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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **A Corpus-Based Comparative Study of Arabic and English Prepositions among Arabic-Speaking EFL Learners in the Saudi Context**

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**ABSTRACT**

Prepositions play a crucial role in English for expressing relationships of time, place, manner, and possession; however, they can be challenging for Arabic-speaking learners due to the syntactic and semantic differences in structure. This study scrutinises how Saudi EFL learners use English prepositions and compares their usage with that of native English writers. Corpus-based approaches (CBAs) have been utilised for identifying the cooccurrence of prepositions in learner text. The study compiled 500 written texts (150,000 words) in the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) and 2,761 texts (6.9 million words) in the British Academic Written English (BAWE). The study's key findings reveal that in the writings of English learners whose first language is Arabic, the preposition ل / li ("for, to") appears 2614.08 times, ب / bi ("with, by, in") appears 285.25 times, and ك / ka ("like, as") occurs 187.14 times. In contrast, the prepositions فوق / fawq ("above, over") appear only 0.66 times, تحت / tahta ("under, beneath") 0.87 times, and أثناء / athnā' ("during") 0.87 times in learner writing. On the other hand, the most frequently occurring English prepositions are to (67.23), of (39.26), for (31.71), as (24.06), by (23.79), with (21.85), and in (22.21). The least commonly used prepositions include beneath (0.01), beyond (0.13), and concerning (0.13), along with other low-frequency items such as upon (0.37) in BAWE. The findings demonstrate that first language influence and limited exposure to abstract prepositions contribute to these patterns. This study fills a research gap and provides the empirical evidence to guide pedagogical strategies that target underused prepositions in Saudi EFL contexts.

**KEYWORDS**

Prepositions, Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC), British Academic Written English (BAWE), Saudi EFL learners, corpus-based method

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**Background of the Study**

Prepositions are small but important words that play a crucial role in both Arabic and English. They create relationships between words, phrases, clauses, and sentences by linking nouns and pronouns to express time, place, direction, manner, possession, and other abstract meanings. English has a wide range of prepositions, such as in, on, upon, with, between, under, beneath, above, over, after, beyond, to, towards, from, of, about, concerning, before, during, though, by, for, and as. In Arabic, their equivalents— including في (fi "in"), على ('alā "on"), مع (ma'a "with"), بين (bayn "between"), تحت (taht "under"), فوق (fawq "above"), بعد (ba'd "after"), إلى (ilā "to"), من (min "from"), عن ('an "about"), قبل (qabl "before"), أثناء (athnā' "during"), خلال (khilāl "through"), ب (bi "by"), ل (li "for"), and ك (ka "as")—are equally significant in writing. However, although English and Arabic prepositions share similar grammatical functions, they differ considerably in their usage, number, and complexity. Comparative studies examining the similarities and differences between English and Arabic prepositions also highlight the challenges faced by language learners (Al-Marrani, 2009; Altamimi & Alsager, 2024). In addition, prepositions in both English and Arabic serve a fundamental grammatical purpose. They link nouns, pronouns, and phrases within sentences, thereby providing essential context and meaning.

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Both languages use temporal prepositions, such as before (qabl) and since/after (ba'd), as well as prepositions of place (e.g., under (taht), behind (khalf)) and direction (e.g., to (ilā), toward (naḥw)).

Moreover, English distinguishes between simple and complex prepositions (e.g., in, under, in front of, because of), whereas Arabic does not show a comparable distinction. In addition, some English prepositions (e.g., down, beneath, above) may function as adverbs or semi-prepositions in Arabic. Arabic also occasionally uses prepositions as prefixes (e.g., بـ bi, لـ li), while English prepositions are never combined with words in this way. These structural and functional differences can lead to significant errors among Arabic-speaking learners of English. Learners may struggle to master the relatively smaller set of English prepositions that convey broader and more abstract meanings. Therefore, understanding both the similarities and differences between English and Arabic prepositions is essential to avoid errors and ensure effective communication. This comparative analysis highlights the challenges involved in prepositional usage and emphasises the need for special attention to this linguistic feature in language learning contexts (Alotaib & Alrabah, 2018; Antwi, 2020; Catalan, 1996; Castro, 2013; Koffi, 2010; Swan, 2002).

Additionally, Arabic prepositions are generally more concrete in meaning and multifunctional, which often leads to negative transfer, as students rely on the rules of their first language when learning English. Such transfer effects can result in overuse, omission, or substitution errors (Almahammed, 2016; Anderson, 2025). Few corpus-based studies have investigated the specific patterns of prepositional use by Saudi EFL learners (Almegren, 2021; Esseesy, 2010). It provides a quantitative analysis and systematically compares with native English writers.

Furthermore, corpus linguistics has emerged as a methodological approach to the study of language, especially in applied linguistics, second language acquisition (SLA), sociolinguistics, and translation studies. By providing empirical evidence of language use, corpora allow researchers to identify patterns, quantify linguistic features, and compare learner language to nativespeaker norms. Among widely used resources, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC) have been pivotal for examining the linguistic characteristics of diverse written and spoken texts. Similarly, the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) provides a rich resource for examining the written and spoken output of Arabic-speaking learners of English, while the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus represents a benchmark for proficient academic writing in English (Nesi et al., 2008).

The Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC), developed by Dr Abdullah Alfaifi and Professor Eric Atwell, includes contributions from learners across multiple Arabic-speaking countries, covering a range of proficiency levels, age groups, and text genres. The corpus functions primarily as a concordance tool, allowing researchers to extract information about specific linguistic features, such as prepositions. In parallel, the BAWE corpus, created by Dr Paul Thompson and Dr Alois Heuboeck, includes student texts from UK universities across arts, humanities, social sciences, and sciences, providing a reference point for native-speaker academic writing Alfaifi et al., 2014, pp.77-89).

Studies over the past few decades have examined the construction and challenges involved in learning English prepositions due to their polysemy, context-dependent use, and complex rules. Significant research on prepositional usage has been conducted by Lam (2009) and Loke et al. (2013), which indicates that the correct use of prepositions is far from straightforward. Acquiring knowledge of the multiple meanings of prepositions and their context-dependent functions is challenging, and interference from learners' first language often results in errors. Learners frequently assume equivalence between Arabic and English prepositional forms, which poses a significant challenge in second language acquisition.

One major source of difficulty is the disparity in the number of prepositions in the two languages. English has approximately one hundred prepositions (Leacock et al., 2014, p. 54), whereas Arabic has only about twenty-nine (Aldahesh, 2013, p. 90). Although Arabic prepositions are fewer in number, they tend to be more general in meaning.

Arabic prepositions constitute one of the most problematic areas in second language learning and acquisition due to their abstract meanings and the lack of direct correspondence between Arabic and English prepositional systems. The current study explores the use and types of Arabic prepositions in the written texts of Saudi EFL learners. The functional distribution of prepositions is investigated using ALC. The primary aim of this study is to examine the overall frequency of Arabic prepositions and compare them with those used by native English speakers. This comparison between non-native and native writing provides a systematic understanding of prepositional usage and offers insights into learners' attitudes toward prepositions in both languages. This study contributes to second language acquisition research and applied linguistics. The study quantifies prepositional use and examines differences among native English writers, and it provides evidence-based insights into common

errors, L1 transfer effects, and proficiency-related patterns. Pedagogically, these findings can inform curriculum design, instructional strategies, and corpus informed teaching practices that address abstract and idiomatic uses of prepositions. In addition, the study demonstrates the value of corpus-based methodologies for investigating specific grammatical features among native and non-native contexts.

### **Research Questions**

The study aims to find answers to the following questions, which are the various aspects of the main question:

1. How often do Saudi EFL students use English prepositions in the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC)?
2. How do these frequencies compare with those found in the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus of native English writers?
3. What are the most commonly and least commonly used categories of prepositions by Saudi EFL learners?
4. What are the tendencies of the engagement with the English prepositions among Saudi learners?

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objective of this study is to:

1. To investigate the frequency and distribution of English prepositions in writings by Saudi EFL learners through corpus-based methodology.
2. To compare the usage of English prepositions in the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) with the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus.
3. To determine the most used and misused types of prepositions (time, place, manner, possession, and comparison).
4. To investigate how the first language (L1) Arabic affects the use of English prepositions by Saudi EFL learners.

### **Significance of Study**

The current research is significant because it provides empirical evidence on the acquisition and usage of English prepositions among Saudi EFL learners. The results offer insights into prepositional frequency and usage, and they also identify areas of overuse and underuse, as well as the impact of Arabic on learners' prepositional choices. This study may be considered groundbreaking, as it introduces a new line of inquiry into Arabic writing within EFL Saudi scholarly articles. Furthermore, it is the first corpus-based study to open numerous avenues for research within the academic Arabic linguistic context.

