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Cross-linguistic Influence in Learning L2 Preposition by Paramedical

Students by Akbar Solati

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Author's Profile

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Abstract

As language is the only means of international communication, everybody should learn one or more languages. Because of the importance of learning English as a foreign language in Iran, it is the focus of attentions. English language plays an essential role as an international language of commerce, industry, politics and education in the academic world of today (Solati, 2008). Thus, every attempt should be made to facilitate communication among language learners. Here, the prepositions are no exception. If interference errors, on the part of learners, related to prepositions impede communication, they should be eradicated. This study attempts to investigate the existence and intensity of L1 interference in learning English prepositions by paramedical students. The subjects participating in this study were 40 undergraduate paramedical students whose fields of study were Nursing, Anesthesia technology, Midwifery, Medical laboratory sciences, and Radiology technology. They were required to answer a 40-items test on preposition. After analysis of the data, the study revealed that many of the errors are attributed to the L1 preposition interference with L2 preposition. In other words, prepositions have interference effects from L1 to L2 or vice versa.

Key Words: Cross-linguistic Influence, Paramedical Students, English Preposition, Persian Learners

**Cross-linguistic Influence in Learning L2 Preposition by Paramedical****Students by Akbar Solati****Menu**IntroductionLiterature ReviewLimitations of the studySubjectsInstrumentationResults and discussionImplicationsReferences**Introduction**

The concept of transfer is based on the idea that items and rules in the learner's interlanguage are directly traceable to the native language. So, the observation that prior learning affects subsequent learning leads to the hypothesis of transfer. In language, this means that the forms and patterns of the native language are imposed on the second language (Gass, 1979). Language transfer has been an important topic in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and language teaching for at least a century. Odlin in Doughty and Long (2003) states that "there is little question that learner often do not become proficient in target language and that several factors contribute to learner difficulties, one of them being transfer" (p. 457). As stated by Ziahosseiny (1999), transfer is impossible to ignore mainly because it represents one of the effects of prior learning that the second language learner brings to the task of the learning the new language. According to Ellis (1994), the study of transfer involves the study of errors (negative transfer), facilitation (positive transfer), avoidance of the target forms, and over-use.

Transfer, as defined by Richards et al. (1992), "involves the carrying over of learned behavior from one situation to another" (p. 386). In other words, transfer involves two successive learning, and it causes the first learning in such a case to affect the second. This effect could be of two basic types: positive or negative. According to Johnson, K and Johnson, H (1999), positive



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transfer occurs when a native form is used in the production of an L2 utterance, and it is also a part of the L2 norm. Here the role of transfer is facilitative. In other words, when an old habit facilitates the formation of new habit “positive transfer” is said to take place. Two studies of relative clauses by Gass (1979) and Hyltenstam (1984) illustrate how transfer can have a facilitative effect. They also mention that negative transfer occurs when the L1 form used in L2 production is not a part of the L2 norm, and the resultant utterance is erroneous. As Corder (1971) points out, “one explanation of L2 errors is that the learner is carrying over the habits of his mother tongue into the second language” (p. 169).

The notion of transfer is still very controversial, having different meaning to different people. Lado (1957) and Fries (1945) look at transfer as the imposition of L1 information on an L2 utterance, but for Kellerman and Smith (1986) and Odlin (1989) it refers to cross-linguistic influence “the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired” (Odlin, 1989, p.27).

It is essential to state that in the 1950 and 1960 language transfer was viewed as the sole factor that affects the learner’s language. However, language transfer is now viewed differently; it is seen as a factor among others that may cause the learner’s errors (Torres, 1999). Transfer processes have been documented to occur at all the levels of linguistic analysis: Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Lexis, and semantics (Johnson, K & Johnson, H, 1999). In this study, the term cross-linguistic influence is used since it is a theory-neutral term that is appropriate for referring to the full range of ways in which a person’s knowledge of one language can affect that person’s knowledge and use of another language (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008, p. 3).

This study aims to investigate the prepositional errors made due to the cross-linguistic influence between Persian and English. To do so, an error analysis has been conducted to study prepositional errors made by Persian learner of English. Since a few studies have endeavored to investigate the cross-linguistic influence of English and Persian prepositions; this study might



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help to enhance the cross-linguistic knowledge of English versus Persian prepositions. Furthermore, the significance of the study is to help teachers to change the direction of their classroom exercises towards these findings and assist syllabus designers to decide better on what items to include in the syllabus materials and material developers in selecting and grading of ELT materials.

