An Analysis of Prepositional Errors of College Students

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Abstract: This paper evaluates the extent of Filipino’s interference in the use of English prepositions as reflected in the compositions written by college students of the University of the Philippines. Using Error Analysis as a method of diagnosing the errors in the compositions, and Contrastive Analysis as a method of describing the prepositional systems of Filipino and English, this paper explains the difficulties and the errors committed by Filipino learners. It undertakes the identification, description, categorization, and explanation of the errors found in the data.

The study concludes that the interference of Filipino is minimal as the results show the dominance of intralingual over interlingual errors. Given this scenario, the study explores ways by which teachers can address correcting the errors and restructuring the students’ interlanguage system.

Introduction

A preposition expresses a relation between two entities, one being represented by the prepositional complement of the various types of relational meaning (Quirk et al, 2000). These relationships include those of time, position, direction, and various degrees of mental and emotional states. Studies have shown that the preposition is one of the most problematic categories that students encounter in learning English (Richards, 1974; Ravina, 1982).

In the Philippines, one major grammar error observed in both students’ speech and writing is the prepositional error. Corder (cited in James, 1998) defines errors as the result of some failure of performance. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) state that errors are the flawed side of a learner’s speech or writing. An error is any deviation from a selected norm of language performance, no matter what the characteristics or causes might be. The problems of the Filipinos with the preposition may be grouped into three: 1) using incorrect (uniidiomatic) preposition; 2) non-use of a preposition when one is needed; 3) using a preposition when none is needed (Guzman and Arcellana, 2004).

It is not uncommon to find the use of English preposition reflecting Filipino structures—that is to say, literal translations from Filipino to English. The differences between the prepositional systems of English and Filipino are believed to constitute the difficulty of the Filipino learner in learning and using the English prepositions. While English has numerous prepositions denoting various kinds of relationships, Filipino generally uses only three—sa, ng, kay. Overwhelmed by the numerous prepositions to choose from, the Filipino learner is said to base his understanding of English on his first language (L1) resulting in grammar errors.
Statement of the Problem

It is within this context that this paper poses the major problem: To what extent does Filipino (L1) affect the use of English prepositions in written compositions of students of the University of the Philippines?

To answer this query, some sub-problems must be addressed:

1. How does the prepositional system of Filipino differ from the prepositional system of English?
2. What are the prepositional errors found in the data?
3. How much of the errors can be attributed to the students’ L1?

Hypotheses

This paper hypothesizes that the prepositional system of Filipino has minimal effect on the use of English prepositions in the students’ compositions. Many of the errors are not due to L1 interference (interlingual errors) but due mainly to intralingual transfer, i.e., generalizations made within the target language English.

Objectives of the Study

This paper evaluates the extent of Filipino’s interference in the use of English prepositions as reflected in written compositions of students of the University of the Philippines. Using Contrastive Analysis as a method of describing the prepositional systems of English and Filipino and Error Analysis as a method of diagnosing the errors in the compositions, this paper undertakes the identification, description, and categorization of the errors and the determination of the sources of errors.

Conceptual Framework

As mentioned earlier, this paper uses the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) as a means of describing the differences in the prepositional systems of English and Filipino. Proponents of the strong version of CAH claim that by comparing systematically the native language and the language to be learned, one can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty. A more moderate version of CAH which this paper adopts does not imply a prediction of degrees of difficulty. Instead it recognizes the significance of interference across languages and the fact that these interferences can explain the linguistic difficulties of the learners (Brown, 1994).

This paper also uses Error Analysis to identify, describe, classify errors and to determine their causes. There have been a number of error taxonomies presented in second language (L2) literature. Corder (1973) classified errors into four categories: omission of some required elements; addition of some unnecessary elements; selection of incorrect element; misordering of elements. James (1998) noted that errors may be interlingual, i.e., mother-tongued
influenced. These are errors resulting from the learner indulging in a literal translation from L1 to L2. The target language may also cause intralingual errors. The learner may also resort to some communication strategies-based errors such as approximation and circumlocution errors. Lastly, induced errors are errors that result from the language situation rather than the learner’s incomplete competence of the target language or the interference of the mother language.

