
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tracing Prepositional Pathways: Temporal and Spatial Mastery Among EFL Learners

Jwahir Alzamil

Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Taif University, Taif, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Jwahir Alzamil, **E-mail:** jazamil@tu.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

English prepositions present persistent challenges for second language (L2) learners due to their idiomatic nature and semantic overlap. This study examined whether first language (L1) background, proficiency level and type (time and place) interact with the use of English prepositions by Saudi Arabic (SA) learners. It also aimed to examine variations in accuracy both within and between preposition types. Data were gathered from thirty female SA university students who were classified at the beginner or elementary level. The data instrument was a fill-in-the-blank task involving the selection of seven-time prepositions (*since, by, on, from, at, in, before*) and seven place prepositions (*at, next to, near, on, in, under, between*) in addition to Ø. The results showed that: a) accuracy was higher when a preposition had a close semantic and syntactic equivalent in SA; b) overall accuracy increased with proficiency; c) prepositions such as *in* and *before* (time), and *under* and *between* (place) were the most accurately used items, while *since, by* and *at* (time), and *next to* and *near* (place) were the most challenging; and d) time prepositions were used more accurately than place prepositions.

KEYWORDS

Arabic, English prepositions, L1 transfer, time prepositions, place prepositions

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 August 2025

PUBLISHED: 22 September 2025

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2025.8.9.25

1. Introduction

The acquisition of grammar is an important part of learning any language. It has to begin with a knowledge of the components of speech and how they come together in a sentence so learners can differentiate between a verb and a preposition or between a clause and a phrase (Ibrahim, 2017). In the English language, many prepositions have a range of meanings and uses which in turn makes it challenging to master them (Flores Galleguillos, 2013). Although they are essential in any language, as speakers rely on them to form sentences (Almegren, 2021), prepositions are regarded as one of the most challenging areas of English grammar for L2 learners (Wene & Putri, 2018). Prepositions are particles that come before nouns and indicate relations between two objects (Badawi, Carter, & Gully, 2013). According to Koffi (2010) and Ballard (2022), the English language has about 150 prepositions and some can cause learners to be confused, including some complex prepositions such as *with regard to* and *instead of* and some simple ones, such as *on, of* and *at*. An understanding of the various categories they fall into – time, place, instrument, agent and direction (Aljuraifani & Alanazi, 2025) – is important for learners to be able to use prepositions effectively and accurately.

There has not been enough research on how Saudi female university students use English time and place prepositions via controlled grammar tasks. As a strong command of English prepositions is essential in both everyday and academic communication, it is important to recruit female university students to address this gap. The study considers time and place prepositions, which are often used not only in academic contexts but also in everyday contexts. Grasping them is important for both written and oral communications and for boosting learners' confidence.

This research is an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How accurate are Saudi learners in the use of time and place prepositions?
2. Is accuracy in the use of English prepositions affected by the proficiency level of English language learners?
3. Is there a difference in difficulty between time and place prepositions?

2. Literature

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students encounter issues when using English prepositions and Saudi students are no exception. This is because their first language (L1), Arabic, lacks some of these prepositions (L1) and there are therefore no rules to govern their use (Abdalla, 2021). Several studies have looked at the preposition difficulties encountered by L2 learners.

A study by Al Yaari and Almaflehi (2013) looked at the challenges facing Saudi EFL students when they translate English prepositions of time (*at*, *in* and *on*) into Arabic and whether gender differences affected their translation performance. The participants were 50 EFL university-level students, 25 male and 25 female. The instrument used was a translation test including 20 sentences, 10 for time prepositions and 10 for place prepositions. The results showed that the students struggled more with time prepositions and had difficulty distinguishing between the use of *in*, *on* and *at*. Most participants were confused when using *in*. However, their use of place prepositions was better. In terms of gender, females performed better than males in the use of both types of prepositions. The results indicated that the participants' L1 transfer and literal translation were the major causes of the students' errors.

