

The Misuse of English Prepositions of Time and Place by EFL Learners in Algeria: the Case of MA Students at Abd El Hamid University of Mostaganem



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Summary:

The paper at hand aims to pinpoint the types of errors that advanced Algerian EFL learners, viz master students of English at the University of Mostaganem, commit while using English prepositions of time and place. Furthermore, this paper attempts to identify the causes of such errors. To this effect, a grammaticality judgement test was administered to 80 master students from the Department of English at the University of Mostaganem. The grammaticality judgment test includes three types of ungrammaticality, viz misuse of prepositions, addition of prepositions and omission of prepositions. Error analysis was adopted to analyze the data set. The findings of this study demonstrate that the errors that advanced Algerian EFL learners make fall into three categories, namely substitution, addition and omission. As to the triggers of such errors, they comprise negative transfer and overgeneralization of the target language's rules of time and place prepositions. Nevertheless, negative transfer appears to generate a larger number of errors.

Keywords: Prepositions of time and place; error analysis; master students of English; causes of preposition errors; negative transfer.

1. INTRODUCTION

Acquiring a foreign language is not an evident task and task is rendered even more complex because of the existence of certain aspects of the foreign language which require special techniques and intensive drills in order to be mastered. According to Abushihab, El Omari and Tobat,

(2011) Such aspects comprehend tenses, articles, active/ passive voice, but chiefly prepositions. Prepositions of English; for instance, are source of difficulty to EFL learners in general and to Algerian EFL learners in particular (Hamdallah & Tusheyeh, 1993).

A preposition is defined as a part of speech, a word, that serves to relate a given word to other words within a sentence (Tilak, 1985). It, as put by Hudson (1988, p. 23) "... doesn't merely happen to occur between these two nouns: it is the essential "glue" that allows the second to stick to the first". Furthermore, a preposition could be a linking particle that is used for grammatical requirements, merely to make the sentence grammatically correct as is the case with 'of' in the sentence 'The title of the book is long'. It can also function as a content word which contributes to the meaning of the sentence and whose absence would render the sentence semantically incomplete as is 'in' in the sentence 'There are flowers in the garden'.

Prepositions may express different sorts of relations. Such variation occasioned the classification of prepositions into a number of categories. Indeed, some prepositions, labelled place prepositions, denote spatial relations or else the position of an object or an individual in relation to other objects or individuals. Such class of prepositions comprises such prepositions as in, on, at, to, into, across, between, above, under, below, over and so on (Hewings, 1999). Another set of prepositions, coined time prepositions, is used in correlation with time expressions. This set of prepositions comprehends the prepositions in, on, at, during, for among other prepositions. Other classes of prepositions exist such as instrumentality/ agency prepositions in "I write with a pen", "He was killed by the butler", manner as in "I learnt the poem by heart", cause as in "He died of Cholera" (Tilak, 1985, p.92). Furthermore, some prepositions may pertain to more than one class at the same time as is the case with on, in, at, by. Indeed, in, on, at may be both time and place prepositions and are as well used in correlation with verbs or adjectives as in insist on, interested in and look at. 'By' could express agency, manner and cause (Tilak, 1985, p.92).

Certain pairs of prepositions are a source of confusion since both prepositions tend to denote the same relation, but only one is appropriate in a given context. Instances of such case include 'between' and 'among'. 'Between' relates two elements as in "the Property was divided between the two brothers". 'Among' relates more than two elements as in "the money was distributed among the students" (Tilak, 1985, p.92). 'With' and 'to' constitute another confusing pair. 'To' is used in combination with 'compare' when two items pertaining to different categories are compared as in "a beautiful face is always compared to the moon". 'With' serves to compare items of the same category as in 'we compare a great dramatist with Shakespeare". (Tilak, 1985, p.95).

