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Investigating Second Year Students' Errors in the Use of English Spatial Prepositions (*in*, *on*, *at*) at the Faculty of Medical Technology, Azzaytuna University

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Abstract

This study attempts to identify and analyze errors in the use of English prepositions of place (*in, on,* and *at*) committed by EFL undergraduate students at the Faculty of Medical Technology, Azzaytuna University. This study also attempts to explore the reasons behind these errors. The study population consisted of (60) students enrolled in the second year at the Faculty of Medical Technology in the academic year 2025/2026. A sample of 45 undergraduate students was randomly selected in January 2026. They were given a 30-sentence gap-filling test and asked to fill in the gaps with suitable prepositions. The findings indicated that the participants committed several errors in using these prepositions, which could be due to a number of causes, such as interference from the mother tongue or the lack of knowledge of English. The researcher recommends that teaching spatial prepositions at the early stages of teaching and learning should be considered by teachers through exercises about prepositions of place, which may help students to use these prepositions in English properly.

Keywords: *EFL students, error analysis, L1 interference, prepositions of place, error sources*

الملخص

هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لتحديد وتحليل الأخطاء في استخدام حروف الجر المكانية الثلاث في اللغة الإنجليزية (*at -in- on*) عند طلاب كلية التقنية الطبية في جامعة الزيتونة والذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية. كما تحاول الدراسة اكتشاف الأسباب التي تقف وراء هذه الأخطاء. ويتكون مجتمع الدراسة من (60) طالباً من طلاب السنة الثانية بكلية التقنية الطبية المسجلين في العام الجامعي 2026/2025 م. وتكونت عينة الدراسة من (45) طالباً تم اختيارهم عشوائياً في يناير 2026م, حيث تم إعطاؤهم امتحاناً يتكون من (30) سؤالاً وطُلب منهم ملء الفراغ بحروف الجر المناسبة. وأظهرت النتائج أن المشاركين في الدراسة يرتكبون العديد من الأخطاء في استخدام حروف الجر المذكورة أعلاه وهذه الأخطاء من الممكن أن تعزى إلى عدة أسباب مثل التداخل من اللغة الأم للطلاب أو نقص معرفتهم باللغة الإنجليزية. وقد أوصى الباحث على أن يؤخذ في الاعتبار تدريس حروف الجر المكانية في المراحل الدراسية الأولى من خلال إجراء التمارين على حروف الجر المكانية حيث أن هذه التمارين من الممكن إن تساعد الطلاب على استخدام هذه الحروف بصورة صحيحة في اللغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: *طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تحليل الأخطاء، تداخل اللغة الأولى، حروف الجر المكانية، مصادر الأخطاء.*

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1. Introduction

Prepositions in English are fundamental elements of the structure of correct sentences. They play a crucial role in English grammar by connecting words and making sentences easier to understand. In other words, they are cohesive devices that help EFL learners understand the meaning of sentences. Dunstan (2003, p.14) states that: "prepositions express a relationship of meaning between two parts of a sentence, often between two noun phrases, usually a relation of space or time." He indicated that prepositions are meaningful links between words and divided them into two principal types: prepositions of time and prepositions of place. Many ELT researchers, such as Al-Ashab et al., (2018), Abdalla (2021), Al-Bawaleez and Abdullah (2023), Castro (2013), Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), Crystal (2008), Quirk and Greenbaum (2000), and Hattab (2012), describe prepositions as words that indicate the relations or connections between other words in sentences. In the same perspective, Shahbon (2022, p. 60) states that: " A preposition is a word or group of words used before a noun, pronoun, or noun phrase to show direction, time, place, location, spatial relationship, or to introduce an object." According to Al-Ahdal and Asmawi (2021), Belaid (2025), and Saed and Yassin (2017), English prepositions can be divided into two groups: simple and complex prepositions. The first group is composed of one word, such as (to, on, and at), whereas the second group is composed of more than one word, such as (with regard to, in spite of, and according to).