Al-Qudah (2013) collected data from 197 Jordanian female university students majoring in English to investigate their grasp of twelve time prepositions: *to*, *in*, *on*, *for*, *after*, *before*, *during*, *at*, *since*, *while*, *until* and *from*. The least challenging of these were *at*, *in*, *to* and *for*, while the most challenging were *while*, *until*, *on* and *since*. The results showed that there were significant improvements among third-year students in the use of *at*, *to* and *since* and that the use of *on* was better among fourth year students. The use of *after* was better among second year students but there was no significant difference in the use of other prepositions. When students had taken a grammar course they performed better at using *during*, *at*, *from* and *while*. Overall, the study showed that this sample of Jordanian English major students struggles to acquire English prepositions of time. The preposition *at* was the most successfully acquired and *until* was the most difficult to acquire. Studying grammar helped to improve their performance on some prepositions. L1 interference played a major role in incorrect usage especially for idiomatic uses.

Loke, Ali & Anthony (2013) carried out a corpus-based study to analyse how accurately and frequently Malaysian secondary school and college students use prepositions *on* and *at* when writing argumentative essays, and their most common error patterns. The participants were 1,010 Malaysian students. The corpus size was 605,300 running words. The errors were omission, insertion and incorrect selections. The students had trouble selecting the correct prepositions especially when they involved time periods and dates. The use of argumentative essays in this study may have limited the number of chances to use prepositions of time, but errors still happened when they appeared due to lack of exposure and confusion.

Ibrahim's (2017) study investigated Saudi students' difficulties in the use of English prepositions of time, specifically *on*, *in* and *at*, and tried to identify the causes of mistakes. Ibrahim enrolled forty students in the study, all of whom were on a health diploma programme and aged (19–24). The data was collected using 14 fill-in-the-blank items testing the use of English prepositions of time. Nearly three-quarters (70%) of those taking part in the study answered incorrectly. The most difficult prepositions proved to be *on* and *in* and errors were caused by L1 transfer and lack of familiarity with the rules of prepositions. The students applied Arabic equivalents which caused the errors, using *in* for most expressions of time, which is equivalent to *fi* in Arabic which covers many time sentences. They performed better with time expressions that involved the word *night* or specific times, such as *10 o'clock*, because these sentences might have been more familiar to them.

For their study of L2 learners' problems with the acquisition and use of English prepositions of time, direction, and place Wene & Putri (2018) drew on a sample of 43 Indonesian EFL university students enrolled in an English language programme. They collected data with a questionnaire and a fill-in-the-blank test which had two sections, each containing an equal number of examples of preposition use: ten for time and ten for direction and place. Nearly half the participants (47%) agreed that prepositions were difficult, but 30.9% disagreed. Common errors in the use of prepositions of time included misusing *from* and *to* and confusing *in* and *on*. Regarding the place and direction prepositions, the participants were confused about the use of *toward*, and were unable to use *out of*. This study showed that the students did not think prepositions were difficult until they were tested. They struggled more with place and direction prepositions than with time.

Abdalla (2021) worked with 10 Saudi university students in an attempt to ascertain the difficulties they faced in the use of English prepositions, specifically when they were used after verbs or within prepositional phrases. The students were majoring in English and aged 20–22. The instrument used was a written test divided into two parts involving two tasks: a) inserting the correct

prepositions after verbs and b) completing prepositional phrases. The findings showed that 82% of the answers to the first part of the test were wrong, while for the second part, 81.2% of the answers were wrong. These results showed that the participants encountered difficulties when using prepositions in prepositional phrases and after verbs, and that this was caused by L1 interference, where there are no Arabic equivalents and because they lack practice.

In 2021, Muhassin and Octavia analysed the frequency and types of time and place preposition errors made by tenth-grade Indonesian students. Their participants were sampled purposively and consisted of thirty-one students chosen because they frequently made errors in their use of prepositions. The data was collected using narrative essays which included prepositions of time and place. Students made different types of errors in approximately equal proportions as follows: errors of omission (25%), errors of addition (24%), and misordering (23%) and misinformation errors (28%). Misinformation errors, such as 'she came for a spring instead of she came to a spring' were more common than the other types. The causes of errors were L1 transfer, the application of L1 structures and low motivation.

Another study of problems with preposition use was conducted by Al-Ahdal and Asmawi. The participants were 46 Arab EFL students aged 18 years at a Malaysian public university. The researchers were also interested in whether communicative language teaching helps learners minimise the errors they make. The data was collected using a pre-test and post-test design that focused on prepositions of time and place and open-ended interviews. The intervention lasted six weeks and involved a CLT based programme which included pictures, newspapers and poems, and reinforcement exercises. Before the intervention, students made a total of ninety-seven errors; after it, they made only thirty-one. Moreover, their attitudes towards English prepositions improved.