2. Review of Related Literature

Enter A considerable number of studies have been conducted in attempt to investigate the errors and difficulties that EFL learners commit and encounter while using English prepositions. Such studies targeted subjects of diverse levels of proficiency, ranging from primary school students to undergraduate university students passing by middle and secondary school students. Some of such studies did not scrutinize errors' commission in the use of English prepositions per se, but focused on different sorts of errors committed by EFL learners in their written compositions and identified errors in prepositions as being among the most frequent errors in such compositions. Abisamra (2003) for instance, indicated in her investigation of the written compositions of Lebanese primary school ninth graders that prepositions together with other aspects of the English language were highly ranked in the hierarchy of grammatical errors together with articles and reported speech among other errors. Similarly, Abdul-Fattah and El Hassan's (1994) study, which examined the syntactic errors that 15-year-old Jordanian school students commit in English, classified errors in prepositions' use at the top of syntactic errors hierarchy after comparative adjectives, word order and coordinations. Furthermore, in their analysis of errors observed in the English essay writings of secondary school Malaysian students, Darus and Subramanian (2009) identified errors in prepositions' usage as being amongst the most common errors that were detected in such essay writings together with plural forms, verb tenses, word choice, and so forth. Analogously, in their attempt to identify the errors that second -year BA students at Al-Zaytoonah University made in their written works, Abushiahab, El Omari and Tobat (2011) discovered that errors in prepositions' use constituted the dominant number of overall set of errors identified within the study.

Studies that targeted errors committed by Algerian EFL learners while using English prepositions as such without other aspects of the English language included Habash (1982), who after examining the errors that third grade pre-school students in UNRWA schools in the Jerusalem Area committed in their written compositions and a multiple choice test, discovered three types of errors relating to English prepositions, namely omission when a preposition is deleted in positions where it should appear, addition when a preposition is added in positions where it is not required and substitution or misuse when a preposition is erroneously posited instead of another which is more appropriate in the targeted position. Correspondingly, Hamdallah & Tusheyeh (1993) indicated that the errors that Algerian EFL learners make in their use of prepositions include substitution, redundancy and omission errors. In his study of the difficulties that Algerian third year university students of English encounter while employing such prepositions as at, in, on, between and among, Boukhalifa (2010) also categorized the errors committed by the participants in his study while using the aforementioned

prepositions into redundancy (addition), omission and substitution (misuse) errors. By way of analogy, Tahaimh (2010) did as well organize the errors that BA students of English at the university of Jordan made in English prepositions into omission, substitution and addition errors.

In order to establish the reasons behind the commission of the previously alluded to sorts of errors that relate to the use of English prepositions by Algerian EFL learners, studies relied on one of two sorts of analysis, namely Contrastive Analysis or Error Analysis. The contrastive Analysis Hypothesis attributes the errors committed in a foreign language to negative transfer of the native language (Towell & Mawkins, 1994). The key reason behind the difficulties and errors encountered in a foreign language in that hypothesis is, as claimed by Khoury (1988), the negative transfer of "the mother tongue system" (p. 2) to acquire the foreign language's system.

Error analysis; on the other hand, attributes the errors committed while learning a foreign language to both interlingual or negative L1 interference and intralingual interference which results from the overgeneralization of rules of the foreign language to forms that are not subject to such rules, as indicated by Da'oud (1984, p.11) "many errors come from the strategies used by learners and from intralingual interference or interference of items within the target language".