Prepositions are an essential element in any language learning process, whether it is a native or a second language. EFL students have problems using English prepositions correctly. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, p. 401) state that "prepositions are notoriously difficult to learn. Long after ESL/EFL students have achieved a high level of proficiency in English, they will struggle with prepositions". Swan (1996) explains that learning using prepositions in EFL is difficult because most of them have different functions, and some of them have similar uses. According to Tetreault and Chodorow (2008), many errors in the writing skills of non-English speakers are attributed to the misuse of English prepositions. They cannot choose the correct English preposition. In the same context, Lynch (2010) considers English prepositions as a main element of English language grammar structure, which offers a challenge to EFL learners because they differ from the manner of expression in the learner's first language. Kharma and Hajjaj (1997) support this idea by saying that English prepositions' errors are an eternal problem for EFL Arab learners. Aleraini (2020), Alharbi (2019), and Soliman (2021) add that EFL Arab learners have difficulties in the use of English prepositions due to the use and meaning of prepositions in their first language or the differences between English and Arabic.

2. The difference between error and mistake

The terms "error" and "mistake" have different meanings and usages in the process of EFL learning. EFL students commit this error systematically because they do not know the correct form of the language. The error in the field of foreign or second language learning is attributed to the lack of students' knowledge of a target language." Gass and Selinker (2008) defined errors as "red flags." They consider errors as warning indications that refer to ESL students' lack of

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linguistic knowledge of a target language. Botley (2015, p.83) states that: "Errors can be defined as systematic deviations from the rules of a target language, as they are believed to occur because a learner does not know a given rule or feature, such as Subject-Verb Agreement or Noun Plurality in English". In contrast, a mistake is a linguistic performance fault. It can be committed by an EFL student because of carelessness, fatigue, lack of attention, or any other aspect of performance, but not because of a lack of language knowledge. This means that the student knows the correct linguistic form, but he/she makes a mistake. The mistake is only a slip of the tongue, and the student can correct it by himself. According to Brown (2007), Ellis (2008), Gass and Selinker (2008), and James (1998), the mistake is a random slip of the tongue. This indicates that EFL students know the grammar rules of a target language, and they can easily correct their mistakes when their attention is drawn to them. Saville-Troike (2012, p.202) defines the mistakes as: "Inappropriate language production that results from some kind of processing failure such as a lapse in memory." Similarly, Karim et al. (2018) indicated that a mistake refers to language system failures related to memory lapses, carelessness, and physical conditions.

3. Error analysis

Error analysis concerns all aspects of learners' errors in the target language. It helps teachers detect students' errors and deal with them seriously. In other words, error analysis is an essential element in language learning and teaching. Guzmán-Muñoz (2020) and Imaniar (2018) state that language learners cannot learn a language without making errors. This means that the errors committed by learners are inevitable in the language learning process. Brown (2007), Crystal (2003), Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), Karim et al. (2018), and Richards and Schmidt (2010) consider error analysis as a technique used to identify, classify and explain students' errors. Al-Bayati (2013) refers to error analysis as a good way to detect and explain learners' errors during language learning. He adds that the analysis of errors can be used to indicate the sources of errors, which help language teachers and syllabus designers to determine remedial steps to ameliorate students' knowledge of a target language. In the same context, Ellis (1997) classified the error analysis process into four steps:

a) Error detection.

b) Description of the error.

c) Explanation of the error.

d) Evaluation of the error.

4. Sources of errors

Brown (2007) and Ellis (1997) point out that there are three principal sources of learner errors, which can be outlined as follows:

a) *Interlingual transfer:* errors attributed to the interference of learners' L1, which is classified as a negative transfer.

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b) *Intralingual transfer:* errors committed by learners while learning the target language. This type of error is due to the target language.

c) *Context of learning:* In this case, the error might be attributed to other causes, such as a textbook, cultural interference, a teacher, and a social situation.

5. Statement of the problem

Many studies have investigated English preposition errors committed by EFL students. EFL learners have difficulty using these prepositions. Jalali and Shojaei (2012, p. 81) state that: "Prepositions usage is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for non-native speakers to master." Despite several years of English study, second-year undergraduate students at the Faculty of Medical Technology, Azzaytuna University, continue to experience difficulty in the accurate use of English spatial prepositions in both spoken and written communication. Although these difficulties are widely reported in the EFL context (Jalali and Shojaei, 2012), empirical research within Libya remains limited, with Belaid and Almrtdi (2020) being among the few studies documenting learners' persistent problems with prepositions. Therefore, this study aims to investigate learners' errors in using English spatial prepositions and to find the causes of these errors among learners at the Faculty of Medical Technology, Azzaytuna University.