In addition, the topic of the present investigation is highly significant because no previous research has employed a corpus-based method to examine prepositions and their classification. This study is unique and addresses an area that has been largely neglected. It also serves as a bridge between past research on prepositions and their categorization within Saudi research articles. A comparative study on prepositions and their types has not been conducted in Saudi Arabia, nor has such a study been carried out in a global linguistic research context.

### **Literature Review**

The acquisition of English prepositions is a complex problem for Second Language Learners and Foreign Language (EFL) learners. In contrast to most other grammatical categories, prepositions are abstract, polysemous, and contextual in nature and have to be acquired by learners in subtle form and in subtle function (Lindstromberg, 2010; Kemmerer, 2005). These features complicate mastering prepositions because learners are required to combine syntactic knowledge and semantic knowledge.

The lack of one to one equivalent between English and Arabic prepositions adds more difficulties to Arabic-speaking learners. Arabic prepositions usually have several semantic meanings (that are context dependent), whereas English prepositions are generally stricter in their usage (Mahmoodzadeh, 2012). This difference may lead to the overuse, underuse, or wrong choices of prepositions, which affect written and spoken communication. To illustrate the point, the English preposition on can be literally translated into Arabic as ala, the contextual application in the idiomatic expressions of English can vary significantly, resulting in mistakes.

From another perspective, prepositions are critical elements for expressing accurate temporal, spatial, and relational references, which are essential in academic writing and discourse. The use or lack of prepositions may distort meaning and may lead to a lack of understanding. Thus, it is essential to comprehend how learners acquire prepositions and how acquiring prepositions depends on factors in both SLA research and EFL pedagogy.

A number of studies have been conducted on the knowledge and use of prepositions by EFL/ESL learners in various situations. In a study by Masoudi (2020) examining the conceptualisation of English prepositional verbs by Saudi EFL learners in academic writing, the authors discovered that learners usually have difficulties in using them correctly, especially in formal writing. In a similar vein, Shafique and Mahmood (2022) studied prepositional mistakes among the undergraduate ESL students in Pakistan and have found that these mistakes are common, which are associated with the gaps in grammatical knowledge and exposure to English. Al-Zangana et al. (2016) examined Kurdish EFL learners and found out that concrete preposition errors are more commonly made by beginners and abstract and less frequent prepositions are more problematic in advanced learners. Together, these studies underscore the notion that acquisition and proper use of prepositions is a developmental process that depends on the competence level of the learners, exposure, and the learning environment, which implies that prepositional competence is one of the major indicators of the overall language competence.

### **L1 Influence and Transfer**

Past studies have investigated the Arabic and first language interference in the written English of Saudi EFL learners. (Alhajailan, 2020). For Arabic-speaking learners, the prepositional semantic multiplicity and structural distinctions between Arabic and English make a significant contribution towards these errors. Ineza & Najim (2010) indicate that learners often replace, miss, or wrongly apply prepositions because of Arabic negative transfer. Direct translation of the Arabic preposition *fi* to English *in* can be wrong in some situations, like *in the bus* as opposed to *on the bus*.

The overuse of high-frequency prepositions like *of*, *to*, *in*, *for*, *on*, and *by* are patterns with a rich history (Biber, 1999). There is a tendency to overgeneralize these high-frequency items, whereas less frequent prepositions are underutilised, which is a sign of incomplete knowledge about semantic differences. According to Qasem (2020) observed that Saudi EFL learners do not commonly use less frequent prepositions in their writing. And Mujcinovic (2020) found the same trends in Bosnian learners, meaning that negative L1 transfer is a cross-linguistic issue, but not a phenomenon specific to Arabic speakers.

Learning is also complicated by the fact that the Arabic prepositions have semantic multiplicity when one form can have multiple meanings in different contexts (Aldahesh, 2013). This plurality frequently leads to the overgeneralization of a single form to multiple functions, leading to predictable errors by the learners. Therefore, context-related instructional strategies are critical in helping language learners to be conscious of semantic differences and correct usage patterns (Abdalla, 2021).

Cognitive theories of SLA indicate that L1 influence not only leads to error but is also a resource that learners use during the initial onset of acquisition (Ellis, 2006). Transfer not only results in accuracy interference, but can also facilitate learning when using appropriate similarities between the L1 and L2 structures. Therefore, educators should be keen on shaping instruction to prevent negative transfer but to take advantage of positive transfer.

### **Contrasting Studies on Prepositions.**

Comparative analyses made by Arabic against English give more information on the structural and semantic difficulties to which learners are exposed. According to Djeribiai (2022) and Alotaibi et al. (2018), English prepositions usually do not have direct equivalents in the Arabic language, and thus learners tend to use approximations of their native language, resulting in either misuse or omission. An example of this is the wrong usage of the phrase *on Monday* rather than *on Monday* that illustrates the way learners transfer L1 rules to the L2 framework.

As noted by Alnasery (2024), the key reasons for mistranslation are semantic overlap and structural variance between Arabic and English. Context-based translation techniques, where the meaning of prepositions in context is considered instead of literal correspondence, are proposed to improve the accuracy of learners. On the same note, Altamimi and Alsager (2024) refer to prepositional errors as some of the larger grammatical challenges that Saudi EFL learners face, such as subject-verb disagreement, the use of articles, and tense errors. The findings show that prepositional acquisition is deeply connected with general grammatical competency and exposure to real English.

Contrastive analysis is therefore a descriptive and predictive instrument. Through the knowledge of the points of divergence of the L1 and L2, the educators are able to predict the patterns of common errors and offer specific instruction. Furthermore, the comparison studies offer the new curriculum development the empirical evidence that helps to develop the exercises that are focused on risks prepositions and the usage patterns that are context-dependent.

### **Corpus-Based Investigations.**

Corpus-based research has played an important role in analysing the use and errors of prepositions among EFL students. Learner corpora provide statistical evidence of how prepositions are used, including their frequency, overuse, underuse, and incorrect use (Roslim & Mukundan, 2011; Yuan, 2014; Arjan et al., 2013; Loke et al., 2013). By studying natural learner language, researchers can identify recurring errors and patterns, which are important for both second language acquisition theory and language teaching practice. Alhammad (2023) examined the use of spatial prepositions (in, on, and at) among Saudi EFL learners. The study also found mistakes in collocations with prepositional verbs, which were linked to first language transfer and limited exposure to natural English usage. Such corpus-based studies highlight the importance of context-based learning experiences and provide useful insights for curriculum design.

A corpus-based approach and cross-linguistic comparisons reveal that learners frequently use prepositions inaccurately when producing English. Comparative studies show that learners' overreliance on L1 structures leads to a high prevalence of errors in academic writing and spoken discourse.

In addition, corpora facilitate longitudinal analysis, which allows researchers to investigate the developmental patterns. For example, comparative studies of beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners indicate that errors decrease with practice and explicit instruction. Although some semantically complex prepositions remain challenging even at higher proficiency levels (Lindstromberg, 2010).

It has been noted that learners from Arabic-speaking countries face difficulties in learning English prepositions due to the influence of their first language (Gvarishvili, 2013). Previous studies (Alangari, 2019) are primarily based on limited samples and qualitative data, and relatively few corpus-based investigations have examined the use of prepositions within the Saudi EFL context.

### **Semantic Complexity of Prepositions**

The literature review shows that L1 interference, semantic complexity, and limited exposure are cumulative factors that inhibit accurate prepositional acquisition. While the literature concerning Saudi EFL learners is substantial, corpus-based studies are still insufficient. There is a scarcity of qualitative analyses concerning prepositional usage, especially in relation to the application and misapplication of prepositions among EFL writing students across various academic contexts and proficiency levels (Nurhamidah, 2021; Saeed et al., 2015).

The acquisition of English prepositions by Arabic-speaking learners is influenced by several interrelated factors, such as L1 transfer, semantic complexity, idiomatic and phrasal usage, and limited exposure to English. Corpus-based research and contrastive studies provide empirical data on learner errors, frequency distributions, usage patterns, and common misuses.

The evidence underscores the need for corpus-based methods in EFL classrooms, particularly in Saudi Arabia. Analysing the frequency and nature of prepositional use enables teachers to identify overuse, underuse, and incorrect choices and to formulate targeted interventions. Further research should focus on examining larger corpora, conducting longitudinal monitoring of learner progress, and incorporating technological tools to support prepositional acquisition. Such efforts will contribute to the development of both theoretical knowledge and applied pedagogy in SLA, ultimately improving learners' accuracy, fluency, and communicative competence in English.