For the purpose of diagnosing the errors found in the data, this paper adopts an eclectic framework from Corder and James; thus, the following categories of errors:

1. Interlingual
   - literal translation
   - features of L1 are transferred to the target language

2. Intralingual
   - omissions
   - additons
   - misselection of L2 preposition
   - redundancy
   - cooccurrence restrictions
   - overgeneralization

3. Communication strategy-based
   - filling the gap
   - incorrect use of an L2 expression that involves a preposition
   - coinage

4. Induced
   - teacher-talk induced
   - material induced

Methodology

Two hundred seventy eight (278) compositions were collected from ten (10) sections English General Education (GE) courses. The data were guided compositions, meaning to say, the teacher provided the topic for the writing session. The teachers confirmed that all the students speak Filipino as the first language. Of the 278 compositions, 163 or 58% contained errors in prepositions. These 163 compositions comprised the corpus of the study. Sentences with prepositional errors were isolated and the errors were described and categorized using the frameworks of Richards (1974) and James (1998).
Results and Discussion

Descriptions of the Prepositional Systems of Filipino and English

**FILIPINO**

Guzman and Arcellana (2004) describe the prepositional system of Filipino as having only three prepositions—sa, ng, and kay. These three are multifunctional in the sense that one preposition may convey locative, directional, or even spatial relations. The determination of the distinct sense of a Filipino preposition depends on preceding phrases in addition to the preposition itself as illustrated in the box below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FILIPINO</th>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ilagay SA kahon</td>
<td>put (it) in the box</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ipatong SA mesa</td>
<td>put (it) on the table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nangpunta SA palengke</td>
<td>went to the market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>galing SA palengke</td>
<td>came from the market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>patak NG ulan</td>
<td>drops of rain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kinain NG pusa</td>
<td>eaten by the cat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>basa NG pawis</td>
<td>wet with sweat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ibigay KAY Anna</td>
<td>give to Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kunin KAY Anna</td>
<td>get from Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tungkol KAY Anna</td>
<td>about Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>para KAY Anna</td>
<td>for Anna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to EnglishClub.com, (http://www.englishclub.com/grammar/prepositions-list.htm) there are about 150 English prepositions. The English prepositions can be grouped in categories such as:

1. Those indicating direction (to, towards, into)
2. Location (in, at, on, by)
3. Spatial relationship (above, across, around)
4. Time, place, and object (on, in, within, about, for, etc.)

The nine most frequent prepositions in English are at, by, for, from, in, of, on, to, with. However, this grouping is misleading as each form has multiple meanings (may denote time, space, location, etc.) and functions (agentive, dative, benefactive, etc.). Thus, each of these frequent prepositions must be studied in detail to isolate a small but optional number of meanings that it performs in English. There are also variations in the use of prepositions. More than one preposition may be acceptable in certain contexts. For instance, *a quarter to/of ten, from 9 to/till 5 pm*, etc (Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman, 1983, 1998). All these contribute to learners’ difficulty in learning and “mastering” the English prepositions.

Following the comparison between the English and Filipino prepositional systems is a description of errors found in the data. According to James (1998), it is necessary to include a description of errors for the following reasons:

1. To make explicit what would otherwise be tacit and on the level of intuition;
2. To provide a basis for counting errors;
3. To create categories.

This study adopted Lennon’s categories (cited in Brown, 1994) to describe the learners’ errors.

These categories are substitution, addition, omission, and misordering.

The data yielded the following results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Errors</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Substitution</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>addition</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misordering</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Substitution ranks highest with 62% while misordering is last with no incidence at all. It is evident that the large number of English prepositions compared with the number of prepositions in Filipino contributed to the learners’ difficulty in processing relationships between the grammatical elements and choosing the appropriate English prepositions.
At this point, it can be hypothesized that L1 interference caused the errors but it is also possible that the internal make-up of English caused much of the learners’ difficulty. These possibilities necessitate what James calls error diagnosis.

Error diagnosis tries to ascertain the factors that cause learners to commit errors. Primary diagnosis simply explain why errors occur while secondary diagnosis discusses the forms that these errors assume. This paper will attempt to do both.

There is a general agreement over the main diagnosis-based categories of error (James, 1998). The four major categories are 1. Interlingual errors; 2. Intralingual errors; 3. Communication strategy-based errors; and 4. Induced errors.

Interlingual errors are errors caused by the interference of the learner’s mother tongue. Learners engage in over-literal or word-for-word translation. The origins of the intralingual errors are found within the structure of the target language itself and through reference to strategies by which a second language is acquired or learned. These are errors that reflect the general characteristics of rule learning. Under this category of errors, Richards talks of faulty generalization, incomplete application of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, false concepts hypothesized. James (1998), on the other hand, has false analogy, misanalysis, incomplete rule application, exploiting redundancy, overlooking cooccurrence restrictions, hypercorrection, overgeneralization. Lacking the required form, the learner resorts to using another near-equivalent L2 item resulting in communication strategy-based errors. Induced errors are the result of being misled by the ways in which teachers give definitions, explanations, examples, and arrange practice opportunities (James, 1998).