6. Research questions

- What are the most common errors in the use of English spatial prepositions (*in, on,* and *at*) committed by second-year students at the Faculty of Medical Technology, Azzaytuna University?
- What are the causes of these errors?

7. Aim of the study

- To investigate and identify second-year students' errors in the use of spatial prepositions (*in, on,* and *at*).
- To shed light on the causes of these errors committed by second-year students.

8. Significance of the study

The present study seeks to explore students' English spatial preposition errors (*in, on,* and *at*) and explain the reasons for these errors. Moreover, remedial procedures and strategies that focus on teaching these prepositions are suggested. These procedures and strategies may help students use the prepositions of place correctly and draw teachers' and syllabus designers' attention to enriching classroom exercises and syllabuses with spatial preposition activities.

9. Limitations of the study

The study results are limited to second-year EFL learners at the Faculty of Medical Technology, Azzaytuna University, during the academic year 2025/2026.

10. Previous studies

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Many studies have investigated students' English preposition errors. Al Jroshy and Benmustafa (2024), for example, analyzed English prepositions errors made by Libyan learners at the English Department, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Misurata University, Libya. The sample in this study consisted of 20 students and three teachers from the English Department. The researchers collected data by analyzing essays written by third-semester students and conducting interviews with teachers to investigate their effective teaching methods for prepositions. The results showed that the students made English preposition errors, and the sources of these types of errors were attributed to a lack of linguistic competence and interference from L1.

Omenogor and Akpojisheri (2024) carried out a study identified the difficulties of English learners encountered with ESL prepositions and the causes of these errors. The sample consisted of 203 ESL learners from Delta University, Nigeria. A questionnaire was the main instrument used to collect data. The results revealed that the errors committed by students were attributed to interference from their first language.

Alhammad (2023) conducted a study on the acquisition of three English spatial prepositions (in, on, and at). This study aimed to explore the difficulties Arab EFL students encounter when learning English. The sample comprised 100 Saudi EFL learners. The findings indicated that the participants had some challenges in using the spatial prepositions '' in, 'on, ' and '' at, and the source of errors was due to the L1 interference (Arabic).

Fathi (2022) investigated the difficulties encountered by the EFL Libyan university students in the usage of English prepositions. The study sample consisted of 76 EFL students from the English Department, Faculty of Education, Sirte University, Libya. The data collection tool was a multiple-choice test. The findings showed that most students had problems when they used English prepositions because they did not master their meanings and functions in English.

Shahbon (2022) conducted a study explored students' errors in using English spatial prepositions (*on-in-at*). Data were elicited from a randomly selected sample of 80 EFL students from the English Department, Faculty of Arts, Zawia University, Libya. A test comprising 19 completion items was used as an instrument to collect data. The findings illustrated that the students committed errors in using English spatial prepositions, and the source of errors was interference from their L1.

Another study was conducted by Abdalla (2021) identified the causes of EFL learners' errors in using English prepositions and to use these prepositions correctly by learners. The sample comprised 10 EFL students from the English Department, Faculty of Science and Arts, Albaha University, Saudi Arabia. A written test was used to collect data for the study. The findings indicate that the study participants encountered difficulties in using the correct prepositions after certain verbs. The results also showed that the Saudi students had problems using correct prepositional phrases in English.

Similarly, Alfetouri (2021) carried out a study scrutinized the problems faced by freshmen English Department students in using English prepositions and tried to find solutions to these

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difficulties. The sample size comprised 30 students and 10 teachers from the English Department, Faculty of Education, Zawia University, Libya. A test and questionnaire were used for data collection. The test was administered to first-year students, and the questionnaire was administered to teachers. The findings revealed that the students have difficulties in using the correct preposition, which can be due to the interference from the native language in the use of prepositions or to teachers who do not provide enough practice to ameliorate preposition learning.