The previous have studies shown that teaching semantic differences through visuals, realistic texts, and contextual practice improves learner comprehension level. Technology-enhanced learning, such as corpus-based concordances, provides empirical evidence of usage patterns that can be presented to learners, helping them gain clearer insight into the meanings and functions of prepositions.

The literature on Saudi EFL learners is extensive, but corpus-based studies in this area remain limited. Few studies have conducted qualitative analyses in light of the findings on prepositional usage, particularly regarding the use and misuse of prepositions in EFL writing students (Nurhamidah, 2021; Saeed et al., 2015).

This gap highlights the need for a corpus-based approach and instructional strategies in classroom teaching. The key teaching strategies must involve contextualised learning and address the various senses of preposition, such as exercises of idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs, and utilise corpus-based curriculum resources that highlight common errors of learners. Additionally, it is possible to integrate real materials to expose learners to the real world and make them aware of how prepositions function in natural English usage.

Along similar lines, addressing these aspects reduces the impact of L1 interference, enhances semantic understanding, and promotes appropriate prepositional use in both scholarly writing and oral communication. Moreover, these strategies contribute to SLA research by providing evidence of learner development, error patterns, and instructional effectiveness.

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### Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the prevalence of English prepositions among the Saudi EFL learners. This approach provided systematic identification, quantification, and comparison of prepositional use across the learner and native corpora.

### Data Collection

The two corpora were used in the study to understand prepositional usage. The Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) Arab corpus (<https://arabiccorpus.byu.edu/>), developed by the University of Leeds, was the first corpus. It includes both written and verbal information on 942 students learning Arabic in Saudi Arabia. In this study, 500 written texts were chosen, equivalent to 150,000 words. These texts covered various levels of proficiency (beginner, intermediate, and advanced), age groups (16-42 years), and genres (essays, reports, and summaries). Written texts have been selected due to the fact that the study is about academic writing performance, and the ALC provides real learner-written language that is applicable in determining the L1 transfer effect in prepositional language use. The British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/britishacademic-written-english-corpus/>) corpus is the second corpus, which comprises 2,761 of the assessed academic texts of the universities in the United Kingdom, and includes 6.9 million words in total, representing Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Life Sciences, and Physical Sciences. The texts vary between 500 and 5,000 words. BAWE was chosen to offer a solid baseline to inform academic writing and to be used to identify deviations, errors, and frequency variations in learner writing.

**Table 1 Statistical Analysis of Learner Data**

Corpus	Size (Words)	Number of Texts	Learner Levels	Genres / Disciplines
<b>Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC)</b>	150,000	500 written texts (from 942 learners)	Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced	Essays, reports, summaries
<b>British Academic Written English (BAWE)</b>	6,506,995	2,858 texts	Proficient university level writers (Undergraduate & Master's)	30 disciplines across four major fields: Arts & Humanities, Social Sciences, Life Sciences, Physical Sciences; 13 genre families (e.g., Essay, Case Study, Literature Survey, Research Report, Proposal, etc.)

ALC was selected with 500 written texts from three proficiency levels to maintain balanced representation. Beginners contributed

150 texts (about 45,000 words), intermediate learners provided 200 texts (about 60,000 words), and advanced learners contributed 150 texts (about 45,000 words). The dataset included a variety of genres: 60% essays, 30% reports, and 10% summaries. This proportional distribution was chosen to reflect the authentic academic writing tasks assigned to learners and to allow a meaningful comparison of prepositional use across proficiency levels and genres. On the other hand, the British Academic Written English Corpus (BAWE) is a large corpus of written student writing in the United Kingdom. It contains nearly 3,000 written assignments of no more than 2000-2007 years of writing and approximately 6.5 million words. The texts are varied and belong to Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Life Sciences, and Physical Sciences. They also address numerous forms of writing, such as case studies, proposals, essays, and reports. The assignments were all written in real university assessments and were rated by lecturers as good quality. Native English speakers wrote most of the texts; the rest were written by proficient users of English as a second language as well.

### **Preposition Identification and Coding Procedures**

Prepositions were automatically extracted through the corpus tools Arabicorpus (for ALC) and Sketch Engine (for BAWE). All extracted prepositions were then manually checked to identify the frequency and distribution of individual types. These tools provide reliable and authentic results, allowing the study to determine which prepositions were used, underused, or overused based on the frequency patterns in both corpora.

**Table 2 Arabic and English Prepositions**

No	Type of Preposition	Arabic Preposition	English Preposition	Type of Preposition
1.	Place / Spatial	في (fi)	In	Place / Spatial
2.	Place / Spatial	على ('ala)	On	Place / Spatial
3.	–	–	Upon	Place / Spatial
4.	Accompaniment / Association	مع (ma'a)	With	Manner / Instrument
5.	Place / Spatial	بين (bayn)	Between	Place / Spatial
6.	Place / Spatial	تحت (taht)	Under	Place / Spatial
7.	–	–	Beneath	Place / Spatial
8.	Place / Spatial	فوق (fawq)	Above	Place / Spatial
9.	–	–	Over	Place / Spatial
10.	Time	بعد (ba'd)	After	Time
11.	–	–	Beyond	Time / Extension
12.	Direction / Spatial	إلى (ila)	To	Direction
13.	–	–	Towards	Direction
14.	Source / From	من (min)	From	Source / From
15.	–	–	Of	Possession / Relation
16.	About / Concerning	عن ('an)	About	Cause / Purpose
17.	–	–	Concerning	Cause / Purpose

18.	Time	قبل (qabl)	Before	Time
19.	Time	أثناء (athna')	During	Time
20.	Time	خلال (khilal)	Through	Manner / Instrument
21.	Manner / Instrument	ب (bi)	By	Manner / Instrument
22.	Possession / Belonging	ل (li)	For	Purpose / Cause
23.	Comparison	كـ (ka)	As	Comparison / Function

The above table identifies the major prepositional categories in Arabic and English. Prepositions of place (showing the location or position of something), time (indicating when an event occurs), and direction (showing movement toward or away from something) are largely similar in both languages. However, categories such as movement, source/from (showing how something is done or where it originates), accompaniment/association (doing something with someone or something), possession/belonging (showing ownership or association), cause/purpose (explaining why something happens), and comparison (indicating similarity or difference) show more variation.

Overall, Arabic and English share similar prepositional types, but English contains a much wider range of forms within each category, whereas Arabic relies on fewer prepositions that carry broader, more general meanings.

### Normalized Frequency

Frequencies of prepositions were normalised and counted. The given formula was used to calculate the relative frequency of prepositions to allow meaningful comparison across corpora of different sizes (Biber et al., 1991).

Normalised Frequency (Raw Frequency)  $\times 1000$   
 Total Number of Words For instance, the  
 preposition (ala) occurred 2597 times in the Arabic  
 Learner Corpus (ALC), which contains  
 approximately 287,295 words. Applying the  
 normalisation formula:

$$\text{Normalized Frequency} = \frac{(2597)}{287295} \times 100,000 = 904.1$$

### Research Procedure

The analysis was conducted in three steps. First, all the prepositions in the sampled texts were identified through the EFL and the native writers. Second, the frequencies of these prepositions were calculated and normalised to allow comparison across the corpora. Third, a statistical comparison was made between the ALC and BAWE to examine how prepositions were used, as well as to identify the reasons behind learners' use or overuse of certain forms. Tables and charts were used to visualise the patterns of prepositions.

### Ethical Considerations

All data related to learners were anonymised to protect personal identities, and permission was obtained from the corpus administrators. The findings were presented in a well-organised and transparent manner to ensure confidentiality, privacy, and adherence to ethical standards throughout the study.