Using Richard’s and James’ taxonomies, the following categories are derived:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interlingual</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- direct translation</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intralingual</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- misselection of prep</td>
<td>107</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- inc. application of rules</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- simple addition</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- redundancy</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overlooking cooccurrence rest.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication strategy-based</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- misuse of L2 expression</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Induced</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>227</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interlingual Errors

The interlingual errors comprised 10% of the total errors. These errors are the result of prepositions directly translated from L1 to L2. The learners made use of L1 repertoire to process meanings and structures in L2.

Examples:

1. I was usually forced to write essays and articles OF English journalism teacher.

   This sentence is the direct translation of: *Ako ay madalas mapilit magsulat ng mga sanaysay at artikulo NG aking guro sa English Journalism.*

   NG can be both *of* and *by* depending on the preceding word. NG after a verb signals a passive voice and denoted by *BY* in English.

   Example:

   Kinain NG bata (eaten *BY* the child)

   NG after noun is usually denoted by *OF* in English. It signals possession or the fact that the object of the preposition has reference to the noun.

   Example:

   Kamay NG bata (hand of the child)

   Pagmamahal NG ina (love of a mother)

   What happened in the preceding example was that the proximity of the noun ARTICLE to the position of the preposition prompted the learner, who was thinking in Filipino, to write OF instead of *BY*.

2. I have to share the learnings I have TO others, directly or indirectly.

   This sentence is the direct translation of: *Ako ay nakakapamahagi ng aking mga nalalaman SA iba.*

   SA is always associated with something locative and directional. Its equivalent English prepositions are IN, ON (locative) TO, FROM (directional). The use of TO instead of WITH stems from the idea that sharing is directional, that is to say, someone gives something TO someone else.

Intralingual
**Misselection of Preposition.** These are errors that do not conform to TL norms but cannot be traced to the L1. The high frequency of misselected prepositions gives credence to Brown’s observation that intralingual transfer is a major factor in second language learning. Researchers have found that that the early stages of language learning are characterized by interlingual transfers but once the learners have begun to achieve parts of the new system, more and more intralingual transfers are manifested (Brown, 1994). The learners in this study have studied English for at least 10 years and the occurrence of many intralingual errors only reaffirms the findings of earlier studies.

Examples:

1. It takes me a whole lot of time to finish a text on something that I don’t have a clear idea WITH.
2. I tend to be hesitant WITH the ideas I wrote.
3. It is usually comprised WITH at least two or more characters.
4. I don’t entertain problems and I never get affected WITH them.
5. People are talking WITH me because they realized that I have that characteristics.

One error that surfaced many times is the use of WITH instead of by, of, to. This misselection often results in unidiomatic expressions like *talk with.* One can also hypothesize that the learner associates talk with speak (both of which are oral language productions) and generalizes that if speak goes with WITH; talk can also be used with WITH.

Conversely, different prepositions are used when WITH is needed as seen in the following examples:

1. I’m really disappointed OF what I have done.
2. …the wind blowing through my hair is what I am most likely to associate TO dried leaves.
3. I’m drawing a tiger but I have nothing to color it ON.

There also a number of instances involving the locative prepositions ON and IN. Although the learners are not able to make distinctions between the two related prepositions, the sense/intention of the learners is, nonetheless, comprehensible. These errors are what Burt and Kiparsky call “local errors.” Local errors do not prevent the message from being understood. Usually these are minor violations of one segment of a sentence still allowing the reader to make an accurate guess about the meaning of the writer.

Examples:

1. The hero will triumph ON the end.
2. Some poems may look ridiculous when written IN paper.
3. Sumptuous food and sweet desserts awaits IN the table to be eaten.
4. On days when I put peppermint candy ON my mouth….
5. I hum a tune a heard IN the car’s radio.
Incomplete Application of Rules

These errors occur when learners fail to perform certain operations. This error category is evident in the omission of prepositions in the phrasal verbs/idiomatic expressions requiring the use of prepositions and must be learned as one unit.

Examples:

1. I am really open with what going _____ in my life….
2. …and I don’t have a hard time relating _____ the topic.
3. If a person feels extreme anger and has no one to share it____ he can “dispose”___ almost all his anger though writing a poem.

Simple Additions

Addition errors are characterized by the presence of a preposition which must not appear in a well-formed sentence.

Examples:

1. You can feel my knuckles swelling but I won’t let you feel for you may end up being the reason OF why it is swollen.
2. In fact, I also consider this as a reason ON why I have lots of friends.
3. The problem is WITH me.

The sentence, The problem is WITH me, is a little ambiguous. Without looking at the context, one can say that the sentence is correct in the sense that “the problem” may refer to someone or something that is WITH the speaker. An examination of the text, however, showed that the writer meant “the problem is ME.” In such case, WITH is not needed.