Syafei (2020) carried out a study scrutinized the English preposition errors made by freshmen students at the English Department, Padang State University, Indonesia. The Participants were 31 EFL students selected through systematic random sampling in 2019. The instrument used for data collection was a gap-filling test. The results indicated that the freshmen students committed several English preposition errors. It also confirmed that the causes of these errors were attributed to the students' lack of English grammar knowledge. These are intralingual errors.

Abdulnnour (2019), in his MA thesis, examined the difficulties facing Arabic EFL students in the use of English spatial prepositions. The sample consisted of 72 native Arabic speakers who studied at the Eastern Mediterranean University. They were from different Arabic countries, and their ages ranged from 18-21. A test composed of two parts was used as a tool to collect the data. The findings showed that the learners committed several errors in the use of prepositions of place, and the reasons for these errors were due to interference from their native language (Arabic).

Abualzain (2017) studied the difficulties in using prepositions of place in written production among EFL students. This study aimed to explore the difficulties encountered by Albaha University students in their preparatory year program in using spatial prepositions (on, in, at) and to discover the reasons for these difficulties. Fifty students were randomly selected as the subjects. A test and questionnaire were used as the principal data collection tools. The results confirmed that the participants made several errors in the use of spatial prepositions. It also revealed that the carelessness of students and their mother tongue (Arabic) were the sources of the errors.

Suzanne (2017) conducted a study to scrutinize the English preposition errors in a spoken language. This study aimed to investigate students' preposition errors when they spoke English. The study sample comprised 20 graduate students. Data were collected from interview transcriptions. The findings indicate that the participants committed preposition errors in oral production. The findings also proved that the occurrences of preposition errors in oral production are influenced by the students' first or second language.

11. Methodology

11.1. Participants

The participants were 45 second-year students studying at the Faculty of Medical Technology, Azzaytuna University, Libya. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 21 years,

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and they had studied English for three years in Libyan preparatory schools and three years in Libyan secondary schools. They shared similar backgrounds in the English language.

11.2. Instrument

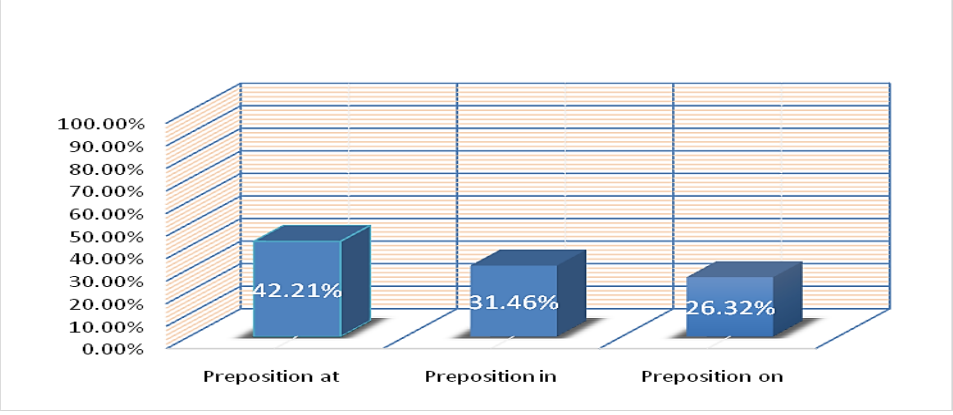
A test was the main tool used to collect data from the subjects. It consisted of 30-sentence gap-filling exercises. According to Grabe (2009), gap-filling questions are beneficial for measuring knowledge of target language structures, such as prepositions. Thirty gap-filling questions were carefully selected from several grammar books. The participants were asked to write the correct spatial preposition (*in, on,* or *at*) in the blanks.

11.3. Data collection

The researcher asked for research permission from the Dean of the Faculty of Medical Technology before distributing the test. Verbal consent was granted to the researcher. The test was distributed to the 45 students during their classes in January 2026. The participants were instructed to choose only one answer, and they were informed that their responses would be confidential and would be used for scientific research purposes only. Also, they were informed to answer all the questions.