Although all the studies above investigated EFL students' difficulties in the use of English prepositions, they either recruited mixed gender samples or used different kinds of prepositions, and used questionnaires or translation tasks. The variety of methods used to study preposition use emphasises the need for more studies that control for variables in order to understand the causes of EFL learners' English time and place errors.

3. English and Saudi Arabic prepositions

Prepositions are grammatical elements that express relationships between linguistic items related to time, place, direction and manner. English prepositions need nouns as complements, as in the phrase *in the room* (Ballard, 2022). Although using English prepositions is relatively simple, they pose challenges for L2 learners of English because their use is idiomatic and sensitive to subtle distinctions (Koffi, 2010; Tyler & Evans, 2020).

Similar to English, Saudi Arabic uses a wide range of prepositions, such as *fi alghurfah* (*in the room*). However, they are different from English in terms of form, scope and usage flexibility. In Saudi Arabic, preposition usage depends on context rather than strict syntactic rules (Almegren, 2021). These variations are more evident in time and place prepositions, which are the focus of the present study. The table below illustrates how English prepositions of time are used, along with their Saudi Arabic counterparts.

Table 1. English and Saudi Arabic prepositions of time

English preposition	Usage	English example	Arabic equivalent	Arabic example
At	Specific time	At 6 p.m.	'ala	'ala alsa'ah sittah
On	Days or dates	On Saturday	N/a	Yaum alsabt
In	Months, years	In February	Fi	Fi fibrayer
Before	Earlier than	Before sunset	Gabl	Gabl alghurub
From	Starting from	From Saturday	Min	Min Alsabt
Since	From past time point	Since 2010	Min	Min 2010
By	Deadline/limit	By 6 p.m.	Gabl	Qabl sittah

The table shows that Saudi Arabic often omits prepositions when expressing days and dates, while English uses *on*. English links the use of prepositions to temporal specificity, while Saudi Arabic uses a variety of strategies such as using *'ala* for clock times and *fi* for months. The preposition *since* is sensitive to tense and aspect in English which is not the case in Arabic. The preposition *by* corresponds to *gabl* (*before*) which means that *gabl* is used instead of the English *before* and *by* (Chodorow, Tetreault, & Han, 2007).

Table 2. English and Saudi Arabic prepositions of place

English preposition	Usage	English example	Arabic equivalent	Arabic example
In	Enclosed spaces	In the room	Fi	Fi algurfah
On	Surfaces	On the table	Ala	Ala alṭawlah
At	Specific locations	At the station	'ind	'ind almaḥaṭa
Under	Beneath something	Under the chair	Taḥt	Taḥt alkursi
Next to	Beside something	Next to the girl	Janb	Janb albint
Between	Between two objects	Between the houses	Bayn	Bayn albaitin
Near	Close proximity	Near the school	Janb	Janb almadrasah

The table shows that English prepositions have near-equivalent forms in Saudi Arabic. However, English seems to have specific prepositions for spatial functions (i.e., *in*, *on*, *at*). Saudi Arabic has a smaller set of forms. For example, *'ind* is used in Saudi Arabic in contexts where English uses *at*, while *janb* is used for *next to* and *near*. Overall, Saudi Arabic uses spatial prepositions more flexibly, while English uses a stricter system.

4. Methodology

Since the aim of this study was to investigate the English time and place prepositions in controlled grammar tasks and to examine the most frequent errors made by Saudi university students, a quantitative method was adopted. Quantitative methods depend on statistics which increases reliability, and experiments can be distributed widely (Babbie, 2020; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). The participants were 30 Saudi female students enrolled at a university. Their proficiency level was either beginner ($n = 15$) or elementary ($n = 15$) according to the Oxford Quick Placement Test. The instrument was a two-part controlled fill-in-the-blank task with a fixed response bank, designed to assess seven English time prepositions (*since*, *by*, *on*, *from*, *at*, *in* and *before*) and seven English place prepositions (*at*, *next to*, *near*, *on*, *in*, *under* and *between*). Each preposition was tested using six sentence-based items. There were 48 items in the task for the time prepositions and 48 for the place prepositions. To avoid fatigue, the tasks were administered in two separate sessions. Seven participants in each proficiency group completed the time task on one day, and the place task the next. To avoid order effects, this pattern was reversed with the remaining participants. The task was validated by two native English speakers to ensure clarity and accuracy. Prior to the data collection, consent forms were distributed to and signed by participants. These informed them that they would remain anonymous, about the purpose of the study and that their responses would be used for research only.