On the basis of the former hypotheses, that is Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis, studies focusing on Algerian EFL learners' errors in the use of English prepositions identified two triggers of such errors, namely L1 interference and intralingual interference or the overgeneralization of rules in the target language. However, the majority of such studies considered L1 interference as triggering a larger set of errors than interference of the target language. Indeed, Habash (1982) discovered, as the outcome of her study of pre-school students in Jerusalem, that a larger number of errors were triggered by negative L1 transfer or the use of the English equivalent of an Arabic preposition in positions where an English preposition other than the equivalent of Arabic preposition is expected to appear. In both Da'oud (1984) and Bdour (1989), the errors that secondary Jordanian school students committed were caused both by interference from Arabic and overgeneralization of rules applying to a given set of English prepositions. However, the errors that were triggered by L1 transfer proved to be larger in number. Analogously, Fareh and Saeed (2009) identified interference of Arabic as being among the key triggers of the difficulties that Jordanian University undergraduate students encountered in their use of English prepositions. Similarly, Temime (2010) and Boukhalfa (2010) considered Arabic transfer as the key reason behind the errors that undergraduate Algerian students of English at university level commit with respect to English prepositions. Furthermore, Tahaineh's study (2010) of the errors that undergraduate Jordanian University students of English made with prepositions demonstrated that both intralingual interference from the

target language which is English and interlingual interference from Arabic are potential causes of the errors that Jordanian undergraduate university students of English made in their use of English prepositions. However, as indicated by the findings of this study, the errors that resulted from Arabic interference outnumbered those that were occasioned by intralingual interference from English.

3. Rationale

As it appears from the previous review of related literature, the errors that advanced Algerian EFL learners commit while using English prepositions has been discarded since most of the previous studies that were conducted on Algerian EFL learners and English prepositions targeted less advanced Algerian EFL learners as undergraduate university students, high school students, and primary and middle school students, but quite rare, if non-existent studies were conducted on advanced EFL students such as Algerian EFL students in master level. The present study endeavors to identify the sorts of errors that are committed by advanced Algerian EFL learners, namely first and second year master students of linguistics and those of didactics at the department of English at University of Mostaganem, when they use English prepositions of time and place. The paper also establishes the factors that lead to error commission in the use of English prepositions by advanced Algerian EFL learners.

The following set of research questions may be raised to treat the rationale of this paper:

1. What types of Errors do advanced Algerian EFL learners, viz master students at the department of English of the University of Mostaganem, commit while using English prepositions of time and place?
2. What are the factors that lead to such errors?

Accordingly, the following set of hypotheses are developed from the aforementioned research questions:

1. The types of errors that advanced Algerian EFL learners may commit when using time and place prepositions are replacing one preposition by another, using the wrong preposition and deleting a preposition.
2. The factors that may lead to errors in the use of time and place prepositions include the influence of the mother tongue and overgeneralization of the preposition rules in the target language.

4. Methodology

The sample of the study encompasses 80 master students of English at the University of Mostaganem. 40 students are first year and second year master students of linguistics at the department of English and the remaining 40 are first year and second year master students of didactics at the department of English. The participants are native speakers of Arabic who have learnt English as a foreign

language starting from their first year of middle school then specialized in the language, after obtention of their High School Diploma (Baccalaureate), as part of their licence formation. Then, they carried on specializing in the language through master studies. These participants then are assumed to be advanced EFL learners since they have been studying the English language for a period that ranges from 11 to 12 years, including from 4 to 5 years of specialization in the language.

The research tool consists of a grammaticality judgment test that includes 16 sentences. This type of test was favoured upon a completion test since it was assumed by the researcher that a grammaticality judgment test would provide no hint to the participants, as to the focus of the test, and thus, the participants would not be informed that the ungrammaticality relates to the usage of prepositions. This would ensure the spontaneity of the answers.

The sentences included within the test pertain to one of three categories on the basis of the sort of ungrammaticality they contain. Hence, in some of these sentences, prepositions of either time or place are misused, in some others prepositions of both place and time are added and in others prepositions of time are omitted. Furthermore, correct instances of each category are included within the test. Each sentence is followed by the options correct and incorrect and a space for providing the correct alternative if the sentence is judged incorrect. Two instances of each category are included within the test together with two correct counterparts in each category so that the total number of incorrect sentences in the three categories was 8 sentences (two sentences for substitution of time prepositions, two for substitution of place prepositions, two sentences for the addition of place and time prepositions and two sentences for the omission of time prepositions) in addition to 8 sentences containing the correct counterpart of each incorrect sentence. Instances of prepositions' omission included time prepositions but not place prepositions as the researcher assumed that the participants would easily detect that a preposition is needed if that preposition is a place preposition as its omission would make the sentence incomplete as in 'There are some beautiful trees... the park' (in). Such omission would not be as subtle as that of a time preposition as in 'I was asleep... half an hour' (for).

