

Prepositional Errors Among Malay MUET Band 3 Students: An Error Analysis Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the prepositional errors produced by MUET Band 3 undergraduates at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia using an error analysis framework. A written test adapted from various books was administered to 30 Malay L1 respondents. A total of 354 prepositional errors were identified and analysed across spatial (place, position, direction) and temporal (time) categories. Errors were classified into subtypes of wrong selection, omission, and unnecessary insertion. Findings show an almost equal distribution between spatial (50.8%) and temporal (49.2%) errors, with wrong selection accounting for 94% of all errors. The prominence of these errors indicates strong L1 transfer influences and incomplete mastery of English prepositional systems, which differ significantly from Malay. The study provides pedagogical implications for English language instructors in Malaysia, highlighting the need for focused instruction on prepositional usage and cross-linguistic contrasts.

Keywords: error analysis, prepositions, Malay learners, MUET, L1 interference

INTRODUCTION

Error analysis (EA) continues to be a central tool in second language acquisition research because learner errors provide insights into developing interlanguage systems and areas requiring pedagogical intervention (Corder, 1974; Darus & Subramaniam, 2009). Unlike contrastive analysis (CA), which predicts difficulties based on L1–L2 differences, EA focuses on empirically examining actual learner production to uncover error patterns and linguistic challenges.

Prepositions are consistently reported as one of the most challenging grammatical categories for ESL learners, particularly in contexts where the L1 has simpler or less differentiated prepositional systems (Ariffin & Abdul Rahman, 2020; Jalali & Shoja, 2021). For Malay learners, difficulties arise due to the absence of a tense system and the multifunctional nature of certain Malay prepositions such as *di*, *ke*, and *pada*, which do not map neatly onto English prepositions (Asmah, 2000; Saidalvi et al., 2020).

Recent studies further confirm that prepositional errors among Malaysian learners stem from overgeneralisation, incomplete rule acquisition, intralingual developmental issues, and cross-linguistic interference (Chan & Abdullah, 2022; Shamsudin et al., 2021). These findings align with global research which highlights prepositions as a persistent difficulty for ESL/EFL learners due to polysemy, semantic complexity, and inconsistent usage (Hassan & Fattah, 2023; Nourmohammadi & Shakeri, 2020).

This study revisits prepositional errors among MUET Band 3 undergraduates and integrates contemporary literature to enhance understanding of the underlying causes of these difficulties.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prepositions in ESL/EFL Acquisition

Prepositions function as relational markers of time, place, direction, and abstract concepts, making them semantically dense and context-dependent. Recent studies argue that learners struggle due to the lack of one-to-one correspondence between English and their native language (Hassan & Fattah, 2023; Jalali & Shoja, 2021). English prepositions convey both literal and metaphorical meanings (e.g., in trouble, on duty), increasing cognitive complexity.

L1 Influence on Preposition Use in Malay Learners

Malay prepositions such as *di*, *ke*, *dalam*, and *pada* have flexible functions, leading to overgeneralised English equivalents such as *in*, *on*, *at*, or *to* (Saidalvi et al., 2020; Chan & Abdullah, 2022). Studies consistently show that Malay ESL learners rely heavily on L1 conceptual frameworks, especially when selecting spatial and temporal prepositions (Rahman & Ariffin, 2021).

Error Analysis in Malaysian ESL Contexts

EA studies in Malaysia show recurring patterns of prepositional errors linked to:

- wrong selection (most frequent) (Chan & Abdullah, 2022)
- omission of obligatory prepositions (Shamsudin et al., 2021)
- unnecessary insertion due to hypercorrection (Nourmohammadi & Shakeri, 2020)

The current study's findings align with these trends.

METHODOLOGY

Thirty MUET Band 3 undergraduates were randomly selected from various faculties at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. This population reflects the minimum proficiency level required for university admission, making them a suitable sample for analysing foundational grammatical accuracy.

A grammar test comprising four sections was administered:

1. Demographics
2. Multiple-choice items (Part B)
3. Multiple-choice items (Part C)
4. Fill-in-the-blanks items (Part D)

Items were adapted from reputable Malaysian grammar textbooks. Errors were identified, categorised into spatial and temporal types, and further classified as wrong selection, omission, or unnecessary insertion. Frequencies were tabulated and analysed descriptively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, Error Distribution

A total of 354 prepositional errors were found:

- Place/Direction (Spatial): 180 errors (50.8%)
- Time (Temporal): 174 errors (49.2%)

Most errors occurred in Part D (fill-in-the-blanks) with 291 errors, showing that open-ended tasks reveal deeper difficulties than recognition-type items.