5. Results

This section presents the findings of the participants' preposition selections. First, accuracy scores for each group are presented in the form of two charts to provide an overall view of their mean scores. The results are organised around the three research questions: the first section compares accuracy for each preposition in each category, using repeated-measures ANOVA. The second section examines the role of proficiency level, using independent samples t-tests. The third section concludes by comparing the use of time and place prepositions, using paired samples t-tests.

Time

The graph below shows the accuracy rates for each time preposition in both groups ranked from the least to the most accurately used.

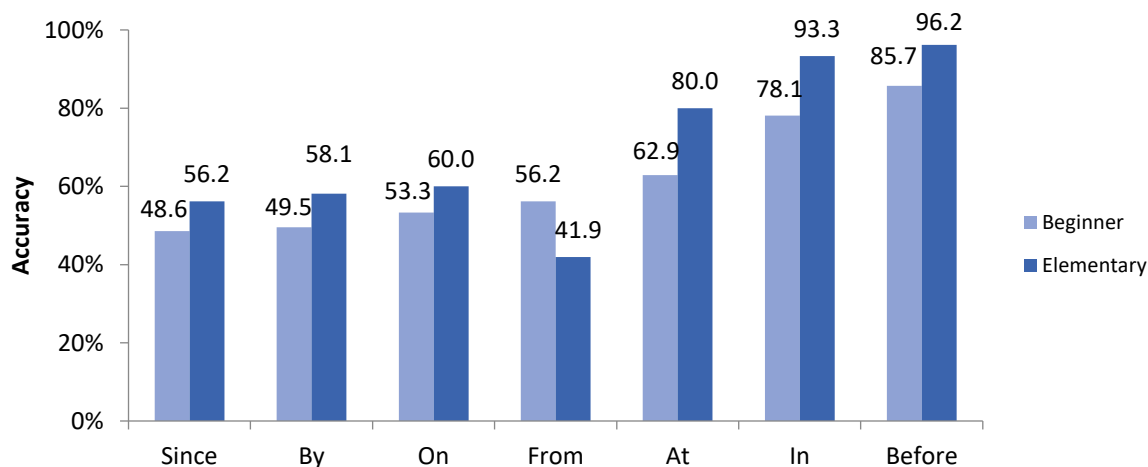


Figure 1. Time prepositions by proficiency level

The graph shows that *since*, *by*, *on* and *from* were used less accurately than the other prepositions. In addition, the accuracy rates are sensitive to proficiency level in that the EG performed more accurately than the BG in the use of all prepositions except *from*.

The table below presents p-values from repeated measures ANOVA post-hoc tests. The target-like prepositions were compared to each other, and are ranked in the same order as the graph, to provide a clearer visual grouping. This order is maintained throughout the results section, although the order may vary according to the type of comparison and group. To avoid redundancy, only the upper triangle of the comparison matrix is presented.

Table 3. Time prepositions compared within group (beginner)

	Since	By	On	From	At	In	Before
Since	-	1.000	1.000	1.000	.712	.016	.001
By	-	-	1.000	1.000	.704	.007	<.001
On	-	-	-	1.000	1.000	.062	.002
From	-	-	-	-	1.000	.024	<.001
At	-	-	-	-	-	.166	.004
In	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.000
Before	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The table shows that *before* was used significantly more accurately than most of the prepositions tested. In contrast, *since*, *by*, *on*, *from*, and *at* were not significantly different from each other, and were among the least accurately used. *In* occupied a middle position, as it was used more accurately than *since*, *by* and *from*.

Table 4. Time prepositions compared within group (elementary)

	Since	By	On	From	At	In	Before
Since	-	1.000	1.000	.218	.008	<.001	<.001
By	-	-	1.000	.330	.059	.001	<.001
On	-	-	-	.193	.091	.003	<.001
From	-	-	-	-	<.001	<.001	<.001
At	-	-	-	-	-	.074	.034
In	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.000
Before	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The table shows that *since*, *by*, *on*, and *from* were all used with a similar degree of accuracy. *At* was used more accurately than *since* and *from*. *In* and *before* were used with about the same degree of accuracy and with a greater degree of accuracy than almost all the other prepositions.