The prepositions that were included within the test were prepositions of time, viz in, on, at, for, and those of place, namely in, on, at, to. Such prepositions were selected since they are the most commonly used in both speech and writing and tend to be a center of confusion in certain cases. The preposition 'on' is chiefly used with dates and days as in 'on September 18th, 2011' or 'on Friday'. 'At' is found "with time of the day" (Murphy, 1989, p.2) as in 'I wake up at seven O'clock every day'. 'At' is also used with such expressions as at night, at Christmas (Murphy Ibid). 'In' is used with longer periods of time as months, seasons 'in May' 'in spring' and generally with all time expressions with which 'on'; and 'at' do not combine. 'For' refers to the duration or the period of time something lasts for as

in 'I stayed home for three days'. 'On' could also function as a preposition of place when it indicates that some element is situated on the surface of another element as in "there is a label on the bottle" (Murphy 2004, p. 246). 'In' is also a place preposition that indicates that something is located inside another (Swick 2010, p. 100) as in 'there is water in the bottle' (Murphy, 2004, p. 246). 'At' indicates that an element is next to or by another element or location as in 'do you know the man standing at the door?'. 'To' refers to direction as in 'they are going to France'. (Murphy, 2004, p. 246).

The sentences of the test were collected from (Murphy, 2004). Some of these sentences are part of completion exercises in which the appropriate preposition has to be filled in the gap while some other sentences were taken from the explanation part of the book. Prepositions were misused, deleted or added in some of these sentences, while they were kept in their correct usage in some others to ensure the correct-incorrect alternation. In order to know the correct prepositions, the keys to the exercises included within the book were consulted. Moreover, the test was administered to five native speakers of English, more precisely Americans online via social networks, namely Facebook and. The answers of these native speakers were compatible with the keys of the exercises in the book (Murphy, 2004).

Participants had to determine whether the sentences are correct or incorrect. If the sentence was judged as being incorrect, the participants had to provide the correct alternative. The responses of the participants are analyzed and classified into types. In order to identify the types, Error Analysis is used. Furthermore, such an analysis is also used to determine whether the reason for such errors is Arabic interference or the overgeneralization of rules learned in the target language which is English. Arabic equivalents of the participant's responses were provided. Such equivalents were validated by five native speakers of Arabic whose major is Arabic literature: all five are third year licence university students. The Arabic equivalents are compared to the participant's responses in the test. The variety of Arabic that is used in the analysis is Standard Arabic and no consideration of any colloquial variety of Arabic was made. If the preposition used in the participant's responses is similar to the Arabic preposition and the responses are erroneous, Arabic interference is identified as the cause of the error. However, if no similarity appears to exist between the Arabic equivalent preposition and the preposition used in the responses, consideration of other causes, such as overgeneralization of rules of English with respect to the use of English prepositions of time and place, are assumed to be the triggers of such errors.

5. Results and Discussion

The test revealed errors of various types with respect to the usage of English prepositions of time and place. Such types of errors are exposed in the present section and the factors that might have triggered such errors are highlighted.