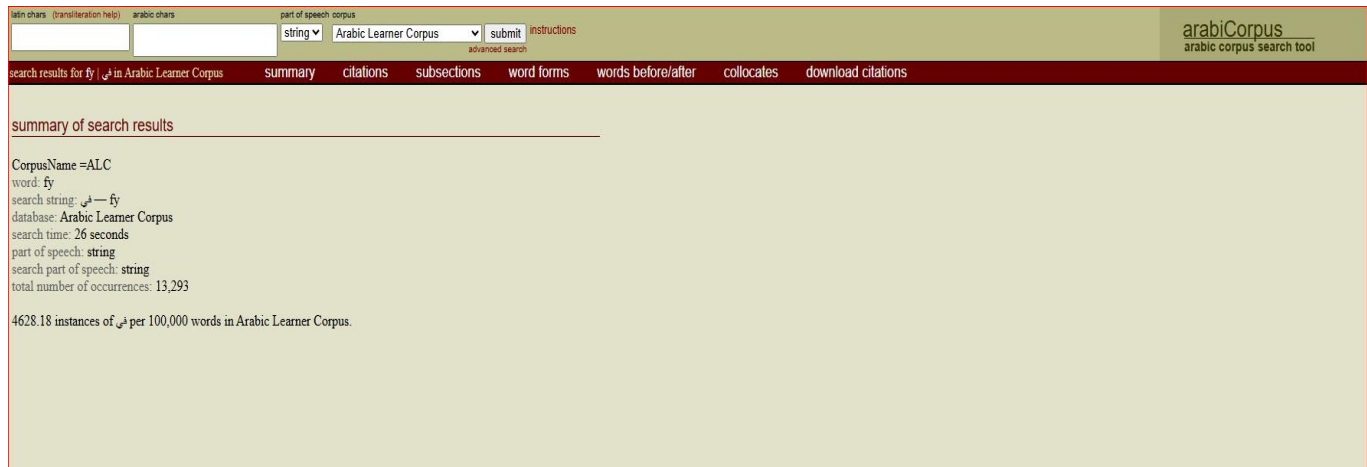
### Result

The Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) and the British Academic Written English (BAWE) Corpus are used in this section to collect and analyse data. This analysis would be done with the frequency and patterns of prepositions used by Saudi EFL learners in ALC



versus the use of prepositions in native English. It also identifies collocations and contextual use to provide knowledge of how learners behave. This chapter is aimed at constructing a comparison between the prevalence of prepositions among Arabic learners in ALC and BAWE.

This comparison shows how Saudi students employ prepositions in their writing and how their usage varies from that of native writers. The study uses these frequencies to identify prepositions that students would use excessively or insufficiently, indicating areas of weakness. The findings can be used to provide a contextual understanding of the process by which Saudi students acquire English prepositions and the challenges they encounter during learning. This study also provides a detailed description of the pattern, analysis, and use of prepositions in the classroom. The following table illustrates the frequency number and a description of the prepositions of both ALC and BAWE, and the pattern comparison is given. The findings demonstrate the similarities and differences of prepositional use that can be applied in subsequent pedagogical approaches to EFL students.



**Figure 1 Frequency of Fi Prepositions in ALC**

The Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) search results indicated that the preposition of fi (في / in, inside) is employed 13,293 times. The frequency of fi is so high because it is an important part of the writing performed by the learner. It is among the primary prepositions of designating position, time, and abstract relationships. The preposition is regularly used, which proves the fact that learners use this multifaceted preposition regularly to structure the meaning and to form the spatial, temporal, and conceptual connections in their text.

### **Example 1**

الكتاب **في**  
الحقيبة

The book is **inside** the bag.

[\(https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/\)](https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/)



**Figure 2 Frequency of Ala Prepositions**

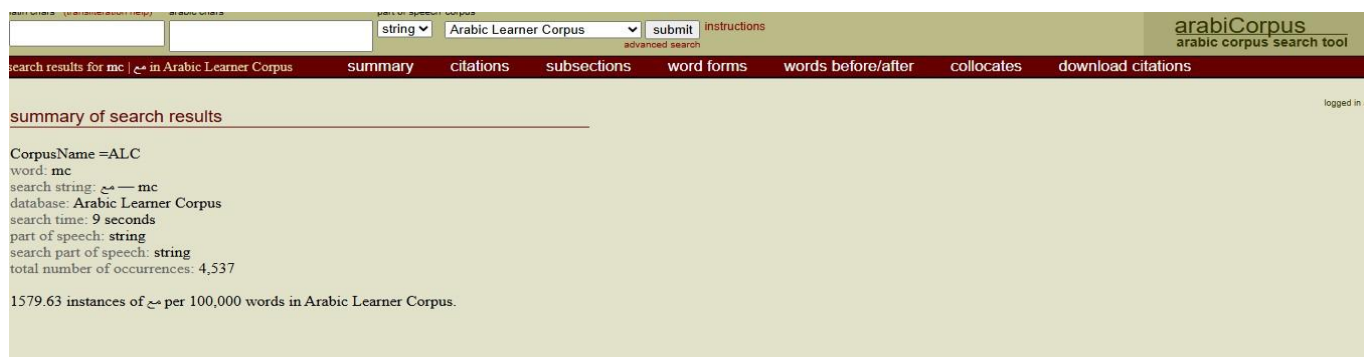
The figure above shows that the preposition *ala* (على) (on or upon) appeared 2,597 times in the corpus. The statistical findings indicate that this preposition is often used by the learners in their writing. The same finding also shows that the preposition *ala* is used to convey spatial relations (e.g., on or upon) and metaphorical meanings. The following examples of 'alā are taken from the ALC.

Example 1

وضع القلم على الطاولة.

The pen was placed on the tab

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)



**Figure 3 Frequency of Ma'a Prepositions in ALC**

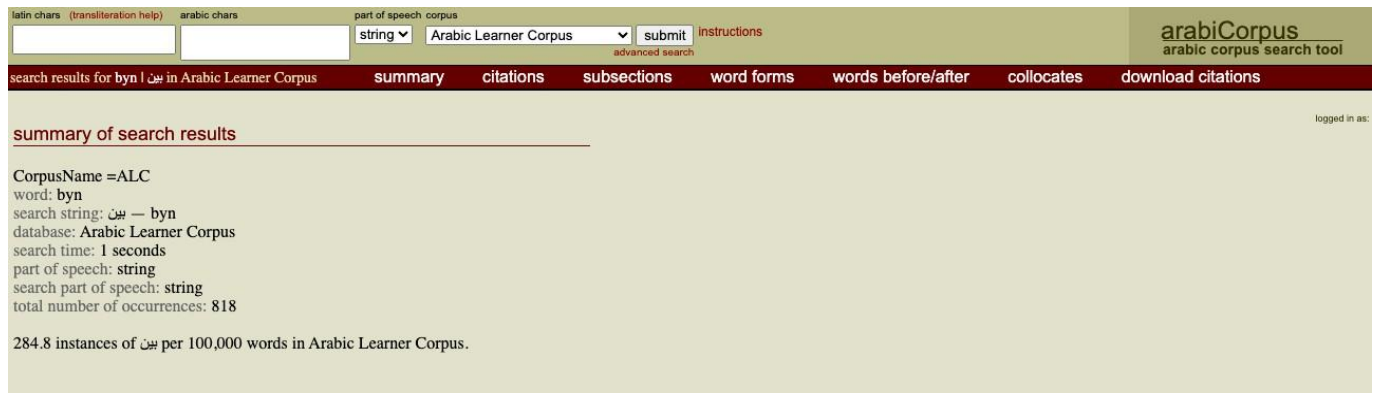
The above figure shows that the preposition *ma'a* (مع / with) occurs 4,537 times in the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC). The frequency of this preposition indicates that learners frequently use *ma'a* to express accompaniment or association in their writing. Its high frequency highlights its importance in learner discourse, as this preposition is simple, multifunctional, and an inherent part of everyday communication.

Example

ذهبت مع صديقي.

I went with my friend.

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)



**Figure 4 Frequency of Bayna Prepositions in ALC**

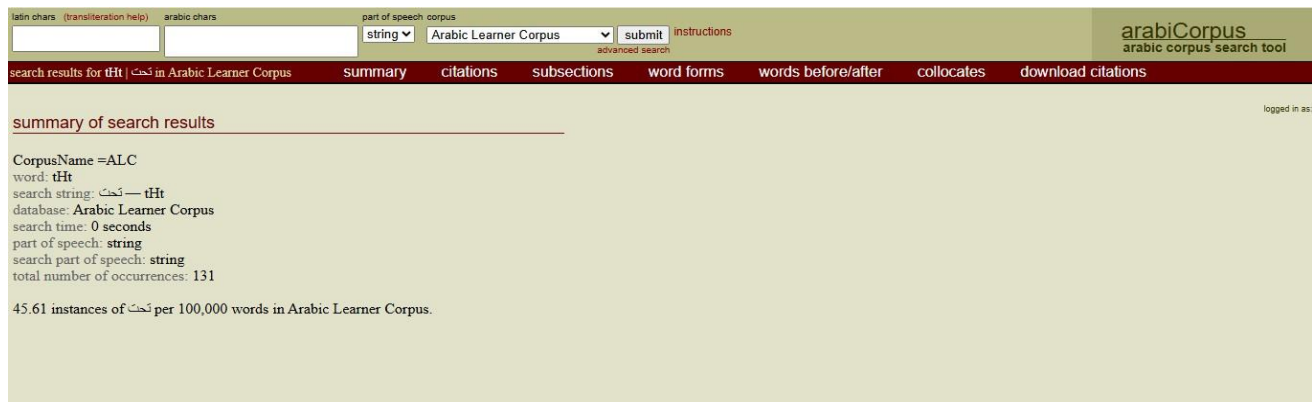
The figure above shows that the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) has 818 instances of the preposition bayna (بين / between, among). This means that students use bayna a little bit in their writing, mostly to talk about how two or more things are positioned or opposed to each other. But it doesn't happen as often as other prepositions. But it is still important to use it because it helps learners make comparisons and talk about differences. The ALC provides the following examples of bayna.