The table below shows the two most frequent non-target uses of time prepositions for both groups.

Table 5. Main non-target time prepositions

Beginner Time	Non-target preposition		Elementary Time	Non-target preposition	
Since	From 34%	Ø 10%	Since	From 26%	Ø 11%
By	Before 24%	Ø 11%	By	Before 25%	On 8%
On	Ø 28%	In 18%	On	In 22%	Ø 16%
From	Since 20%	By 14%	From	Since 28%	Ø 11%
At	On 15%	Ø 12%	At	On 10%	In 7%
In	On 10%	At 7%	In	On 4%	At 2%
Before	Ø 9%	In 2%	Before	At 2%	By 1%

The table shows the two most frequent non-target prepositions for each preposition. The substitutions varied by preposition, item and proficiency level. This reflects variability in learners' choices.

Place

The graph below shows the accuracy rates for each place preposition in both groups, arranged in order of accuracy.

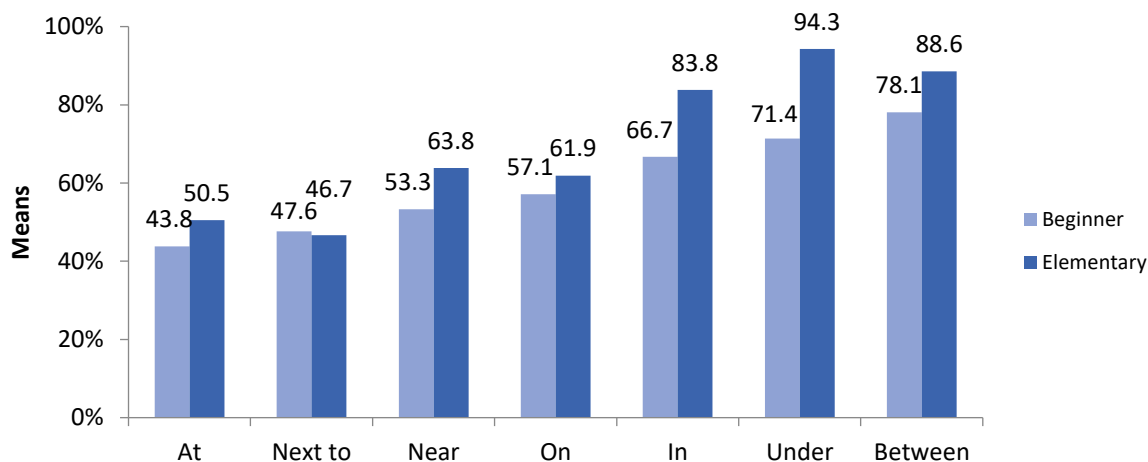


Figure 2. Place prepositions by proficiency level

For the BG, *under* and *between* showed the highest accuracy scores, which was also true for the EG, with the addition of *in*. Both groups showed similar accuracy trends, and the EG was more accurate in most prepositions.

Table 6. Place prepositions compared within group (beginner)

	At	Next to	Near	On	In	Under	Between
At	-	1.000	1.000	1.000	.028	<.001	<.001
Next to	-	-	1.000	.570	.028	.004	<.001
Near	-	-	-	1.000	.610	.027	.008
On	-	-	-	-	1.000	.058	.006
In	-	-	-	-	-	1.000	.180
Under	-	-	-	-	-	-	.284
Between	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 7. Place prepositions compared within group (elementary)

	At	Next to	Near	On	In	Under	Between
At	-	1.000	1.000	1.000	.001	<.001	<.001
Next to	-	-	.589	.128	<.001	<.001	<.001
Near	-	-	-	1.000	.226	<.001	.010
On	-	-	-	-	.009	<.001	.003
In	-	-	-	-	-	.456	1.000
Under	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.000
Between	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The tables show that both groups used the prepositions *at*, *next to*, *near* and *on* with a similar degree of accuracy. *In* was used more accurately than *at* and *next to* (and also more accurately than *on* for the EG). Conversely, *under* and *between* were used similarly and more accurately than almost all other prepositions.