5.1 Types of Errors regarding English prepositions

Table 1. Number and Percentage of the Types of Errors Committed with Prepositions

	Substitution (N=40)	Addition (N=40)	Omission (N=40)	Total Number
Number	11	7	9	27
Mean score	27.5%	17.5%	22.5%	67.5%

Table 1 demonstrates that 27 (67.5%) of the overall responses are erroneous. Such errors appear to fall into three major categories, namely substitution, addition and omission. Substitution errors are further subdivided to two subcategories, viz substitution of time prepositions and substitution of place prepositions. 11 (27.5%) constitute errors of substitution. Substitution of time prepositions' errors involved the use of one-time preposition in positions where another time preposition was expected to appear. Substitution of time prepositions in the test included the use of 'in' instead of 'on' and that of 'on' instead of 'in' in the sentences 'The course begins in (rather than on) 7 January' and 'The course ends sometimes on (rather than in) April'. One subject substituted 'at' for 'on' in the sentence 'The course begins at (rather than on) 7 January'. Interesting enough is the fact that in the sentence 'The course ends sometimes on April' which was given in its correct form in the test and included the preposition 'in' was judged incorrect by two subjects (20%) and corrected through the substitution of 'on' for 'in'. Substitution of place prepositions involved the use of 'in' instead of 'at' in the sentence 'There was a long queue of people in (rather than at) the bus stop'.

7 (17.5%) responses constitute addition errors which involved the use of the place preposition 'to' and the time preposition 'on' in positions where no preposition is needed. Addition errors were manifested in the sentences 'I met Linda on my way to home', 'I will see you on next Friday'.

9 (22.5%) answers correspond to errors of prepositions' omission. Such type of errors comprised the deletion of time prepositions as 'for' and 'at' in the sentences 'I was asleep... half an hour' ('for' is deleted) and 'I am going ... the end of January' ('at' is omitted). Furthermore, the place preposition 'at' was deleted by some subjects in the sentence 'I left it... home' which was exposed in its correct

form_ that is including the preposition 'at'.

It appears that substitution of time and place prepositions is the type of errors that constitutes the highest percentage of errors if compared to the remaining types of errors. Hence, one may assume that advanced Algerian EFL learners, as the subjects of the present study, tend to confuse between prepositions more than they tend to add and delete prepositions.

If one compares between the number and types of errors that the students who did the test in real time (N=6) committed with the number and types of errors that the subjects who did the test via the e-mail (N=4) committed, one does not discover a significant difference. Indeed, five errors were committed by the six subjects that constituted the group that answered in real time either substituted 'in' or 'at' for 'on' in the sentence 'The course begins in/at (rather than on) 7 January', 'on' for 'in' in the sentence 'The course ends sometimes on (rather than in) April' and 'in' for 'at' in the sentence 'There was a long queue of people in (rather than at) the bus stop', while six errors were committed by the four subjects who answered through the e-mail in each of the sentences 'The course begins in 7 January', 'The course ends sometimes on April' 'There was a long queue of people in the bus stop' in which respectively 'in' was substituted for 'on', 'on' for 'in' and 'in' for 'at'.

Four errors of preposition addition were committed by the subjects who answered in real time as they added 'at' and 'on' in the sentences 'I met Linda on my way to home' and 'I will see you on next Friday'. Whereas, three errors of preposition addition were committed by the subjects who answered through email as they similarly added 'to' and 'on' in the same sentences mentioned formerly.

Omission errors displayed an identical number of errors in the two pseudo-groups. Two omission errors were committed by the subjects who took the test in real time as they omitted the prepositions 'for' and 'at' in the sentences 'I was asleep... half an hour', 'I waited for you... half an hour', 'I am going away... the end of January'. Similarly, two omission errors were committed by the subjects who responded via the e-mail. These subjects deleted the prepositions 'for', and 'at' in the same three sentences mentioned above_ that is, 'I was asleep... half an hour', 'I waited for you... half an hour' and 'I am going away... the end of January'.