12. Results and discussion

The data were collected from the second-year students at the Faculty of Medical Technology, Azzaytuna University, by using a test composed of 30 filling questions. The results showed that the study participants committed (623) errors in the use of English spatial prepositions (*in, on,* and *at*). The figure (1) below indicates that the spatial prepositions errors can be classified according to the number of errors and their percentages. The preposition "at" has the lion's share of errors with (263) representing (42.21%) from the total number of prepositions' errors, whereas the preposition "in" takes second place with (196) errors representing (31.46%). The use of the preposition "on" has the smallest number of errors (164), representing (26.32%) of the total errors. The frequency of students' errors indicates that the preposition "at" is the most difficult preposition for the learners and the preposition "on" is the easiest one.



Image

Figure 1: Distribution of students' errors in the use of spatial prepositions (at, in, on)

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12.1. Students' errors in the use of the preposition "at"

As will be shown in table (1) below, the results of the test show that most participants have difficulties in the use of the spatial preposition "at" in the questions no: (2, 7 and 8). The prepositions' wrong answers of participants in these three questions had the highest percentage of errors compared to the other questions of the test. In questions no: (2 and 8), they used the wrong preposition of place "in" instead of the correct preposition "at" and in question no: (7), they used the wrong preposition "on" instead of the right preposition "at". These kinds of errors might be due to interlingual transfer. In other words, the cause of the errors was rendered to the influence of L1, since the participants' L1 use of such prepositions is quite different from those of the English language.

The remarkable errors can be seen in questions no: (2, 3, 4, 5 and 8) which indicate that the participants repeated the same error by replacing the preposition "in" instead of "at". The prepositions errors in questions no: (6, 9 and 10) were probably attributed to the intralingual errors. This means, the errors are due to the lack of knowledge in English grammar. Furthermore, the achieved findings of the test indicated that most of the participants did not encounter any problem in using the preposition "at" in question no: (1).

Table 1: The frequency distribution for the participants' responses about the preposition "at"

No	Questions of the test	True answer	False answer	Total	Percent
1	My friend is studying **at** university.	73.33%	26.66%	45	100%
2	I will meet my sister **at** the station.	24.44%	75.55%	45	100%
3	She loves to look up **at** the stars	44.44%	55.55%	45	100%
4	There are a lot of people **at** the bus stop.	42.22%	57.77%	45	100%
5	She wants to rent a car **at** the airport.	40%	60%	45	100%
6	Students are required to write their names **at** the top of the page.	35.55%	64.44%	45	100%
7	I found my name **at** the bottom of the list.	24.44%	75.55%	45	100%
8	The traffic light **at** the crossroad is out of order.	33.33%	66.66%	45	100%
9	There are a few restaurants **at** the end of the street.	37.77%	62.22%	45	100%
10	He is going to spend the weekend **at** home.	60%	40%	45	100%

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12.2. Students' errors in the use of the preposition "in"

Based on the findings of the test, the participants made many errors in using the preposition of place "in". Table (2) below indicates these errors in accordance with the participants' percentages of frequency. The percentages of occurrence of errors in the test are different from one question to another. The high occurrence of errors in using the spatial preposition "in" shows that the participants have some problems in using this preposition correctly such as questions no (2, 3, 4, 8 and 10). The wrong answers of prepositions in these questions range from (44.44%) to (64.44%). In these questions, the students used the wrong answer of the spatial preposition "at", whereas the correct answer was the preposition "in". This type of error may be caused by the interference from the participants' mother tongue (interlingual transfer), which is a negative transfer. Moreover, there are other errors of the spatial preposition "in", such as in questions no: (5 and 9) where some participants used the wrong preposition "on" instead of the right one, which is "in". Such erroneous use of this preposition might be attributed to the participants' lack of knowledge of English grammar rules (intralingual transfer).

Furthermore, participants have committed fewer errors in using the preposition "in", such as in questions no: (1, 6 and 7). Their wrong answers are less than (40%).