Table 8. Main non-target uses of place prepositions

Place	Non-target place preposition		Place	Non-target place preposition	
At	In 28%	On 22%	At	In 24%	On 20%
Next to	Near 40%	At 7%	Next to	Near 40%	Ø 9%
Near	Next to 27%	By 5%	Near	Next to 19%	Ø 7%
On	In 33%	Ø 5%	On	In 32%	Ø 3%
In	On 32%	Between 1%	In	On 15%	Between 1%
Under	Next to 15%	On 3%	Under	Next to 4%	Between 2%
Between	Under 11%	On 1%	Between	In 5%	On 1%

Similar to time prepositions, substitution and omission errors in the use of place prepositions varied across items and proficiency levels. This indicates inconsistency in learners' choices.

Group comparison

The two groups' uses of prepositions were compared to address the potential role of proficiency.

Table 9. Group comparison of preposition accuracy

Time (Beginner vs. Elementary)		Place (Beginner vs. Elementary)	
Preposition	Significance value	Preposition	Significance value
Since	.267	At	.368
By	.151	Next to	.862
On	.379	Near	.139
From	.022	On	.380
At	.001	In	.005
In	.005	Under	<.001
Before	.010	Between	.019

For time prepositions, the BG outperformed the EG in the use of *from*, whereas the EG performed better with *at*, *in* and *before*. For place prepositions, the EG showed higher accuracy with *in*, *under* and *between*.

Time vs. place

Beginner Group

Three prepositions (*on*, *at*, *in*) were used as both place and time prepositions. These were compared for the beginner group. For *on*, no significant difference was found. Regarding *at*, the participants performed significantly better in the time context ($M=4.4$, $SD=1.0$) than in the place context ($M=3.1$, $SD=0.9$), $t(14)=3.25$, $p=.006$. Concerning *in*, the participants performed more accurately in the time context ($M=5.5$, $SD=1.3$) than in the place context ($M=4.7$, $SD=1.23$), $t(14)=2.18$, $p=.047$.

Elementary Group

Similar to the BG, no significant differences were found in the use of *on*. For *at*, the participants performed better with the time *at* ($M=5.6$, $SD=1.1$) than with the place *at* ($M=3.5$, $SD=1.5$), $t(14)=4.7$, $p=.001$. Regarding *in*, their scores were significantly higher in the time context ($M=6.5$, $SD=0.8$) than in the place context ($M=5.9$, $SD=0.9$), $t(14)=3.16$, $p=.007$.

6. Discussion

This section discusses the findings and is structured to deal with each of the research questions in turn. The discussion draws connections with previous research and the participants' L1.

1. How accurate are Saudi learners in the use of time and place prepositions?
2. Is accuracy in the use of English prepositions affected by the proficiency level of English language learners?
3. Is there a difference in difficulty between time and place prepositions?

Concerning accuracy levels in the use of time prepositions, the results showed that *since*, *by*, *on* and *from* were the least accurately used prepositions, which supports Al-Qudah (2013), Al Yaari & Almaflehi (2013) and Ibrahim (2017). Errors in the use of *since* and *from* are related to the fact that SA has the same equivalent for both prepositions (*min*) which explains why there were a lot of substitution errors, as the participants demonstrated difficulty in distinguishing between *from* and *since*, especially the latter, which requires more complex tense and aspect coordination than does *from*. *By* was challenging to use because its meaning is related to the Arabic *gabl*, which led to confusion and the overuse of *before*. However, *before* was used accurately due to its clarity of meaning, and because it is used in a similar way to the Arabic *gabl*. *On*'s difficulty can be explained by the fact that SA does not use a proposition before days and dates such as *Yaum alsabt (Saturday)* which led to a high degree of omission error due to direct L1 transfer. *At* caused relatively fewer errors but was occasionally confused with *on* and *in*. In contrast, *in* was used more accurately than *at* and *on*, likely because *in* has a semantic and syntactic SA equivalent – *fi* – which explains participants' more successful use, and this supports Al Yaari & Almaflehi (2013) and Ibrahim (2017).

Place prepositions are similar to time prepositions in that they were used with varying degrees of accuracy. *At*, *next to*, *near* and *on* were the most difficult ones. *At* was frequently confused with *in* and *on* and this supports Al Yaari & Almaflehi (2013). The difficulty in using *at* is related to the fact that the SA *'ind* can be used in different spatial contexts related to proximity and locations, which overlap with different English prepositions. Conversely, *next to* and *near* were not used accurately which is in line with Wene & Putri (2018). Both prepositions have the same SA equivalent – *janb* – which led to a high number of substitution errors which were reminiscent of the errors in the use of time prepositions *from* and *since*. *Next to* was substituted more for *near* than vice versa, possibly due to its longer and less familiar form. *On* (SA *'ala*) was moderately challenging which supports Abdalla (2021). It was substituted for *in* because SA has *fi* which means *in* in expressions where English uses *on* such as *on the bus* (*fi albas*). Although it was less challenging, especially for the EG, *in* was still confused with *on*. However, since SA *fi* has a logical and clear mapping to *in*, *in* was used accurately. *Under* and *between* were used the most accurately, and this can be attributed to the clear one-to-one correspondence between the English forms and their SA equivalents *taht* and *bayn* and also to the direct semantic similarity.