5.2. Causes of Errors in Time and Place Prepositions

The formerly alluded to types of errors that the subjects of the present study committed may be attributed to two major triggers, namely first language interference and the overgeneralization of English rules relating to English prepositions. Indeed, subjects were either negatively influenced by their mother tongue, which is Arabic, and might have automatically translated the sentences exposed in English to Arabic to judge their grammaticality. Such translation yielded

a non-matching Arabic equivalent of the English preposition and; thus, resulted in error commission. In some other cases, subjects also appeared to have overgeneralized the rules relating to English prepositions to cases that the rules did not apply as such cases either did not fall within the scope of the application of such rules or represented exceptions to such rules. Table 2. below demonstrates the number and percentage of errors that were triggered by Arabic transfer as well as the number and percentage of errors that were caused by overgeneralization of rules relating to English prepositions of time and place.

Table 2. Number and Percentage of the Errors Caused by Arabic Transfer and Those Caused by Overgeneralization

	Errors caused by Arabic transfer	Errors caused by overgeneralization	Total (N=120)
Number	19	8	27
Mean score	15.83	7.5	23.33

Substitution errors relating to English prepositions of time seem to have been generated by both Arabic transfer as well as overgeneralization of rules concerning English prepositions of time. The substitution of 'in' for 'on' in the sentence 'The course begins in 7 January' which was committed by three (30%) subjects may be attributed to negative transfer from Arabic since the preposition that is used in the Arabic parallel of this sentence /tabda?u addira:satu fi: sab?a kanu:n al awal / is /fi:/ (please consult appendix 2 for the chart of Standard Arabic sounds in IPA symbols) which is the equivalent of 'in' in English. The Arabic equivalent of 'on' which is the preposition /?ala/ is inappropriate in Arabic in such case which explains why the formerly mentioned English sentence containing 'in' was judged grammatical by three subjects. Indeed, one would never say in Arabic /tabda?u addira:satu ?ala sab?a kanu:n al awal/. The substitution of 'at' for 'on' in this sentence by one subject may neither be attributed to Arabic transfer nor to the overgeneralization of the rule relating to the use of 'at' since as demonstrated above the Arabic equivalent does not involve the use of /?inda/ which is the parallel of 'at'. Furthermore, there tends to be no similarity between the cases in which at is used_ chiefly with time of the day as 'at 10:30' and the case in which it was used by the subject who committed the substitution error (ie. 'at 7 January'). Indeed, '7 January' indicates a date and 'at' is not used with dates, but rather with time of the day. The reason for such error does not seem to be clear, but one may assume that it is the outcome of unawareness relating to the difference that exists in the contexts that at and on are used in.

The use of 'on' instead of 'in' in the sentence 'The course sometimes ends on April' by two subjects (20%) cannot have been caused by interference from Arabic since Arabic would have provided the correct response if it had interfered. Indeed, the Arabic parallel of this sentence is / tantahi addira:satu fi: ni:sa:n / which includes the preposition /fi:/ which is the equivalent of the English preposition 'in' which is the appropriate preposition in this case. Such error may be the outcome of the overgeneralization of the rule relating to the use of the preposition 'on'. The subjects who committed this error may have applied the rule which requires the use of 'on' with dates as in 'on 7 January' to months as 'on April'. The reason for such overgeneralization may be the fact that the element that succeeds to the prepositions in the sentences 'The course begins on 7 January' and 'The course sometimes ends in April' is a month and the subjects might have disregarded the existence of '7' which makes the preposition to be inserted in each sentence different.

Substitution errors of place prepositions appear to have been caused by Arabic interference. The substitution of 'in' for 'at' in the sentence 'there was a long queue of people in the bus stop' by five (50%) may have been generated by the transfer of the Arabic /fi:/ in the Arabic parallel which is / ka:n huna:ka al kaθi:ru mina al aʃxa:s fi: mawqifi al hafila:t / to the English sentence. In other terms, 'at' was judged ungrammatical by such subjects since its Arabic equivalent / ʕinda/ would be inadequate in the Arabic parallel of this sentence.