Redundancy

Redundancy manifests the learners tendency to overelaborate the target language which often results in verbosity.

Example: 1. A smile forms on my face and my eyes can’t help but wandering AROUND.

   The term wandering already implies ‘moving or going around.’ The learners probably wanted to highlight ‘circular movement’ of the eyes as they examine the area; hence, the addition of around.

Example 2: …and all that boosted up the company sales.

   In the second example, the learner attempted to foreground the increase or the ‘rise” in sales hence, the addition of UP.
**Overlooking Cooccurrence restriction**

This error refers to the failure to observe the restrictions of existing structures, that is, the application of rules to contexts where they do not apply.

Example 1: Taking it seriously will just end up to let them do it again.

Example 2: I embraced myself, a useless attempt at protection from the cold…

In both examples, the learners failed to recognize the fact that the phrasal verbs *end up* and *attempt at* select the –ing complement rather than the infinitive nor a noun form.

**Communication strategy-based errors**

**Misuse of L2 expression**

This error results from the learners attempt to use the English idioms but not able to realize the correct form.

Example 1: I put everything I know and discuss about it.

The addition of ABOUT must have come from the learner’s association of expression TALK ABOUT with DISCUSS. The learner generalizes and assumes that like TALK ABOUT, discuss would also require the preposition ‘about.”

Example 2: No, not the kind of novel that one can read in one sitting, over the night.

The use of over the night instead of the expression “overnight” reflects the learners “over attempt” at approximating the L2 expression. Not wanting to miss out on any words, he over monitors his L2 output by adding the article THE, presumably because the next structure is NIGHT which is a noun. This over monitoring of L2 output is what James called “hypercorrection.”

Example 3: If I were a literary piece, I would be a poem because I already took up English 11 and I found poetry really interesting.

In contrast to the previous examples where the addition of prepositions resulted in the misuse of the L2 expression, example 3 deletes an entire noun phrase (the expression took a course in) and replaces it with UP.

**Conclusion and Implications to Language Learning and Teaching**

The results of the study showed there are a number of differences between the English and Filipino prepositional systems in terms of number and sense. Despite the common notion that
Filipino affects the use of English prepositions, this study revealed that most of the errors are intralingual—errors that originate from the target language, English.

The students are definitely still in their interlanguage stage and errors are inevitable. As teachers though, we have to be vigilant of fossilization. Fossilization is a reality; however, as Selinker (1992) notes, “there is nothing in the SLA literature to suggest that some effects of fossilization cannot be bypassed in the learning process if emphasis is placed on communicative abilities in context.” The difficulty in learning the English prepositions necessitates classroom strategies and techniques as early as the basic education level) that will distinguish the various senses of the prepositions. These strategies and techniques call for using the preposition in context; engaging learners in authentic communication to promote their learning. It is hoped that this early exposure to the forms and functions of the English prepositions will result in their imbibing the target forms without much reference to the L1.

There is a need to re-evaluate the teachers’ command of the English language and this evaluation must be done in all levels. Although there was no way that this study could establish the teacher-induced errors, there is the possibility that some of the errors originated from the teacher talk. For the non-native speaker teacher, the command of English is always a serious concern. There is a constant need for the Filipino teachers of English to undergo methodological and language proficiency trainings to meet the language demands of the ESL classroom. This is a tall order considering the limited resources given to education in our country. Inevitably, this reevaluation will have to be aided by the non-government organizations and the private sectors and supplemented by the institution and proper implementation of educational policies and reforms.

Considering the premium given to English learning and teaching, there should be more action research done in the area of errors. These future studies must consider more accurate and more varied data elicitation techniques, increased number of data and more precise categorization of errors for more generalizability and refinement of the findings. It was observed that some errors can be diagnosed with two or more causes requiring not just the evaluation of the linguistic context but also the pragmatic context of the errors.

This study is synchronic, focusing on the learners’ language at a given time. A diachronic, longitudinal study can be considered to further illuminate on other important aspects of second language learning, e.g. the evolution/development of the learners system or the interlanguage. The study is also in its initial stages and it is presumptuous to categorically make a statement regarding the extent of cross-linguistic reference nor explain exhaustively all the errors and causes of these errors given the limited time. What can be said, however, is that this study may be able to provide profiles of shared linguistic characteristics of a group of learners of English. Eventually, this can contribute to ongoing developments and documentations of learner’s profiles and the appreciation and evaluation of discourse and linguistic practices that are reflected in the written compositions of our students.

For now, let this study be the seed of more classroom research that will take up the challenge of venturing into the analysis of the different levels of errors.


References