Although the two proficiency groups were not distinctly different from each other in terms of proficiency, given that they represented the second and third levels of the proficiency test, they did exhibit some differences in their use of prepositions in line with Ibrahim (2017). The EG was more accurate in the use of the time prepositions *at*, *in* and *before*, and this can be attributed to the greater exposure to temporal distinctions associated with higher proficiency levels. However, the BG outperformed the EG in the use of *from* and this can be attributed to the BG's greater reliance on positive L1 transfer, as *min* is associated with both *since* and *from*. Conversely, *since*, *by*, and *on* remained difficult for both groups and no significant improvement was observed due to the fact that these prepositions require tense awareness (as in *since* and *by*) or lack a clear SA equivalent (as in *on*). For the place prepositions, *in*, *under* and *between* have clear equivalents in SA (*fi*, *taht*, and *bayn*) and are semantically transparent which may explain why they were used more accurately with proficiency. This is in line with Abdalla (2021). However, for *at*, *near*, *next to* and *on*, which do not have such direct analogues in SA, there were no significant differences in accuracy of use, a confusion that persisted at the elementary level, which confirms Wene & Putri (2018).

Concerning whether place or time prepositions are more challenging to use, three overlapping prepositions (*on*, *in* and *at*) were compared in both time and place contexts. *On* was used similarly by both groups, and this can be attributed to the fact that their usage in SA does not distinguish between the place and time *on* which is in line with Abdalla (2021). For *in*, the temporal usage was more accurate than the spatial one. This could be because the SA *fi* strongly aligns with temporal contexts, but its spatial usage is more context-dependent. *At* was used more accurately for time than for place. This can be attributed to the fact that *'ala* is used for clock time in SA but when referring to a place *at* is used in special spatial cases in English, which does not reflect the SA usage. Overall, two-time expressions were used more accurately than their place counterparts, and this indicates that time prepositions are probably less challenging for learners, although both types show overlapping difficulty patterns.

The discussion above shows that SA significantly influences L2 learners' use of English prepositions, especially when the L1 equivalents are either too general (e.g., *fi*, *'ind*) or completely absent. In addition, a number of prepositions especially those that are tied to tense or subtle contextual meanings (e.g., *since*, *by* and *at*) made using prepositions even more challenging. However, it was found that levels of difficulty vary according to preposition. That is, although the participants operated at low proficiency levels, they managed to use prepositions such as *before* at accurately more than 85% of the time. It was also found that time prepositions were slightly easier overall, but both types showed item-specific challenges. The main implication of these findings in terms of teaching instruction is that in order to provide their students with clear and beneficial guidance, teachers should target problematic prepositions individually and examine how learners' L1s realise English prepositions.

The study suffers from the following limitations that can be avoided in future research. First, it recruited only two low-proficiency groups which makes generalising the findings to advanced learners impossible. Second, although the study examined fourteen prepositions, the number is still limited and expanding the range could offer a fuller picture of grammatical challenges. Third,

including participants with different L1 backgrounds may have strengthened the L1 transfer argument. Fourth, administering additional task types may have revealed further insights.

7. Conclusion

This study supports the involvement of L1 transfer in the use of English time and place prepositions by L1 speakers of SA. The findings showed that not all prepositions were equally challenging and that some difficulties resulted from form-function mismatch. That is, time prepositions such as *since*, *by* and *at*, and place prepositions such as *next to* and *near* posed greater challenges. In contrast, the place prepositions *under* and *between* were used accurately. A number of these challenges persisted regardless of proficiency, although the EG used some prepositions more accurately than the BG (e.g., the preposition *in* in the context of both place and time, and *before* in the context of time). Overall, time prepositions were slightly less challenging than place prepositions. This suggests the need for specifically designed instructional materials that target problematic forms.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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