Errors of prepositions' addition also seemed to have been caused by both Arabic transfer and the overgeneralization of rules applying to prepositions of time or those of place. The addition of the place preposition 'to' in the sentence 'I met Linda on my way to home' by five (50%) subjects seems to be the negative outcome of the Arabic parallel sentence which is /iltaqajtu bi linda fi: tʕari:qi: ila al manzil/. In fact, in the Arabic counterpart sentence, the preposition /ila/ (to) is required between the words 'way' and 'home'. Hence, the subjects might have automatically inserted the preposition 'to' being influenced by the Arabic parallel sentence. The subjects might have automatically translated the English sentence to Arabic in order to judge its grammaticality, such translation revealed that a preposition was missing and resulted in the addition of 'to'.

The addition of the time preposition 'on' in the sentence 'I will see you on next Friday' by two (20%) subjects cannot be the effect of Arabic interference since the Arabic parallel of this sentence / saara:ka al dʒumuʕa al muqbila/ does not contain a preposition. The reason for such addition error may be the overgeneralization of the rule that requires the use of 'on' before days' expression such as Friday or Monday. Indeed, the subjects who committed the addition error do not seem to know the exception to the use of 'on' which should not appear before words as next, last, this and every when added to day expressions as Friday

so that it is possible to say 'on Friday' but not on next Friday' (Murphy, 2004, p. 242).

Omission of time prepositions does also seem to have been engendered by both negative Arabic transfer as well as the overgeneralization of certain rules that require the deletion of a given preposition in certain cases. The omission of the preposition 'for' in the sentence 'I was asleep...half an hour' by three subjects (30%) may be attributed to Arabic interference. Indeed, the Arabic counterpart of the present sentence which is /nimtu mudata nisfi saʕa/ does not require the insertion of a preposition between 'asleep' and 'half an hour'. Thus, the subjects who committed such error might have been influenced by the Arabic equivalent in judging whether the same English sentence that does not contain the preposition 'for' is grammatical. The same applies to the omission of 'for' in the sentence 'I waited for you... half an hour' by two (20%). These subjects were influenced by the Arabic equivalent which is /intadʕartuka mudata nisfi saʕa/ which includes no preposition. It is; nevertheless, important to note that this sentence was exposed in its correct form in the test and those subjects considered it incorrect because it included the preposition 'for' which did not correspond to the Arabic parallel they have in their mind.

The omission of the preposition 'at' in the sentence 'I am going away ...the end of January' by one subject (10%) appears to have been the outcome of the overgeneralization of the rule that requires the omission of a preposition before words as last, next, this, every to the case of 'the end' in the present sentence. Indeed, the subject might have been influenced by the sentence that followed this sentence in the test which is 'He left school last June' which includes no preposition and is grammatical. In other terms, students considered that the rule that requires time expressions used with the words last, next, this, every note to be preceded by a preposition also applies to time expressions used with the phrase 'the end'.

The very same sentence_ that is, 'I am going away...the end of January' was judged ungrammatical by three subjects (30%) who inserted a preposition before the time expression 'the end of January'. However, the preposition they inserted was 'in' rather than 'at'. Such error may be another case of substitution which is motivated by Arabic transfer. Indeed, the Arabic parallel of such sentence which is /sawfa aḏhabu fi: nihajati janajir/ contains the preposition /fi:/ which is the Arabic equivalent of 'in' as it would be inadequate to use the equivalent of 'at' which is /ʕinda/ in Arabic.

Interestingly, the deletion of 'at' in the sentence 'I left it... home' by two (20%) subjects may be the result of the overgeneralization of the rule which requires the deletion of 'to' before the word 'home' as in 'I went home'. Yet, one of the subjects who deleted 'at' did not delete 'to' in the sentence 'I met Linda on my way to home' in which no preposition is needed. In such case it is doubtful

whether the reason behind the omission of 'at' by this subject is the outcome of overgeneralization. Arabic transfer cannot be a reason in this case since the Arabic equivalent / taraktuhu fi: al manzil/ of this sentence requires the presence of a preposition, namely /fi:/ (in).