Subcategories of Errors

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Wrong Selection	335	94%
Unnecessary Insertion	13	4%
Omission	5	1%

For Table 1, it presents the distribution of prepositional errors in all three sections of the test based on both spatial (place, position, direction) and temporal(time) uses of prepositions in respondents' second language.

Errors accumulated involving prepositions of place & direction with the total of 180 errors in all three sections (50.8%) – almost similar in number to the errors made by the respondents for the questions based on preposition of time (49.2%) total errors of 174. Based on this result, it can be seen that the respondents may have difficulty in applying preposition of place and direction pertinently.

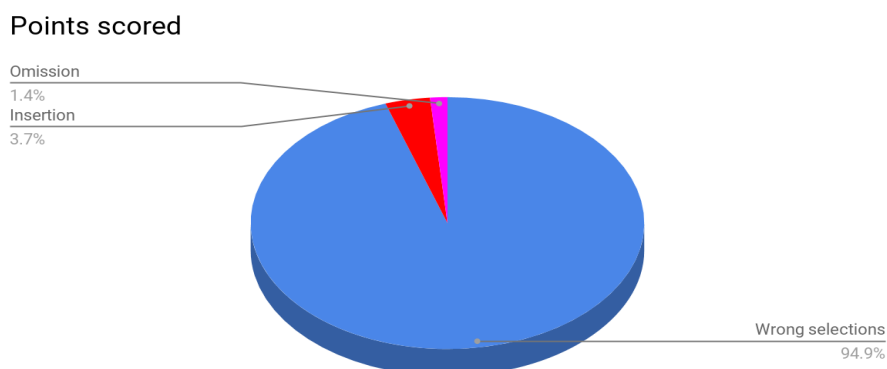
The temporal use of preposition also has not been fully mastered by these respondents, with the gain of almost equivalent percentages, proving that not only preposition about locative and directive that felt strenuous to the respondents, but also they face uncertainty in determining the proper preposition of time to be applied. This finding commensurates to the conclusion made on the preposition increases the difficulty of learning English.

Categories of prepositions	Wrong Selection	Unnecessary Insertion	Omission of Preposition	Total	%
Place & Direction (Spatial)	167	10	3	180	50.8
Time (Temporal)	169	3	2	174	49.2
Total	335	13	5	354	100
%	95	4	1		

Table 1: Errors distribution

Most of the prepositional errors occurred in the sub-category of wrong selection (335 errors). This followed by the sub-category of preposition insertion (13 errors, %) and the least errors occurred in the sub-category of insertion with only 5 errors (%). The results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Percentage of prepositional errors in the three sub-categories



The breakdown for these three sub-categories for prepositional errors is tabulated in the following Table 2.

Table 2: Prepositional Errors In Three Sub-Categories

Categories of Prepositions	PART A	PART C	PART D	TOTAL	%
Place & Direction (Spatial)	14	16	150	180	50.8
Time (Temporal)	24	9	141	174	49.2
Total	38	25	291	354	100

As shown in the Table 2, from 354 errors detected in the sample, major part of this errors were contributed by the sub-category of wrong selection with 335 errors identified (94%). In this sub-category, both spatial and temporal prepositions gained the two highest frequency of errors with 167 and 169 errors severally. This was followed by the sub-category of omission with 13 errors (4%). In this category, both prepositions yielded 10 and 3 errors respectively. The sub-category of unnecessary insertion obtained the least number of errors with only 5 errors (1%); 3 errors for preposition of place and direction, 2 errors for preposition of time. From the sample, some error pattern examples that frequently occurred are presented and explained below.

Misuse of at (Spatial Preposition)

Learners replaced in, across, or beside with at:

- The boys are playing **at** (in) the field.

This suggests overgeneralisation of at as a universal location marker, likely influenced by Malay di.

The preposition of ‘at’ replaces the correct prepositions such as in, across, from and beside. Some of the examples of errors in this category excerpted from the test are shown below:

1. The boys are playing at (in) the field
2. The bride stood at (beside) her groom at the altar.

In (i), an overgeneralization in the use of ‘at’ occurs when it is used as a linker to a point or location. For example:

1. She meets me at the neighbourhood
2. Please wait at the library
3. He sits at the classroom

When ‘at’ is used to tell precisely about a point or location such as ‘at the bank’, ‘in’ refers to the preposition used to describe the location of the noun is in an enclosed space like ‘in a room’, or ‘in the bag’. Thus, this generalization of patterns made by the Malay learners have an effect on their application of ‘at’ to a unsuitable context. To explain this further, there are possibility that these respondents were confused with choosing the right preposition from the three corresponding English prepositions (‘in’, ‘on’, and ‘at’) for ‘di’ word in Malay language, which indicates a place.

