

A Comparative Study of English and Arabic Use of Prepositions Amongst Arab Native Speakers

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Abstract

Prepositions pose major problems when translated from Arabic into English or vice versa. The accurate mapping between English-Arabic and Arabic-English prepositions are some times very difficult to determine by Arab learners. This study is designed to identify the difficulties concerning preposition, which Arab students may face when translating into English or vice-versa. This paper reports on a study undertaken the form of questions and the form of texts to be translated from Arabic to English and these questions were answered by twenty Arab students at university Putra Malaysia. As a result of this examination, mistakes have been detected, analyzed and studied, then recommendation where offered as to how these mistakes may be corrected or eradicated.

1. Introduction

English prepositions have always been a source of great difficulty for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners regardless of his or her mother tongue (Celce-Murcia, 1983:250). One reason for this is because EFL learners usually try to relate the use of English prepositions to their mother tongue (MT) prepositional system. In many instances, the difference in the number of prepositions and the lack of a one to one mapping between the English and the MT prepositions is the source of the difficulty. In addition to this, since prepositional usage in English can be highly idiomatic (especially in preposition verbs and phrasal verbs), the nuances of idiomatic usage of English prepositions are highly challenging to EFL learners and even native speakers are sometimes unsure of the correct form (Gethin, 1983: 161). Furthermore, problems EFL learners have with the prepositions are compounded by the fact that prepositions, in general, are highly polysemous and represents an ontological category that is highly conceptual. These means that EFL learners are often confronted with making decisions as to which prepositions to use since the conceptual mapping in the mother tongue might be different. Thus, prepositions usage often stand in the way of achieving grammatical fluency and accuracy for the EFL learners.

Among Arab EFL learners, prepositions are considered to be the most difficult because of cross-linguistics differences between the Arabic and English prepositional system. The language specific differences between the Arabic and English prepositional system include some English prepositions that are not present in the Arabic language. In learning these prepositions , Arabic EFL learners sometimes transfer their mother tongue system with a limited number of prepositions to transfer their usage of English prepositions resulting in incorrect English prepositional usage and the lack of idiomaticity. Sometime, inaccuracy in prepositional usage (especially in translation) are also produced as a result of the cross-linguistic differences (Zughoul, 1973).

This paper examines the problems Arab EFL learners have with the basic English prepositions at, in and on and attempts to account for their difficulties with these English prepositions through a comparative study of the Arabic prepositional system.

2. Comparison between English and Arabic prepositions (fii..in), (ala..on)

English language researchers are well aware that English prepositional usage is one of the Arab learners are also expected to find similar difficulties in the use of English prepositions because although Arabic and English prepositions have some characteristics in common, they differ in both number and usage. There are only twenty Arabic prepositions the most important and commonly used are six prepositions, (min, ila, ala, ba, la, fi), (Abbas hasan, 1961:pp320) while in English there are one hundred fifty prepositions (Josef essberger, 2000).

A preposition by definition expresses a relationship between two entities: it indicates a relationship in space (between one object and another), and/or a relationship in time (between events), and/or a more abstract relationship (government). So, the first characteristic is that neither Arabic nor English prepositions can stand by themselves: they get their meanings through their usage in contexts.

The other characteristics is that the number of prepositions in English is more than Arabic in Arabic is limited, as mentioned above; but, at the same time, each preposition may have to serve variety of purposes. The same preposition may express time or space and be followed by a noun, a verb, an adverb or an adjective; also it may be used idiomatically.

The main problem for these learners lies firstly in the fact that not every Arabic preposition has definite equivalent in English and vice versa, and secondly, in that not every English or Arabic preposition has a definite usage and meaning, indicating only time or space or following preceding a certain word. The most problematic of all prepositions for both space and time “**fii** and **on**”.

The first example the Arabic preposition “**fii**” is used as an equivalent instead of “**in, into, at, on, during, within, inside and also zero equivalent**”. This particular preposition has therefore great semantic power in both standard and colloquial Arabic: it’s the filter through which all these English equivalents must pass. It is used to denote time and place and occurs with many different Arabic words in abstract and metaphorical usages. Therefore “**fii**” as well as other Arabic prepositions interferes the selection and usage of English once.

Fii

I slept **in** bed. (Correct response) (In)

Spring begins **in** the first of March. (On)

In the end of the journey we brought fruit. (At)

In my last holiday I did many different things. (During)

I went home **in** happily. (?)