Literature Review

Ironical as it is, the majority of students in Iran are found to have inadequate competence in English preposition not only in high school but also at university levels (YarMohammadi, 2005 & Miremadi, 1990). The low proficiency level of the products of Persian speaking learners of English has been highlighted by several researchers. Some of them will be presented as follows:

Jafarpur (1973) analyzed compositions written by Shiraz university entering fresh men and says that one can detect all kinds of grammatical, lexical, and orthographic errors. The point is that one can easily see the footprints of the Persian structure in a great number of errors. YarMohammadi (2005, P, 13) points out that students enter the university with six years of secondary English studies behind them, yet many of them have difficulty in constructing English sentences. They come to the university with errors in many areas of grammar such as gerunds, infinitives, prepositions and affixes. YarMohammadi (2002) contends that the data collected from our students reveal numerous "systematic" errors of various kinds. By systematic we mean "predictable" i.e., errors which reasons can be provided for their occurrences. If errors are predictable, then specific causes can be discovered and formulated. Sadeghi (2005) also says that most of the students who come to university carry with them the problems they had when they were at high school. They are basically poor at almost all aspects of language, especially at grammar and speaking. Solati (2016) examined Persian nursery students' strategies in using English present simple tense and states that nursery students facing a real problem, when writing English tenses. Solati (2013) identified Persian learners' linguistic deficits in learning EFL through spelling error analysis, and says that "some specific differences between the sound



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systems of English and Persian have affected the spelling ability of Persian learners of English. So, Persian learners of English tend to transfer their mother tongue sounds into English, and in the process of transfer the learners substitute the dissimilar and non-matching English sounds with the most similar Persian sounds in spelling English. As such, this is the main reason why spelling errors such as “tirsty, dan, and vatch” are quite common among Persian learners”.

Up to now, many studies have been carried out to study the cross-linguistic transfer of English prepositions across different languages. For example, Hamdallah&Tushyeh (1993), and Hasan & Abdullah (2009) studied the cross-linguistic influence of prepositions across English and Arabic languages. Asma (2010) investigated the reality of the phenomenon of simple prepositions transfer from Standard Arabic into English by Algerian EFL learners. Mourssi and Hilali (2015) showed the impact of error analysis in forms of meta-linguistic feedback and cross linguistic influence on the acquisition of L2 prepositions in the context of Arab learners of English.

As Persian learner are concerned, Delshad (1980) conducted a contrastive study of English and Persian prepositions and found that Iranian EFL/ESL students have difficulty in the use of English prepositions. Jafarpour and Koosha (2006) conducted a study in which the errors of the collocations of prepositions turned to yield the significance of Iranian EFL learners' L1 transfer. That is, Iranian EFL learners tend to carry over their L1 collocational prepositions to their L2 production. Mahmoodzadeh (2012) in his study indicated that the Iranian EFL learners made errors related to wrong use and redundancy of prepositions more frequently as compared with errors related to the omission of prepositions in L2 while translating from Persian into English. According to the studies that were mentioned, the correct usage of prepositions, as an important part of English grammar, is the greatest problem for Persian learners of English. Thus, this study attempts to investigate the existence and intensity of L1 interference in learning English prepositions by paramedical students.



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Limitations of the study

This study is limited to the following aspects: (1) The prepositions are limited to: for, from, to, with, on, in, at and by; (2) This study is mainly devoted to L1 interference (errors originated from the Persian language), and (3) This study also limited to 40 paramedical students.

Subjects

The subjects of the current study were 40 undergraduate paramedical students whose fields of study were Nursing, Anesthesia technology, Midwifery, Medical laboratory sciences, and Radiology technology. They were required to answer a 40-items test on preposition.

Instrumentation

First, a test consisting of 50 items was given to 30 subjects. It should be mentioned that these subjects were not included in main study subjects. After the computation of the results in this test, the items which did no or little interference were omitted. So, the items were reduced to 40 for subjects under study. These 40 items were given to 40 undergraduate paramedical students. In this study, following Fallahi (1991, pp.34-5), once the formal-semantic correspondents in Persian are identified, the relationships between the structures of two languages will be studied. These relationships can be of the following types:

1. A given preposition may occur in Persian but it may not occur in English.
2. A preposition may occur in English but not in Persian.
3. The identical prepositions may occur in both English and Persian.
4. The preposition in English and Persian partially overlap, formally and semantically.

With the exception of No.4, the other three are assumed to present problem for Persian learners. They are expected to produce interlingual predictable errors at different levels of competence.

Results and discussion

After analyzing data, following Fallahi (1991) the items in the test were classified into following types:



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Table 1.1 Percentage of subjects' errors for direct object in English versus the prepositional objects in Persian

Items	Error	70%	Interference 49%
			Other Errors 21%
100%	Correct Answer	21%	
	Unanswered Items	9%	

1. Some items were made to test the direct object in English versus the prepositional objects in Persian. Since the direct object in English and the prepositional objects in Persian are different, according to what contrastive analysis predicts, different forms in L1 and L2 would lead to L1 interference or interlingual errors. The results showed that 21% of the students answered the items correctly. 9% didn't answer the Items. 70% answered the items incorrectly. From 70% of wrong answers, 49% was related to L1 interference (interlingual errors). The other remaining 21% can be related to other sources of errors (Table 1.1). This simply shows that different forms lead to errors. In other words, such incomplete overlapping results in a maze of learning difficulty for Persian learners of English; hence a lot of time and some extra activities are required to over-come the interference.