One may assume that the correct responses relating to some sentences may have resulted from positive transfer of Arabic. Indeed, in most sentences in which the appropriate preposition is the same in both English and Arabic, the subjects seemed to respond correctly. The sentences 'There are some beautiful trees in the park', 'They got married last March', 'He left school last June' were unanimously judged correct by all subjects as the Arabic equivalent of such sentences include the parallel of the prepositions used in English and which are /fi:/ (in) or the absence of prepositions in the last two sentences.

As indicated in table 2, the errors that were engendered by the interference of Arabic (N=19) outnumber the errors that resulted from the overgeneralization of rules relating to the usage of English prepositions of time and place (N=8). Hence, one may imply that the bulk of the errors that the subjects of the present study, who are a representative sample of advanced Algerian EFL learners, committed were the fruit of the influence of the Arabic equivalent in the judgment and selection of the appropriate English preposition.

6. Conclusion

As far as one is concerned, one may conclude that the triggers of errors in the use of preposition by advanced Algerian EFL learners encompass negative transfer and the overgeneralization of the target language's preposition rules. Thus, measures need to be taken in order to remedy for the formerly mentioned types of errors relating to English prepositions of time and place. Indeed, prepositions may render the speech or writing of advanced Algerian EFL learners ambiguous and vague if not used properly. Further research may elaborate on the findings of the present study. Further research may target a larger sample of advanced Algerian EFL learners and establish if there is a difference in the type of errors as well as the reasons behind such errors and those introduced by the present study. Other studies on the same topic may target Algerian students English from other master programs such as literature or civilization, or even more advanced Algerian EFL learners as PhD students majoring in English and may compare between the errors that these students commit and those that were identified by the present study in terms of types and causes.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Copy of the test

Are the following sentences grammatically correct? Provide a correction if necessary.

1. The course begins in 7 January.
 - o Correct
 - o Incorrect
2. The course ends sometimes in April.
 - o Correct
 - o Incorrect
3. There was a long queue of people in the bus stop.
 - o Correct
 - o Incorrect

4. There are some beautiful trees in the park.

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

5. I don't like going out in night.

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

6. I will see you in the morning.

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

7. There is a label in the bottle.

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

8. There is water in the bottle

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

9. I met Linda on my way to home

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

10. I left it at home.

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

11. I was asleep half an hour.

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

12. I waited for you for half an hour.

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

13. I will see you on next Friday.

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

14. They got married last March.

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

15. I am going the end of January.

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

16. He left school last June.

☐ Correct

☐ Incorrect

Appendix 2. Sounds Chart of Modern Standard Arabic

Consonants

b	Voiced bilabial stop	ð	Voiced dental fricative
t	Voiceless alveolar stop	x	Voiceless velar fricative
tˤ	Emphatic voiceless alveo-dental stop	ɣ	Voiced velar fricative
dˤ	Emphatic voiced alveo-dental stop	ʃ	Voiceless palatal fricative
d	Voiced alveolar stop	ʒ	Voiced palatal fricative
k	Voiceless velar stop	ħ	Voiceless pharyngeal fricative
q	Voiceless uvular stop	ʕ	Voiced pharyngeal fricative
ʔ	Voiceless glottal stop	h	Voiceless glottal fricative
f	Voiceless labial fricative	m	Voiced labial nasal
sˤ	Emphatic voiceless alveolar fricative	n	Voiced alveolar nasal
s	Voiceless alveolar fricative	l	Voiced alveolar lateral
z	Voiced alveolar fricative	r	Voiced alveolar trill
ʕ	Voiced dental fricative	w	Voiced labial approximant (glide)
		j	Voiced palatal approximant (glide)

Vowels

a: short low front unrounded vowel

u: short high back rounded vowel

i: short high front unrounded vowel

aa: long counterpart of /a/

uu: long counterpart of /u/

ii: : long counterpart of /i/