The plane is flying **into** the sky. (In)

The first English preposition that is likely to be produced as the equivalent of the Arabic preposition fii is “in” as shown in the first sentence where it is correctly used. However it is incorrectly selected instead of “on, at, during, “?”, and into”. . In the sentences 2,3,4 and5. On the other hand students may also they maybe use this preposition and all its other equivalents interchangeably, as illustrated by sentence 6.

Another problem is that Arab use or omit certain English prepositions according to Arabic usage .so, by literal translation when the Arabic context requires a preposion (or requires none), learners make wrong responses accordingly as illustrated in the following examples:

The boy enjoyed the film.

The literal translation of this sentence is

Either the boy enjoyed with the film.

Or the boy enjoyed from the film.

In Arabic it is necessary to insert a preposition to make a relationship between the enjoyment and the film, which was the cause of the enjoyment. With out such a preposition the Arabic sentence will have no sense.

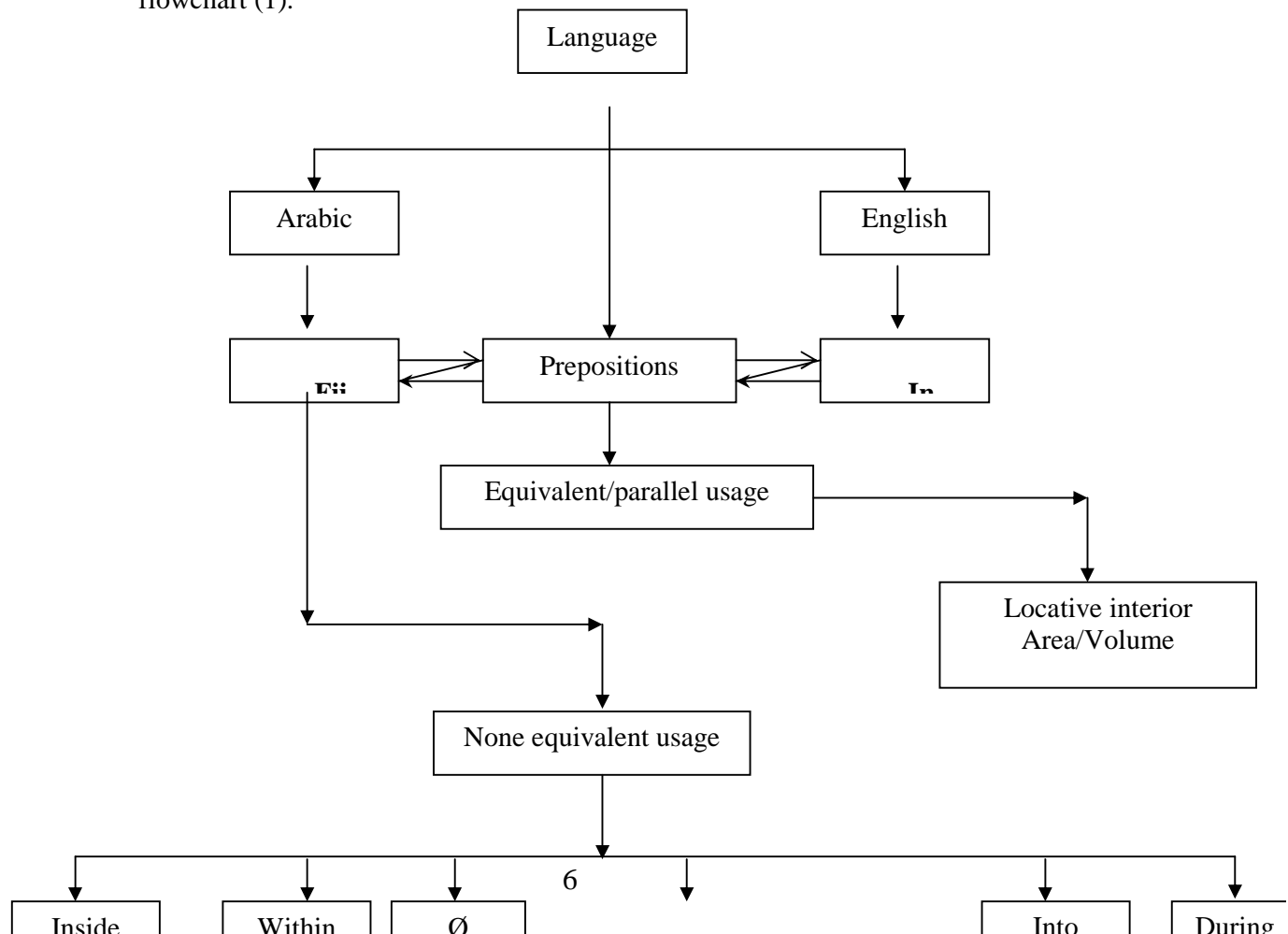
Therefore Arab learners are likely to insert unnecessary prepositions when they express themselves in English. On the other hand, they may omit necessary prepositions as illustrated by the following examples:

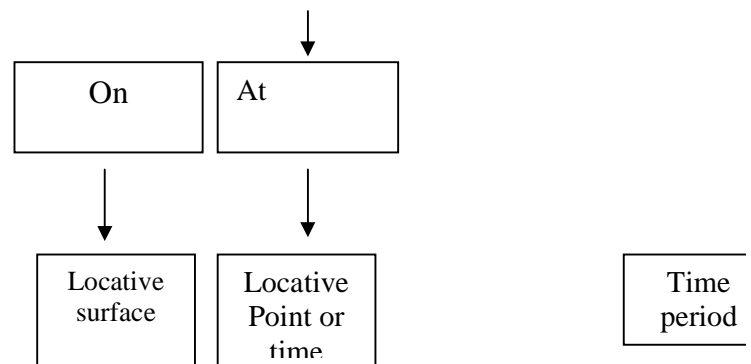
When we arrived in Jericho we bought fruit.

I must stay at the university for eight years.

I saw the dome of the rock.

These are correct responses in English. The prepositions “in, for, and of” must be inserted to form a relationship between the arriving and the place, which was arrived at, and the stay at the university and the time to be spent there; also between the rock and the dome which is built over it. With out these prepositions the above sentences will make no sense in English. But the literal translations of these sentences don’t need such prepositions because the relationship exists in Arabic without them as shown in flowchart (1).





Flowchart (1) Arabic preposition “**Fii**” comparison with English preposition “**In**”

The second example: Ala

The Arabic preposition “Ala’ is used as an equivalent instead of “on, over, above, at and onto”. According to Arab learners these prepositions in English language have the same equivalent and usage. They couldn’t

differentiate in the use of these prepositions, they only use “on”, as shown in the examples below.

I saw a football match on TV. (On)

The bird is flying on my head. (Above)

He jumped on the wall. (Over)

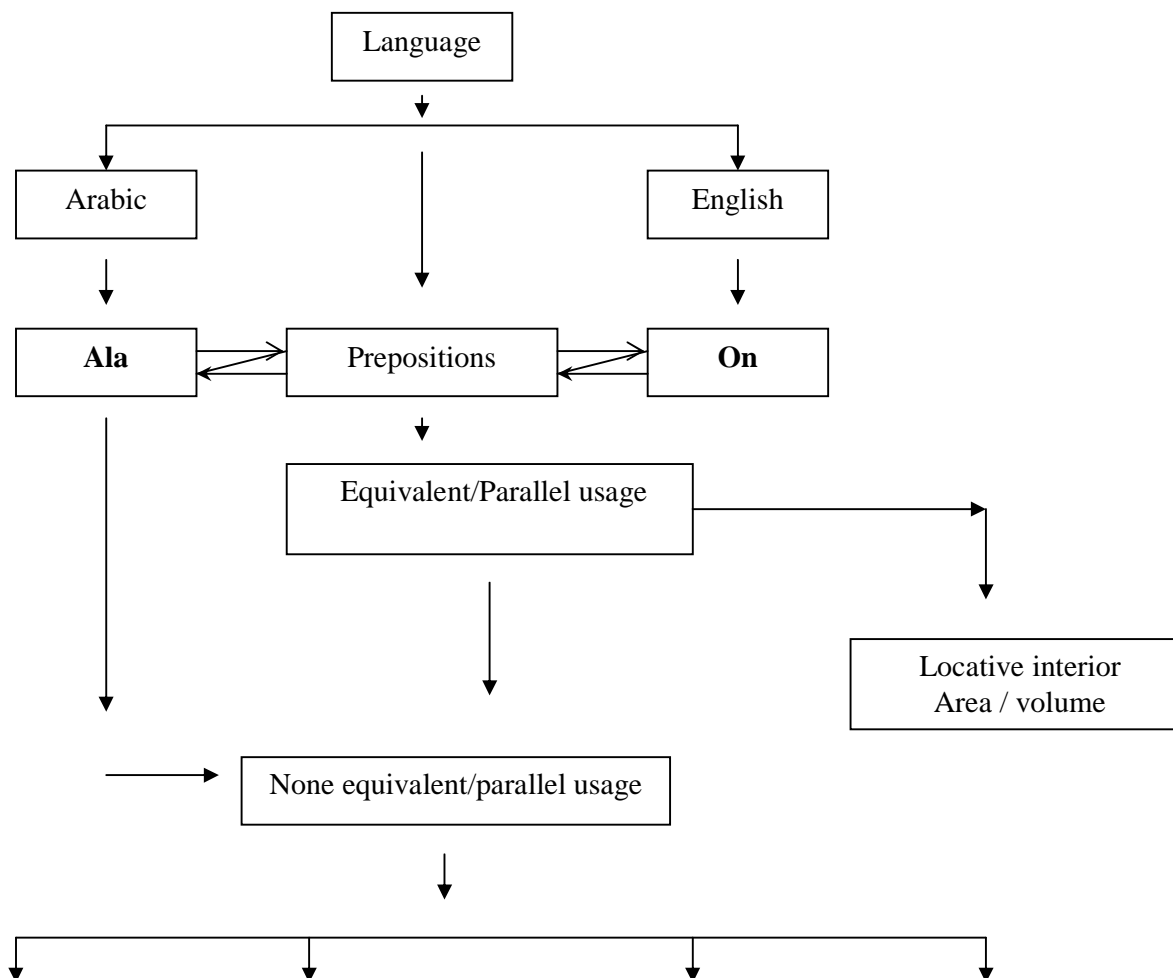
We sat on the table. (At)