Table 2: The frequency distribution for the participants' responses about the preposition "in"

No	Questions of the test	True answer	False answer	Total	Percent
1	The children swim **in** this river.	71.11%	28.88%	45	100%
2	She couldn't find a place to park **in** the centre of downtown.	40%	60%	45	100%
3	My nephew is **in** the hospital. He has food poisoning.	46.66%	53.33%	45	100%
4	My parents live **in** a beautiful village.	35.55%	64.44%	45	100%
5	There are beautiful flowers **in** our garden.	64.44%	35.55%	45	100%
6	My friend works **in** a factory.	60%	40%	45	100%
7	The stars **in** the sky are very bright tonight.	82.22%	17.77%	45	100%
8	There are many innocent people **in** prison.	55.55%	44.44%	45	100%
9	I want to enjoy my holiday **in** Spain.	60%	40%	45	100%
10	The doctor is not **in** his office now.	48.88%	51.11%	45	100%

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12.3. Students' errors in the use of the preposition "on"

According to the findings of the test in table (3) below, the participants committed many errors in using the preposition "on". The highest occurrence of errors of preposition "on" committed by participants can be seen in questions no: (2, 4, and 10). The percentage of errors in questions no: (2, and 10) was (53.33%), whereas, the percentage of errors in question no: (4) was (48.88%). These high percentages of errors prove the problems of participants in using the preposition "on". They used the wrong spatial preposition, "in" instead of "on". Furthermore, the participants used the wrong prepositions "at" and "in" in questions no: (3, 5, 6, 7 and 9). These errors might be due to a lack of grammatical knowledge. In the same context, the lowest occurrence of errors made by participants in using the preposition "on" was in questions no: (1 and 8). The percentages of participants' errors in these two questions were (20%) and (13.33%), respectively.

Table 3: The frequency distribution for the participants' responses about the preposition "on"

No	Questions of the test	True answer	False answer	Total	Percent
1	He left his wallet **on** the table.	80%	20%	45	100%
2	They live **on** a small island in Europe.	46.66%	53.33%	45	100%
3	Someone left a notice **on** the door.	73.33%	26.66%	45	100%
4	There are many homeless people **on** the street.	51.11%	48.88%	45	100%
5	Don't sit **on** the chair, it is broken.	66.66%	33.33%	45	100%
6	There are many books **on** the shelves.	57.77%	42.22%	45	100%
7	Your child is sitting **on** the floor.	66.66%	33.33%	45	100%
8	I put my glasses **on** the table.	86.66%	13.33%	45	100%
9	You will find the exercise **on** page 70.	60%	40%	45	100%
10	I can't find your location **on** the map.	46.66%	53.33%	45	100%

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Conclusion

This study investigated students' errors with three English spatial prepositions (in, on, and at) and tried to find out the reasons for these errors. The findings showed that the participants made errors in using these spatial prepositions. The highest occurrence of spatial prepositions errors between the students was "at", which is (42.21%), and the lowest number of errors was in using the preposition "on", which is (26.32%), whereas the occurrence of errors in using the preposition "in" was (31.46%). These findings indicated that the participants had the most difficulty in using the spatial preposition "at", followed by "in" and lastly, "on". Furthermore, the findings showed that there were two principal causes behind the participants' spatial prepositions errors. The first cause was the interference from the participants' mother tongue, which is a negative transfer. This interference from L1 could be due to the different meanings of these three prepositions in the Arabic language. This result is in agreement with the results of other studies conducted by Abdulnnour (2019), Alhammad (2023), Alfetouri (2021), Omenogor and Akpojisheri (2024), Shahban (2022), and Suzanne (2017), which emphasized the influence of L1 on the use of English prepositions among the participants in this study. The second cause is the lack of basic knowledge of the English rules, which is in accordance with the findings of other studies conducted by Abdalla (2021), Abuazain (2017), Al Jroshy and Benmustafa (2024), Al-Qahtani (2019), Fathi (2022), and Syafei (2020), showed that the cause of participants' prepositions errors is rendered to the lack of knowledge of the English language. In other words, the findings of the study indicated that the sources of errors in the use of the three spatial prepositions could be due to two dominant sources: intralingual and interlingual errors.

Recommendations

The researcher suggests the following recommendations:

1- The teachers and syllabus designers should focus on introducing intensive exercises of prepositions of place to the learners.
2- The instructors must encourage the learners to comprehend the differences between the usage of prepositions in their native language and those in the English language.
3- The teachers should employ effective teaching methods to assist the learners in mastering the use of spatial prepositions.
4- Further studies should be conducted on learning English spatial prepositions at the Libyan university level.

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