Error analysis on English as a Second Language (ESL) Learners' usage in prepositions in dictation tasks

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Sinhala speaking ESL (English as a Second Language) learners make many errors in the use of prepositions in given sentences, in dictation tasks, mainly due to cross-linguistic differences between their first and second languages. For example, English prepositions are words, but in Sinhala, they are represented as spatial postpositions, or as suffixes (locative and ablative case). Some prepositions are polysemous, and the Sinhala ESL learners often become frustrated when trying to distinguish their meanings. Therefore a study, investigating the error patterns in the usage of English prepositions by Sinhala speaking ESL learners in dictation is significant. Littlefield (2006) has found the existence of four categories of English prepositions with ±lexical and ±functional features: Adverbial prepositions [+Lexical, -Functional], Particles [-Lexical,- Functional], Semi-lexical [+Lexical, +Functional], Functional prepositions [-Lexical, + Functional]. The objective of this study is to examine whether Sinhala speaking ESL learners make more omission errors in [+Functional] prepositions than in [+Lexical] prepositions in dictation tasks; whether the category criterion will be preserved in substitutions; and whether these ESL learners in lower grades tend to omit prepositions more often than in higher grades whereas, in higher grades, they substitute prepositions more often than in lower grades. A pool of 316 Sinhala speaking ESL students from four grades: Grade 4, Grade 6, Grade 8 and Grade 10 participated in this study. A dictation task consisting 10 sentences each with adverbial prepositions, semi-lexical prepositions, particles and functional prepositions was used. The learners' were asked to write down these sentences, and their errors were analysed using Excel, following experimental method. Findings concluded that the omissions were higher in lower grades and, substitutions were higher in higher grades and respected the category rule. The findings of error patterns can be used to minimize Sinhala speaking ESL learners' errors in prepositions in dictation tasks, given in sentence form.

Keywords: ESL, Prepositions, Omission errors, Substitution errors