Example:

- English: My brother married Parvin.
- Persian: bærådæremænba (with) Parvin ezdevajkærd.
- Interlingual interference: My brother married *with* Parvin.



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Table 1.2 Percentage of subjects' errors for prepositional objects in English and (Vs.) dissimilar prepositional objects in Persian

Items	Error	65%	Interference 46%
			Other errors 19%
100%	Correct answer	32%	
	Unanswered items	3%	

2. Some other items were devised to test prepositional objects in English and (Vs.) dissimilar prepositional objects in Persian. This group comprises a considerable number of instances in which a given preposition in English corresponds to a different preposition in Persian. These instances show a wide variety of distributions in English and are considered major difficulties for Persian learners of English to master. The results showed that 32% of the students answered the items correctly. 3% didn't answer the Items. 65% answered the items incorrectly. The results showed that 46% of the total errors (65%) were related to L1 interference errors (interlingual errors) (Table 1.2).

Example:

- English: I apologized to him.
- Persian: mænæz (from) oomæzerætkhastæm.
- Interlingual interference: I apologized *from* him.



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Table 1.3 Percentage of subjects' errors for double object complements in English and Persian for different forms

Items	Error	69%	Interference 51%
			Other Errors 18%
100%	Correct Answer	21%	
	Unanswered Items	10%	

Table 1.4 Percentage of subjects' errors for double object complements in English and Persian for similar forms

Total Error	12%
Correct Answer	78%
Unanswered Items	10%

3. Some other items were devised to test the double object complements in English and Persian. The results showed that different forms interfered 51% while similar forms interfered only 12%. This 12% related to all sources of errors not just interlingual ones (Tables 1.3 & 1.4). These results show that: 1) different forms lead to errors, 2) different forms interfered more significantly than similar forms, and 3) identical form in both languages are mostly transferred positively.

Example:

- English: I sent the letter to my sister.
- Persian: mæn name ra bæraye (for) khahæræmferestadæm.
- Interlingual interference: I sent the letter *for* my sister.



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This example shows that the preposition “for” in an English pattern corresponds to its translation equivalent “bæraye” in a Persian pattern (L1 interference).

Table 1.5 Percentage of subjects’ errors for a form in one language may have different equivalents in another language, vice versa

Items 100%	Error	53%	Interference & Other Errors 53%
	Correct Answer	37%	
	Unanswered Items	10%	

4. Sometimes, a form in one language may have different equivalents in another language, vice versa. These differences may cause interference. Some items were made to test this claim. The results showed that 53% of the items were interfered and other errors, 37% were answered correctly, and 10% of the items were not answered by the subjects (Table 1.5). In the case of forms for which Persian exhibits only one form, while English has several, interference is unavoidable. For instance:

English

Persian

In spring*dær bæhar*

On Sunday.....*dær yekshænbe*

At five*dærsaætpænj*

Therefore, any Persian learner of English has to learn the English preposition and their proper uses through rote learning and memorization.



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Table 1.6 Percentage of subjects' errors for prepositional objects in English versus similar prepositional objects in Persian

Total Error	20%
Correct Answer	76%
Unanswered Items	4%

5. Some items were made to test prepositional objects in English versus similar prepositional objects in Persian. The results showed that 76% of the items were answered correctly by the subjects. 20% of the items were transferred negatively (Table 1.6). This can be related to sources of errors other than interlingual ones. Since the two languages classify their prepositions identically, no mother tongue interference is likely to occur.

Example:

- English: These books belong to my brother.
- Persian: in ketabha be (to) bærådæremæntæælløqdarænd.
- No interlingual interference: These books belong to my brother.

Since the two languages classify their prepositions identically in this area, no mother-tongue interference is likely expected to occur as far as the preposition "to" in this combination is concerned. The general conclusions that we can get from these results are: a. different forms interfere more than similar forms interlingually; b. identical forms in both languages were transferred positively; and c. the forms in L1 which had no equivalents in L2 and vice versa interfered as well.

Implications

As learners' errors have always been of interest and significant in some ways. The outcomes of this study have implications for teachers and students, syllabus designers, and test developers. Teachers can identify the problematic areas for learners at different levels of instruction. They will be able to infer the nature of the learner's knowledge of the language, here preposition, at a given stage in his learning career and discover what he or she still has to learn. These points are



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considered for learners as well. Syllabus designers will know what items are important to be included in the syllabus and what items are redundant and should be excluded. Remedial materials can be decided on by considering the results of this study. Areas of difficulties can be found by taking into account the error frequencies found in this study. Test-developers can benefit from the results of this investigation. When they take into account teaching effects on testing, on the one hand, and know the areas of difficulties of language prepositions and their frequencies of errors, on the other, they can use these findings for their purpose. They can include in their test items the forms which create more difficulty, and also ones which lead to errors of high frequencies. For this purposes Appendix one to six would help them.

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