### Example 1

المال بين  
الصفحات

The money is **between** the pages.

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)



**Figure 5 Frequency of Tahta Prepositions in ALC**

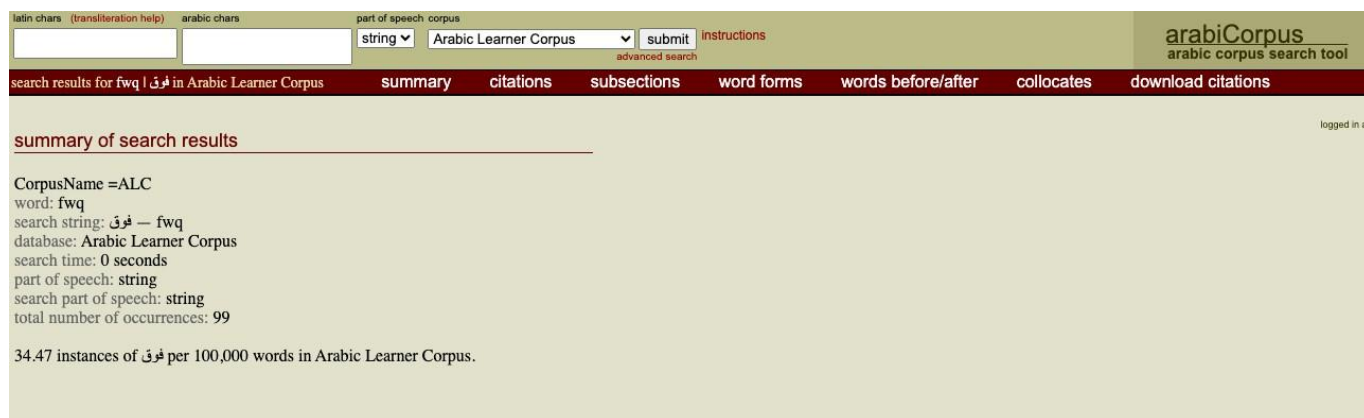
The Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) shows that the preposition tahta (تحت / under, beneath) is used 131 times. This relatively low frequency indicates that learners seldom employ tahta in their writing, potentially due to the infrequent necessity of such spatial relations in academic or descriptive contexts.

### Example 1

الحذاء تحت  
السريّر

The shoe is **under** the bed.

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)



**Figure 6 Frequency of Fawqa Prepositions in ALC**

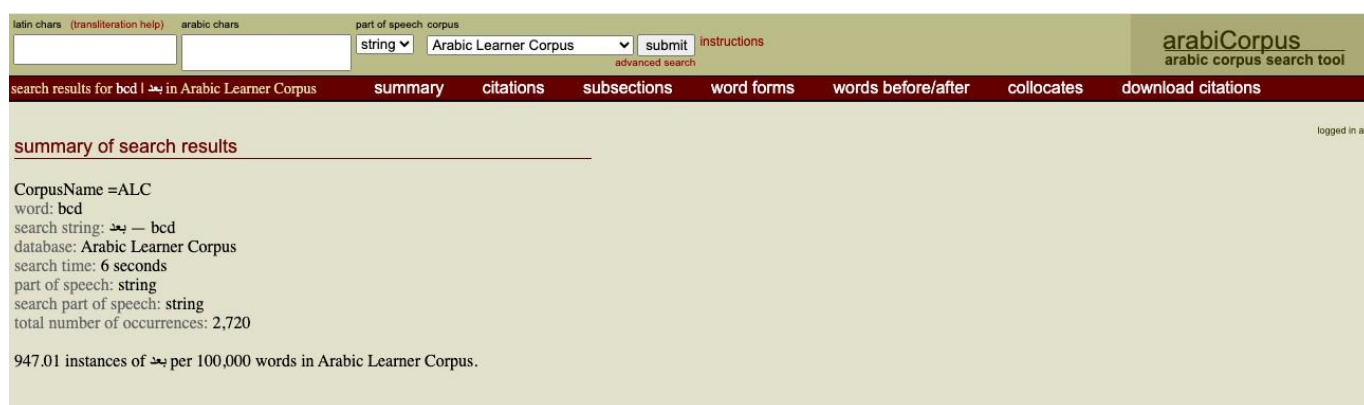
The results show that the preposition fawqa (فوق / above, over) appears 99 times in the whole corpus. This relatively low frequency suggests that students don't use "fawqa" very often in their writing. This outcome indicates that such spatial relations are infrequently necessary in learner text. The examples below from the ALC show how to use the preposition fawqa.

#### Example 1

الطيور فوق الشجرة.

The birds are above the tree.

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)



**Figure 7 Frequency of Ba'da Prepositions in ALC**

According to the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) search results, the preposition ba'da (بعد / after) appears 2,720 times. This high frequency suggests that learners regularly utilise ba'da to communicate time and sequence. Its extensive use emphasises the significance of communicating chronological sequence and advancement in learner speech. The following examples of ba'da are from the ALC.

#### Example 1

ذهب إلى البيت بعد المدرسة

After school, he went to the house.

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)



**Figure 8 Frequency of Ele Prepositions in ALC**

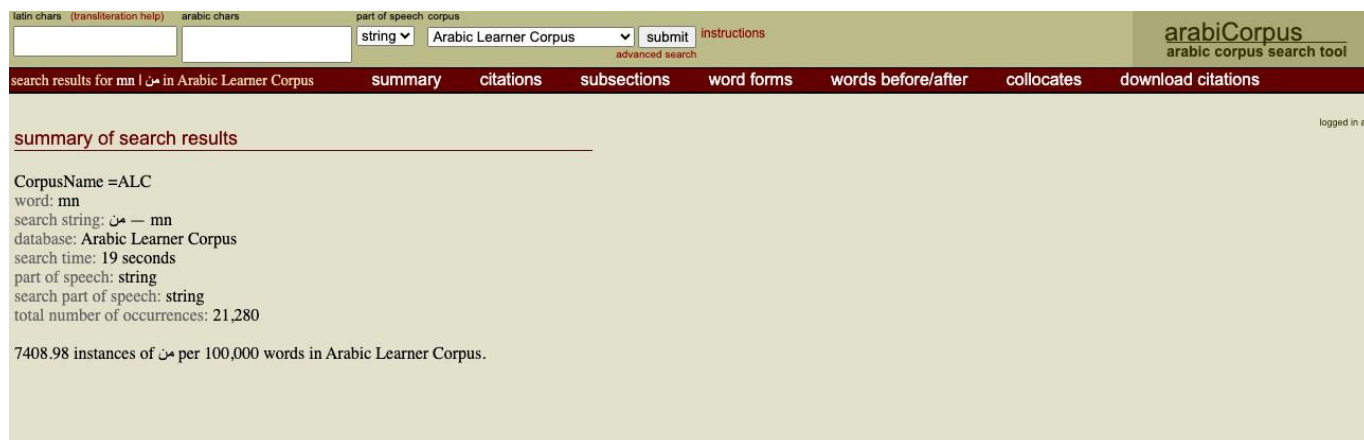
The above figure demonstrates that the preposition 'ilā (إلى / to, towards) is widespread in the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC), which includes 6,681 instances of the preposition. This frequency is notably high which highlights its core in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing. It is a crucial preposition expressing direction, movement, and purpose. Its high frequency indicates that learners use this preposition to build upon spatial and metaphorical relationships, and it is therefore one of the most essential prepositions of the corpus.

### Examples

1 ذهب الطالب إلى الجامعة في الصباح

The student went to the university in the morning.