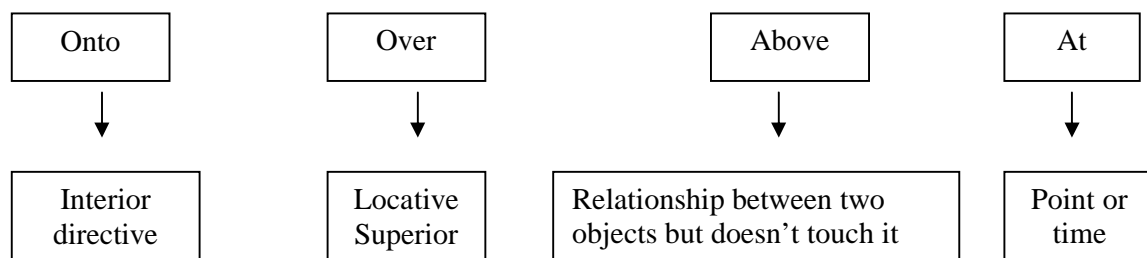
I will come on seven o'clock. (At)

The crab was washed up on the shore. (Onto)

As shown in the first sentence above, the first English preposition that is likely to be produced as the equivalent of the Arabic preposition “**ala**” is “**on**”. However, its incorrectly selected of “**over, above, at and onto**” in sentences 2,3,4,5 and 6.

The key to this problem is the fact Arab always resort to literal translation before they form English pattern. In the other words, they translate the English into Arabic and then the Arabic back in to English, word for word .so these mistakes due to the Arabic interference when they speak or translate into English once. Also the differences between English and Arabic patterns make it difficult to choose the correct preposition, as shown in flowchart (2).





Flowchart (2) Arabic prepositions “**Ala**” comparison with English Preposition “**on**”

Comparison of English and Arabic system:

In English there are three prepositions “on, in and at” that are used to indicate positioned point in time and one preposition “during” to indicate positioned period of time. In Arabic, however, “fii” is used to indicate the meaning and the uses of all the above English prepositions. Thus is equivalent to:

- 1- **On:** an equivalent of “**ala and fii**” in Arabic language. It indicates a positioned point in time and is used with phrases that refer to days and dates since these are perceived as a “surface” or “line”. For example:
 - 2- I arrived **on** time. (An exact point in time)
 - 3- I work **on** Sundays.
- 4- **In:** an equivalent of **fii** in Arabic language. It indicates a positioned point in time and is used with phrases that refer to parts of days (with the exception of “at night”, “at midday” ... etc.), month, years etc. as these are perceived as an “area”, e.g. in the morning”. It is also used to denote an unspecified point during a period of time e.g. “In the evening” = “during the evening”.
- 5- **At:** indicates a positioned point in time and is used with hours, as these are perceived as a “point” e.g. “At 3 o’clock”, also and exceptionally in “at night” as night is seemingly perceived as a point. Its an equivalent of **fii** in Arabic language.
- 6- **During:** an equivalent of **fii** in Arabic. It indicates the passage of a period of time
- 7- E.g. “during the journey”, as the time during which the journey took place is perceived as an imaginary line, similar to the journey’s route.