The following examples refer to the use of these three corresponding(?) prepositions of English:

1. Di tempat itu (at the place)
2. Di dalam negara itu (in the country)

3. Di atas lantai itu (on the floor)

Therefore, Malay learners could have made the prepositional error “The boys are playing at (in) the field” as a result from the confusion faced in using the correct corresponding English preposition to substitute ‘di’(at).

Misuse of for (Temporal Preposition)

Learners substituted in or on for for:

- He ate only fruits **in/on** (for) the week.

Malay lacks an equivalent temporal “duration” preposition, leading to misinterpretation of English temporal markers.

‘In’, ‘at’ and ‘on’ were used to replace ‘for’. Some similar answers detected from the test are presented below:

He ate only fruits *in (for) the week / He ate only fruits *on (for) the week.

An explanation for the above errors is the L1 interference in the target language. Malay students may have been affected by the frequent use of the Malay prepositions ‘dalam’(in) and ‘pada’(on/at). In the Malay language, both of those words may also express time instead of acting as preposition of place. Nonetheless, there are a few types of time prepositions in English language such as ‘in’, ‘on’ and ‘at’. ‘In’ is commonly used to refer to month and year, while ‘On’ is usually used to explain about days of the week such as “on Monday.” Lastly, ‘at’ is generally used to signify a point of time like “at 7pm” or “at dawn.” To use ‘for’ in this context, the idea must be regarding on how long the action lasts (for the day, for the month). To this, there is no direct translation or word that may carry the exact function of the word ‘for’ in temporal use.

Misuse of during

Learners replaced during with on or while:

- Where did Karen go **during** (on) the holiday?

This demonstrates confusion caused by Malay *semasa*, which applies to both during and while.

‘During’ is inappropriately used in referring to certain period of time and certain action in progress. Two of the errors made by the respondents in this matter are as follow:

1. Where did Karen go *during (on) the recent holiday?
2. My mum usually watches television *during (while) dinner.

To explain this further, the preposition of ‘during’ is said to be used when one wants to express a range or period of time, highlighting on the duration of action (e.g. The weather is hot during summer). In this context, the confusion faced by Malay students in choosing the right preposition is caused by the complexity and variety of English preposition. The word ‘during’, ‘on’ and ‘while’ actually carry one similar meaning of ‘*semasa*’, and this explains further on the inaccuracy in choice of preposition of time and place.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that Malay MUET Band 3 students continue to face significant challenges with English prepositions, particularly in selecting the correct spatial and temporal markers. Wrong selection dominates, supporting recent findings that learners struggle with distinguishing overlapping English prepositions whose Malay equivalents are less distinct (Rahman & Ariffin, 2021). The almost equal distribution of spatial and temporal errors further highlights that the problem is not isolated to one semantic category, but reflects a broader difficulty in mapping English relational concepts to the learners’ existing linguistic framework, such as conceptual transfer, where learners map English relational meanings onto Malay conceptual categories, and

semantic mapping challenges, in which fine-grained distinctions in English prepositions do not align neatly with learners' existing conceptual schemas.

Pedagogically, English instructors should prioritise explicit contrastive teaching of English–Malay prepositional systems, increased exposure to contextualised preposition use, and targeted practice focusing on high-frequency errors. Traditional rule-based teaching alone is insufficient because learners appear to rely heavily on L1-driven assumptions; therefore, instruction should incorporate metalinguistic awareness, guided noticing, and repeated exposure to authentic input. In addition, task-based learning activities that require accurate preposition usage—such as information-gap tasks, location-based descriptions, and narrative sequencing—can help learners internalise prepositional functions more naturally.

To conclude, it can be seen that these students still have difficulty in determining the proper use of both prepositions of time and prepositions of place and direction. The influence of L1 prepositional structures contributes significantly to these confusions, particularly because Malay uses fewer and broader prepositional categories. It will therefore be helpful for teachers to pay more attention to these two key categories when designing lessons, especially at lower and intermediate proficiency levels where foundational grammatical accuracy is still developing. From this error analysis, the findings will give insights to teachers in deciding which usage of prepositions should be prioritised or emphasised in a lesson, allowing them to scaffold learning more effectively.

By knowing the factors causing these errors, teachers are better equipped to use appropriate and effective teaching strategies to reduce or block negative transfer from students' first language to the target language. Furthermore, the study's findings highlight the need for continued research into grammar acquisition among Malaysian ESL learners, particularly in the area of functional grammar and L1–L2 conceptual mismatches. Future studies may expand the sample size, include qualitative interviews, or investigate whether targeted pedagogical interventions lead to measurable improvements. Strengthening such research will contribute to more robust ESL teaching approaches in Malaysia, ensuring that learners develop accurate and confident command of English prepositions in both academic and real-world contexts.

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