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)



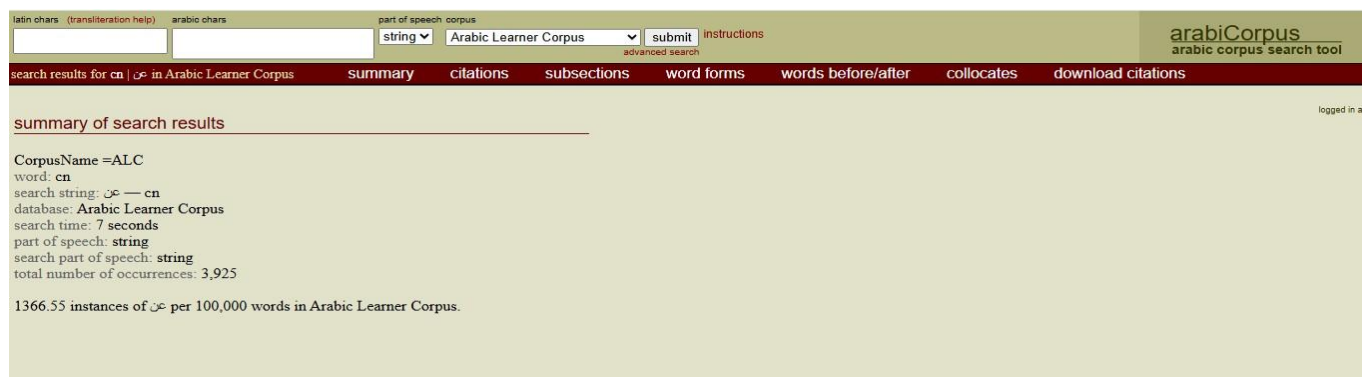
**Figure 9 Frequency of Mn Prepositions in ALC**

The search results of the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) indicate that the preposition mn"من" (min / from, of) is repeated 21,280 times. This incredibly large frequency contributes to the fact that 'mn' is among the most common prepositions in the writings of learners. Its common usage is evidence of its versatility in that it can mean origin, partitive relations, cause, or discontinuity. The findings indicate that learners use 'mn' a lot to convey a wide variety of meanings, and it is at the core of the Arabic grammar and speech. The examples listed below point to the use of the word mn in the ALC. **Example 1**

عاد الأستاذ من المدرسة مبكراً

The teacher came from the school early.

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)



**Figure 10 Frequency of En Prepositions in ALC**

The Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) shows that the preposition "عن" ('an / about, from) occurs 3,925 times. This demonstrates that learners employ it in the process of articulating topics, reasons, or the origin of information. This preposition emphasises its academic and descriptive writing, where learners often argue about ideas, events, or reasons. Examples of "عن" from the ALC are illustrated below.

### Examples 1

تحدثنا عن البحث مدة طويلة

We talked about the research for a long time.

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)



**Figure 11 Frequency of Qbl Prepositions in ALC**

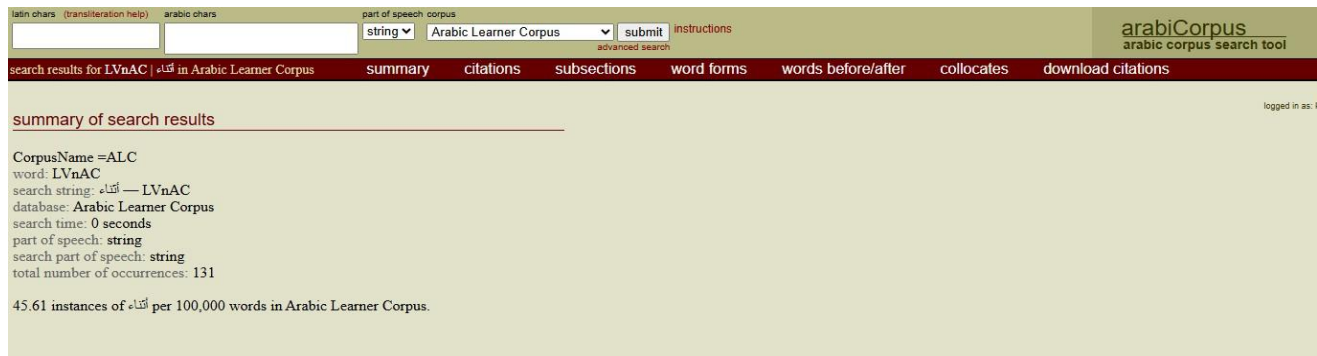
The preposition "قبل" (qabl / before) occurs 1,351 times in the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC). This indicates that learners make moderate use of this preposition, mainly to express temporal relations and the sequence of events. Its usage reflects learners' need to organise ideas chronologically, though it appears less frequently than more general-purpose prepositions. The following examples demonstrate the use of "قبل" in the ALC.

### Examples

جاء الطالب قبل بداية الدرس

The student came before the lesson.

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)



**Figure 12 Frequency of Ahtaa Prepositions in ALC**

The relatively low frequency of "أثناء" ('athnā' / during) suggests that learners use it less often compared to other common prepositions. The Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) shows that the preposition "أثناء" ('athnā' / during) occurs 131 times. This use is typically limited to indicating actions or events happening within a specific time frame, which may explain why it appears less frequently in learner writing. The data below presents examples of "أثناء" from the ALC.

### 1 Examples أثناء المحاضرة

The professor spoke **during** the lecture.

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)



**Figure 13 Frequency of Khilal Prepositions in ALC**

The search results from the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) show that the preposition "خلال" (khilāl / during, through) occurs 156 times. This relatively low frequency suggests that learners use "خلال" only infrequently and prefers simpler and familiar temporal prepositions such as "في" (in) or "بعد" (after). Its limited use may also indicate restricted exposure in learner contexts, despite its importance in formal and academic Arabic for expressing duration and time frames.

### Examples 1 سافرتنا خلال العطلة

We travelled **during** the holiday.

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)





**Figure 14 Frequency of Bi Prepositions in ALC**

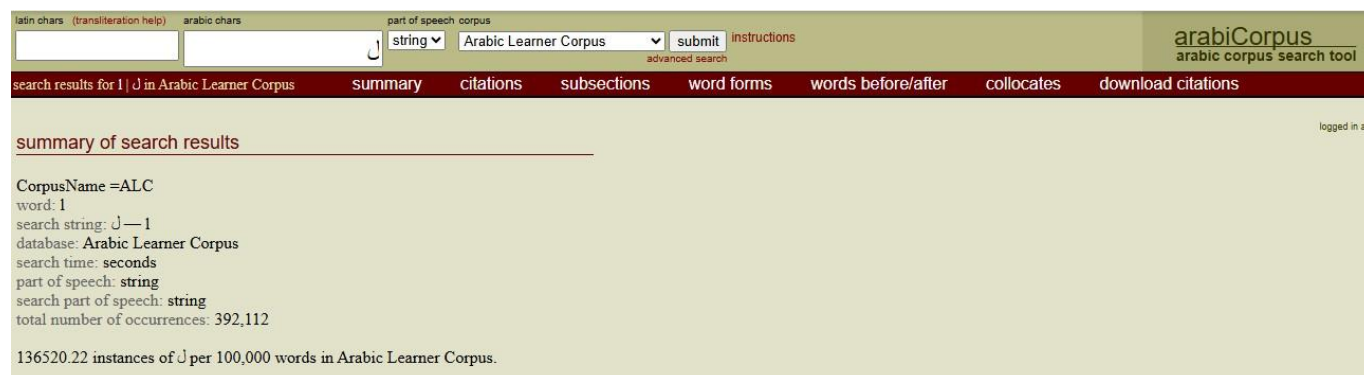
The Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) of search results has indicated that the preposition "ب" (bi / with, by, in) is used 42,788 times. This very high frequency indicates the centrality of "b" in the writing of learners, who commonly use this word to denote means, instruments, accompaniment, and location. This evidence indicates that the learners rely on this multi-purpose preposition to create diverse grammatical and semantically aspects of relations; therefore, it is among the most dominating and essential aspects within the corpus.

#### Examples 1

آمنت بالله.

I believed in Allah.

(<https://www.arabiclearncorpus.com/>)



**Figure 15 Frequency of Li Prepositions in ALC**

The Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) search results show that the preposition "ل" (li / for, to) occurs 392,112 times. This causes "l" to become the most common preposition among learner writings. Its high frequency is an indication of its multifunctionality, as it is critical in constructing possession, purpose, direction, benefit, and attribution. The results of the analysis indicate clearly that learners are counting on "l" as one of their fundamental grammatical tools, which highlights its major role in organising the content of Arabic discourse. The following are examples of Li depicted by ALC.

