on a specific point in space.

22. *We sat on the table to eat dinner.

In this case, students' wrong answer can be easily traced back to negative transfer from standard Arabic since in Arabic it is correct to use 'on' in that context, but in English, the right preposition is 'at'. A possible explanation for this matter is that there is no equivalent for 'at' in Arabic, this is why most of the students have used 'on' instead of 'at'.

23. *Write your name in the top of the page.

In this instance, students who have used 'in' instead of 'at' have made a substitution error, partly because of their ignorance of the prepositional usage of 'at' in such a context. In addition to that, the Arabic language allows the use of 'in' in this situation; this is why most of the students have kept 'in' when they have translated the Arabic sentence into English.

24. *In Ibn Sina Hospital.

This sentence also shows that students are negatively affected by the prepositional system of Arabic. This can be clearly seen through the use of 'in' as a substitute for 'at'. That is, in Arabic 'in' is considered to be the correct preposition in that context; therefore, when students are asked to translate the Arabic sentence into English, they have used 'in' instead of 'at'.

In the same way, the reader can easily recognize the negative influence of standard Arabic, not only through translation task but also through the two other instruments, namely Test A and B. For instance, students have failed to provide the appropriate preposition in the subsequent contexts because they were thinking in Arabic.

25. *Our house is in Third Street.

In this sentence, most of the subjects have used 'in' as an alternative for 'on' because in Arabic, it is correct to insert the preposition 'in' in such a setting; therefore, Moroccan learners have transferred the prepositional usage of their language into English believing that the two languages use the same preposition in that context.

26. *I met Jihane in the party.

Concerning this example, it is obvious that the respondents have been affected negatively by the prepositional system of Arabic, in the sense that they have used the wrong preposition 'in' instead of the correct one 'at'. In other words, the Arabic language allows the use of 'in' in that context. However, in English, the correct preposition is 'at'.

So far, the results discussed in this chapter indicate that Moroccan learners transfer negatively from standard Arabic. Consequently, most of them have come up with erroneous usages of certain locative prepositions in different contexts. Nonetheless, the outcome of the present study also shows that Moroccan students resort to positive transfer when there are similarities between English and Arabic in the use of a given preposition in specific

settings. The following examples show the influence of positive transfer on students' correct answers.

27. The paint on the walls of her room is red.

In this case, most of the learners have succeeded to insert the right preposition in the required place because they have transferred positively from standard Arabic. The latter has an equivalent for the English preposition 'on', namely 'ʕalaa'. As a result, learners did not face real problems in placing the preposition 'on' in this context.

28. Put this book in the box.

This is another clear example that shows that Moroccan learners have inserted the appropriate preposition due to positive transfer from Arabic. The fact that both English and Arabic use the same preposition in such a context has made Moroccan learners provide the right answer.

29. She is sitting in the garden.

Similarly, the majority of the students have provided the right preposition in this context since Arabic has a similar preposition for 'in' which is 'Fii'. This pushes Moroccan learners to transfer positively from their language.

30. The doctor is in his office.

In the same way, a large number of students have succeeded to give the right answer in this setting. The key to this case is that Arabic uses the same preposition in such a place. Consequently, positive transfer is seen as a good strategy that allows learners to answer correctly.

31. Look! There is a man on the roof. What is he doing?

Likewise, this instance indicates that both Arabic and English use the same preposition. This is why Moroccan learners did not face any difficulty in placing the preposition 'on' in this context.

Overall, standard Arabic is considered a double-aged weapon. That is to say, when there are similarities between English and Arabic in terms of the prepositional system, positive transfer is likely to take place and hence Arabic is said to facilitate the process of acquiring English spatial prepositions. However, when there are differences in the prepositional system of the two languages, negative transfer seems to be the outcome.

7. Pedagogical Implications

It should be pointed out that the results of this study may be particularly interesting as far as the lexical units dealt with are concerned. Learning English spatial prepositionsinvolves more difficulty than learning other lexical aspects. Thus, a number of recommendations related to the use of English spatial prepositionscan be drawn from this research. These can be summarized as follows:

- Pedagogically, errors that learners make in their attempt to insert prepositions in the required context will help teachers have a general idea about the prepositional knowledge of their students.
- According to Corder (1973), errors provide significant feedback in the sense that they tell the teacher about the effectiveness of his teaching material and his teaching techniques. In addition to that, errors allow the teacher to remedy the situation by devoting more time and extra effort to the teaching of English spatial prepositions.
- As far as the teaching of English spatial prepositionsis concerned, teachers need to state the similarities and differences that exist between English and Arabic, so that Moroccan learners become aware of the transfer strategy and its outcome. In other words, they will know when to transfer and when not to.
- Teachers are required to introduce their students to specific situations that create problems in the use of English spatial prepositionsso as to promote their awareness and competence.
- Teachers are encouraged to make their students practice English spatial prepositions as much as possible. Still, this practice should be done in a meaningful way and within context.
- Teachers are supposed to call the students' attention whenever there are rules or specific characteristic features of the target language that facilitate the prepositional usage, like the concept of dimensionality.
- Given the fact that there are no particular syllabi that address learners' specific needs in the EFL situation at the university, English teachers are supposed to use different grammar books to teach English locatives. However, Meara (1993) points out that most teaching materials used in the EFL situation have been designed to be used in an English speaking country taking into account the linguistic and cultural background of English students. Therefore, policymakers and textbook designers are invited to develop teaching materials that will consider a more individualized teaching approach to English spatial prepositions, bearing in mind learners' linguistic and cultural background as well as their needs.

8. Limitations of the study

Despite the results and the findings of the present research, it has its own limitations and restrictions. Chiefly, the set of prepositions selected for this research is not representative of the category of English spatial prepositions, in the sense that there are other prepositions that have distinctive characteristics which are not found in any of the prepositions undertaken in this study.

The second limitation has to do with the number of participants involved in the study. Eighty students cannot be assumed to be representative of the whole population (third-year university students). As a matter of fact, the findings of this study cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the homogeneity of the Moroccan third-year university students minimizes this limitation, as all the respondents have more or less similar background in EFL and have taken similar courses in their study.

Another limitation has to do with the instruments used for the investigation. Given the cognitive nature of language aspect presently investigated here, i.e. locative prepositions, it was difficult to come up with better instruments. However, the use of pictures that consist of a set of drawings with sentences describing them could be a supplementary technique for eliciting rich data. This task is said to portray the spatial situations of the targeted prepositions as clearly and as unambiguously as possible.

Conclusion

The results of this study have revealed that English spatial prepositions, more particularly, 'at', 'in', 'on', 'over' and 'above' represent a problematic issue for Moroccan EFL University learners. Students have encountered many difficulties in their attempt to use these prepositions in different contexts. It appears that a longer time of exposure is required for the sake of boosting participants' proficiency through incorporating sufficient diversified input to trigger the required adjustment to better match the target set of L2 features with respect to English spatial prepositions. Though the findings of this study seem to yield some significant outcome about the acquisition of English locatives at the Moroccan university instructional level, they remain specific to the sample population involved and the context where the data were collected. Thus, more research is needed in order to shed more light on this language construction and to see to what extent the findings of this investigation can be valid and consistent.

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