Arabic does not differentiate between all the above range of usages, because **fii** indicates both a point in time and a Period of time. Unlike **fii**, “**ila and min**”, which Indicate movement toward or away from a specific point in time, indicate the same Concepts as their English equivalents “to” and “from”. Toward or away from a Specific point in time, indicate the same concepts as their English equivalents “to” and “from”.

- 8- **For** indicates duration of time and is also used to express movement. It’s Arabic Equivalent is “**li**”, which has the same meaning and usage.
- 9- **Into** “to” indicates movement and “in” indicates no movement in English, with **fii** equivalent to both in Arabic.
- 10- 7. Unlike “**fii**”, “**ila**” indicates movement of an object towards a point. It therefore has both the meaning and the range of usage of its English equivalent “to”, for Example:

Bassam went **to** the seashore.

- 11- 8- like **fii**, “**min**” has several different English equivalents. It indicates separation from a Point, from an area or volume and also, from a line or surface. Thus it translates the English prepositions “from”, “away from”, “out of” and “off.”
9. **Ala** an English equivalent to **ala** is “on, over, above and onto”. “On” indicates locative

Surface, is usually used to express a relation ship between two thinks but can touch it.

Unlike on, “over” and” above” is used to express a relationship between two things but doesn’t touch it. Onto, “on”, indicates surface locative and “to”, indicates movement directive.

10. bi its also equivalent to Arabic” fii” and “in and at” in English.

11. Li this Arabic preposition is equivalent to the English prepositions “to and for”.

Methodology

The sample of this study, which consisted of twenty male students, were chosen randomly from the population of Arab students at UPM .the selected members of this sample were students doing their masters or PHD .in computer science, engineering and economic and management faculties. Arabic is the mother tongue for all of them while English language is used as a foreign language. A test was conducted to examine the students' abilities to distinguish between English and Arabic prepositions.

The test consisted of three questions.

Q.1. This question focused only on locational prepositions, in a multiple-choice format.

Q.2. This question focused only on directional prepositions, in a multiple-choice format.

Q.3. This question focused on both locational and directional prepositions and required the translation of short statements from Arabic into English.

Findings

The researcher reveals the three results as follows:

1-Three (3) Students passed the exam (20%), and the others twelve (12) students (80%) failed the exam.

2- Arab students may tend unconsciously to impose their patterns and structures on English particularly when they express themselves orally or in writing. What we are concerned here is the influence of Arabic prepositions on English, which make them commit these errors.

3-The major reasons for these mistakes are, problems relating to the dominance of mother tongue, imposing Arabic syntactic structure on English and imposing Arabic meaning usage on English.

In the light of the results of this study, it is noticed that these specific words in English language, which are called prepositions, cause difficulties for Arab students. The misunderstanding of some of these words used in the test caused Arab students to commit errors.

Arab learners are expected to find similar difficulties in the use of English prepositions because although Arabic and English prepositions have some characteristics in common, they differ in both number and usage. There are only six Arabic prepositions while in English there are more than thirty prepositions.

The main problem for Arab learners lies firstly in the fact that not every Arabic preposition has an exact equivalent in English and vice versa, secondly, not every English or Arabic preposition has a definite usage and meaning, indicating only time or space or following/ preceding a certain word. For example, the Arabic Preposition *fi* is used as (in, into, at, on, and inside etc.). This particular preposition has therefore great semantic power in both standard and colloquial language use; it is the filter through which all these English equivalents must pass. It is used to denote time and place and occurs with many different Arabic words in abstract and metaphorical usages. Therefore *fi* as well as other Arabic prepositions, interferes in the selection and usage of English ones.

Another problem in this area is caused by the English language, which in certain places allows a reasonable degree of freedom of choice with regard to certain prepositions and prepositional phrases. These choices sometimes, confuse the Arab learners to such an extent that he or she may choose the wrong item, which would, again, negatively influence the quality of the translation. These two main pitfalls in the prepositional from Arabic into English. The dominance of the mother tongue and the freedom of choice in English prepositions are discussed and illustrated below.

Regarding problems relating to the dominance of the mother tongue, many types of errors that students may commit in translating from their native language into the target one could be attributed to the dominance of their mother tongue, that is the traces by someone's native tongue upon the foreign language into which he or she is translating. Students tend unconsciously to impose their own patterns, semantic and syntactic or any other aspects of their language on the patterns and structures of the target language. The extent and the influence of these traces vary in their number according to the degree of closeness between the two languages and cultures

involved in the process of translation as well as the degree of the learner proficiency and command of both the source and target languages.

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