#### Examples 1

الكتاب للطالب

The book belongs to the student.

(<https://www.arabiclearncorpus.com/>)





**Figure 16 Frequency of Ka Prepositions in ALC**

The Arabic learner corpus (ALC) analysis indicates that the preposition ك (ka / like, as) is used 28071 times. This frequency indicates the primacy of the comparison prepositions in the writing of learners. The common use of "ka" indicates that a learner uses comparison as a rhetorical tool that is prevalent in forming meaning and further description. This tendency could be explained by the fact that Arabic rhetorical conventions are more extensive in terms of simile and analogical constructions, which promote transfer effects in learner English texts. The following examples of "ك" are taken from the ALC:

#### Example 1

أشرقت الحديقة كالـ**بستان**  
The garden was shining **like** a paradise.

(<https://www.arabiclearnercorpus.com/>)

#### Results and Discussions

The study employed the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) to investigate the use of English prepositions in terms of frequency, distribution, and contextual usage among Saudi EFL learners. The following table aims to identify the overuse, underuse, and misuse of prepositions in written texts and highlights the influence of Arabic prepositional structures. The comprehensive analysis explores the comparative frequencies of various prepositions and provides contextual insights into the learners' interlanguage development and the linguistic challenges involved in acquiring English prepositional usage.



**Figure 17 Overall Frequency Analysis of Prepositions in ALC**

**Note:** Frequency of Arabic Prepositions

The frequency of prepositions shows a specific pattern and scores among Saudi EFL learners. The above frequency results show that ل/ li ("for, to") has the highest score (2614.08), making it the most frequently used Arabic preposition, which indicates its versatile usage to express ownership, purpose, direction, and advantage, and is also used in all types of text. The preposition ب/

bi ("with, by, in") appears 285.25 times, suggesting that learners frequently use it to express means, instruments, and accompaniment. The frequency of the preposition لـ /Ka ("like, as") is comparatively high, 187.14, and the preposition is often applied in Arabic to express comparison, similarity, and analogy. Both formal and informal writing require these functions, as they are particularly significant in texts that describe ideas, clarify concepts, or argue. Authors frequently apply. In contrast, the least frequent spatial /place prepositions are فوق/fawq ("above, over") 0.66, تحت/ tahta ("under, beneath") and) 0.87 and أثناء/athn ("During") 0.87 time in learner text. The results clearly reveal that Saudi learners extensively use preposition (e.g., لـ/ li, بـ/ bi, كـ/ ka) more frequently than other types of words, and these prepositional words denote manner, instrumental function, possession/belonging, and comparative relations. In contrast, temporal, place, and abstract prepositions are less commonly used. This tendency reflects the influence of the grammatical, syntactical, and semantic structures of the Arabic language. It also highlights specific areas where students require intensive training in prepositional use. The following examples are taken from ALC:

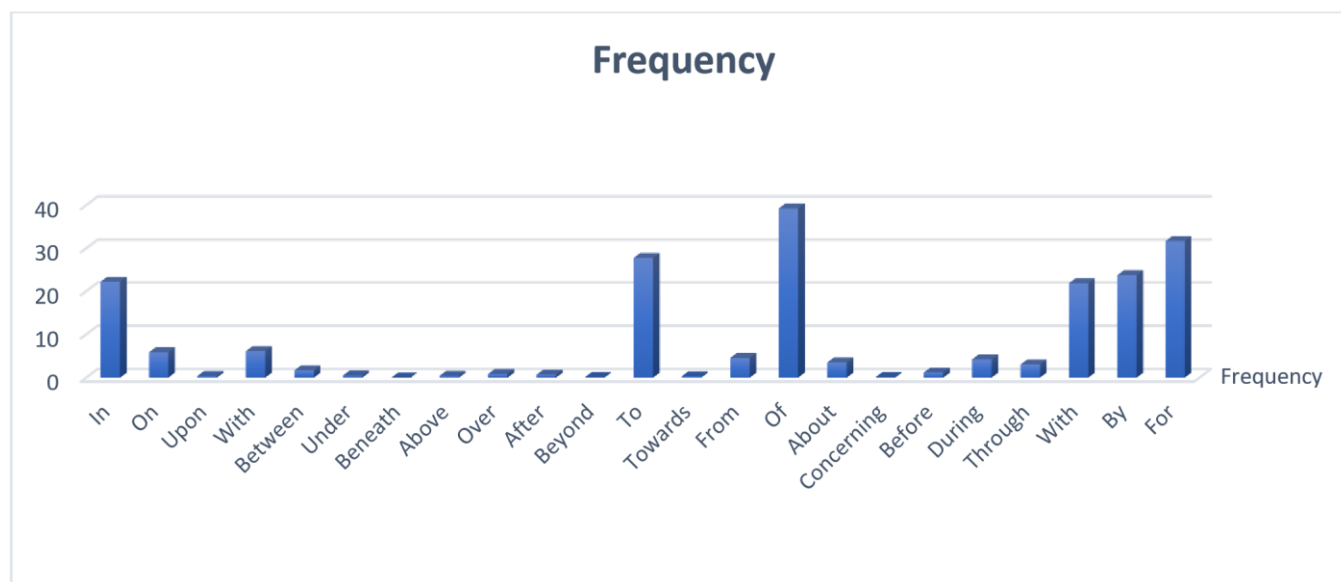


Figure 18 Overall Frequency Analysis of Prepositions in BAWE

**Note:** Frequency of the BAWE Corpus

According to the BAWE frequency analysis, the most common preposition is to (67.23), then the other high-frequency prepositions include: of (39.26), for (31.71), as (24.06), by (23.79), with (21.85), and in (22.21). Such prepositions are more frequently used as they convey basic grammatical and semantic relationships: direction, possession, purpose, comparison, and manner, without which it is not possible to build meaningful English sentences. On the contrary, the most common prepositions are: beneath (0.01), beyond (0.13), and concerning (0.13), and low-frequency words such as upon (0.37) and towards (0.32). These forms are uncommon because they have more specific, formal, or context-specific meanings that are not used frequently in general discourse. Overall, common prepositions prevail over less common ones as they have central grammatical purposes, and other less common prepositions are used only in cases when specific or special meanings are required.

## Discussion

A comparison of prepositions in the Arabic Learner Corpus (ALC) and the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus demonstrates that there is a significant difference in frequency and function between the EFL Saudi learners and the native writers of the English language. The frequency distribution of ALC shows that the prepositions li, bi, and ka are extremely overused. It means that there is a powerful tendency for learners to use multifunctional and high-frequency prepositions. Prepositions which are used to show manner, instrumental, possession/belonging and comparative relationship are also important in ALC.

On the other hand, directional, relational, and purpose prepositions (to, of, for) are used more frequently in the BAWE corpus. These prepositions have important grammatical roles that assist writers in making associations, demonstrating motion, and

stating purpose in academic writing. This shows that native writers apply prepositions more correctly and effectively, whereas EFL learners are used set of familiar prepositions.

The findings answer the four research questions in a coherent manner. For RQ1, the study indicates a significant difference in the frequency of use of certain English prepositions among Saudi EFL learners. In particular, learners overuse the Arabic-based prepositions لـ/ li, بـ/ bi, كـ/ ka, whereas least frequent spatial /place prepositions are occurred فوق/fawq ("above, over") تحت/ tahta ("under, beneath") and and أثناء/athn("During") time in learner text. For RQ2, the ALC and the BAWE the analysis indicates that directional, relational, and purpose prepositions to, of, and for are more commonly used in the everyday language and performs the necessary grammatical roles to combine ideas, demonstrate movement, and establish purpose between ideas. Conversely, certain or formal prepositions such as beneath, beyond, and concerning are much less frequent and used in limited framework. Overall, common prepositions prevail with their general effectiveness whereas rare prepositions appear only in cases where such specific meanings are needed.

In RQ3, frequency findings show that the Saudi EFL learners are relying on three primary kinds of prepositions. The purpose and direction preposition لـ/ li, is the most common one and is dominant as it represents purpose, possession, benefit, and direction in all the types of texts. The second most dominant one is the instrumental or manner preposition بـ/ bi that is often applied to signify means, tools, and accompaniment. The third category is the comparative preposition كـ / ka that is most commonly used and allows to show similarity, comparison, and analogy. These kinds of prepositions are most frequently occurring together due to their critical and multifaceted meanings that are required in daily communication.

For RQ4, the results indicate that Saudi learners use simple prepositions, which are typical, familiar and easy to comprehend, including to, of, in, for, and with. They take advantage of these more since they are frequently found in vernacular English and have more distinct meanings. They, on the contrary, employ less complicated or abstract prepositions such as beyond, beneath, upon and concerning, which demand higher levels of knowledge and are not necessarily equivalent to Arabic ones. All in all, their interaction demonstrates that acquisition of English prepositions is a gradual developmental process that can be improved with the course of time yet it is affected by familiarity, simplicity, and exposure of learners to abstract meanings in English.

The distribution of prepositions also indicates the way the language develops among learners. Beginner learners primarily apply common and concrete prepositions because it is easier to memorise and apply. More advanced students begin to use more uncommon and abstract prepositions, and it allows them to convey more complex thoughts. This finding implies that learners progressively develop their skill to use prepositions correctly in various contexts.

The results of this study show clear patterns in the use of prepositions by Saudi learners, which align with earlier findings in SLA (Biber et al., 1998; Cabuk, 2009; Dera, 1985). First, learners of non-Indo-European languages, such as Arabic, tend to overuse spatial and movement prepositions and underuse abstract and relational ones. In this study, the excessive use of multi-word prepositions, such as li and bi, reflects patterns in Arabic, where spatial and temporal markers are very common. This overuse can also lead to ambiguity when learners transfer these patterns into English.

Another important finding is that the results highlight the role of first-language transfer in Arabic prepositions. It encode multiple meanings, including spatial, temporal, and abstract functions. As a result, learners tend to overgeneralize these prepositions in English, where such functions are divided into separate, context-specific words. For example, li can mean "for" or "to," and bi can mean "with" or "by," which leads to frequent overuse in English writing.

The data suggested that influence of the first language and the diverse ways in which language is expressed, highlighting the fundamental and grammatical relationship between Arabic and English. This study is also highlights the importance of cross-linguistics and Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) creates meaningful communication across cultures. Arabic prepositions usually encode various meanings such as spatial, temporal and abstract meanings. Consequently, learners are likely to overgeneralise these prepositions in English, where those functions are split into context-specific words. For example, "li" may mean "to" or "for," and "bi" may mean "with" or "by," the most common of these being misused in English writing.

In addition, the results reveal how interlanguage evolves with time. High-frequency, concrete prepositions are mostly used by beginner learners as they are easier to learn and use correctly. Contrary to this, more advanced learners gradually employ less common and more abstract prepositions, such as learners can convey more intricate ideas. This pattern shows that the accuracy of preposition usage among learners is directly linked to the levels of proficiency.

In contrast, the comparison with the BAWE corpus indicates that the native academic writers tend to rely on such directional, relational, and purpose prepositions as to, of, and for more often. These prepositions are used to relate thoughts, demonstrate movement and purpose. Conversely, Saudi learners tend to skip or avoid using prepositions such as concerning or beyond, probably because of little exposure to formal academic English.

In general, these findings have relevant pedagogical implications. The dependency of learners on concrete and high-frequency prepositions indicates that underused, abstract, and context-specific prepositions need to be taught specifically. It can be beneficial to provide contextualised practice, clear explanations, and actual examples of errors to help learners develop accuracy and confidence in their academic writing.

As indicated in this paper, several factors influence the use of English prepositions by Saudi learners. One major factor is the interference of their first language, as the habits and rules of Arabic sometimes affect how they use prepositions in English. Another factor is cognitive processing, which relates to the way students think, understand, and make decisions while learning a new language. The process of interlanguage development also plays an important role. Interlanguage is the stage between a learner's native language and full mastery of English, where errors are common but gradually decrease with practice and experience. Additionally, certain prepositions are frequently overused, while others are underused or overlooked. These patterns show that learners tend to rely on simple or familiar prepositions, often avoiding more abstract or context-specific ones. By considering these factors, the study explains why Saudi learners make particular prepositional errors and highlights that, with consistent practice and exposure, they can improve their accuracy and fluency in English writing and speaking. This understanding also helps teachers design lessons that focus on the prepositions learners struggle with the most, making learning more effective.

## Conclusion

This paper has analysed English prepositions among Saudi EFL learners through the Arabic Learner and compared it with British Academic Written English corpus. The high-frequency of Arabic prepositions is used by EFL learners include **لِ**/ li (for, to), **بِ**/ bi (with, by), and **كَ**/ ka (like, as). These categories of prepositions are utilized with various meanings of direction, possession, comparison, and accompaniment. Nevertheless, abstract prepositions like *thn/athna`* (during) and other time or context dependent constructions are not commonly utilised in EFL writing and indicates that learners prefer concrete and multifunctional prepositions. Notably, the use of English prepositions are more frequent and occurred in wide range in the native writing. English prepositions (of, to, for, as, by, with and in) are used regularly to state important grammatical and semantically significant relationships, with low-frequency prepositions (beneath, beyond, concerning, upon and towards) being less frequent and only used in particular or formal situations. The given comparison demonstrates that Arabic as a first language can have a powerful effect on the use of prepositions among learners and indicate that more specific practice with less frequent, abstract, and contextspecific prepositions is required to enhance the accuracy and diversity of using prepositions in academic works.

However, this research is adopted a corpus-based approach and investigate the patterns of prepositions in ALC and shows only level of learner proficiency. Therefore, the results cannot adequately describe the developmental patterns of learners among the EFL. Despite these limitations, this research play a significant role and contributes in the field of second language learning and corpus linguistics and provides the quantitative evidence of prepositional challenges which faced by non-native learners. This study is also promotes theoretical framework as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Cognitive Linguistics and demonstrates the influence of the first language on the interlanguage acquisition.

Pedagogically, the findings highlight the importance of corpus-based method in language teaching, language learning and language testing and this approach guides the learners to use underrepresented abstract and metaphorical prepositions (e.g. in doubt, under review) in written learner language.

Future research will incorporate the longitudinal learner corpora, quantitative frequency data and qualitative error analysis, which need to be integrated in further research. It will investigate the various genres and levels of proficiency to identify patterns and the cognitive processes that lead to the occurrence of those errors that are constantly influenced by L1. In that way, it provides a detailed description and a depth analysis for the acquisition of prepositions in EFL settings.

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Appendix A

**Prepositions in Arabic Learner Corpus**

Arabic Preposition	English Equivalent	Raw Frequency	Normalised per 1,000 words	Function
في	in, inside	13,293	88.62	Spatial, temporal, abstract relations
على	on, upon	2,597	17.31	Spatial, metaphorical
مع	with	4,537	30.25	Accompaniment, association
بين	between, among	818	5.45	Comparison, opposition
تحت	under, beneath	131	0.87	Spatial
فوق	above, over	99	0.66	Spatial
بعد	after	2,720	18.13	Temporal sequence
إلى	to, towards	6,681	44.54	Direction, purpose
من	from, of	21,280	141.87	Origin, partitive, cause
عن	about, from	3,925	26.17	Topic, origin, reason
قبل	before	1,351	9.01	Temporal sequence
أثناء	during	131	0.87	Temporal duration
خلال	during, through	156	1.04	Temporal duration
ب	with, by, in	42,788	285.25	Means, instrument, accompaniment
ل	for, to	392,112	2,614.08	Possession, purpose, direction, benefit
ك	like, as	28,071	187.14	Comparison, analogy

Appendix B

## English Prepositions in British Academic Written English Corpus (BAWE)

English Preposition	Raw Frequency	Normalized Frequency	Type of Preposition
In	153,337	22.21	Place / Spatial
On	40,649	5.89	Place / Spatial
Upon	2,532	0.37	Place / Spatial
With	42,310	6.13	Manner / Instrument
Between	11,583	1.68	Place / Spatial
Under	3,373	0.49	Place / Spatial
Beneath	83	0.01	Place / Spatial
Above	2,823	0.41	Place / Spatial
Over	5,869	0.85	Place / Spatial
After	4,842	0.70	Time
Beyond	880	0.13	Time / Extension
To	191,632	27.78	Direction
Towards	2,228	0.32	Direction
From	31,455	4.56	Source / From
Of	271,079	39.26	Possession / Relation
About	24,248	3.51	Cause / Purpose
Concerning	891	0.13	Cause / Purpose
Before	8,067	1.17	Time
During	29,247	4.24	Time
Through	20,957	3.04	Manner / Instrument
With	150,746	21.85	Manner / Instrument
By	164,142	23.79	Manner / Instrument
For	218,737	31.71	Purpose / Cause
To	463,867	67.23	Direction
As	166,015	24.06	Comparison / Function