International Research Journal of Advanced Engineering and Science
ISSN (Online): 2455-9024

A Corpus-Based Error Analysis of English Preposition Usage among Sinhala-Speaking University Undergraduates

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Abstract— *This study investigated the systemic syntactic and semantic challenges encountered by Sinhalese-speaking undergraduates when conceptualizing and applying English prepositions in second language (ESL) writing. Grounded in Pit Corder's Error Analysis framework and Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, the research examined how structural and idiomatic disparities between Sinhala (an SOV language utilizing postpositions and nominal inflections) and English (an SVO language utilizing structural prepositions) induce systemic learner errors. The study was conducted at the Department of English Language Teaching (DELT) within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda. The sample comprised 120 first-year undergraduate students (academic year 2023/2024) from mixed-ability cohorts. Data collection utilized a mixed-method approach consisting of corpus-based text analysis of free compositions alongside qualitative focus group interviews and document-based case studies. The empirical analysis extracted a total of 504 distinct prepositional errors across three analytical classifications: omission, addition, and substitution error usage. Quantitative evaluation revealed that the omission of required prepositions was the most frequent error type, accounting for 263 instances (52.18%), followed by the addition of redundant prepositions, and lastly, the incorrect substitution of prepositions which constituted 72 instances (14.29%). Qualitative findings from focus group interviews indicated that these errors stem from a reliance on direct cross-linguistic translation, where learners attempt to map English prepositions directly onto Sinhala postpositional suffixes (such as the locative suffix '-ē' or instrumental suffix '-in'). This literal, word-for-word translation strategy complicates the spatial, temporal, and abstract conceptual boundaries of target prepositions. The high frequency of omissions and misapplications demonstrates an underlying lack of cognitive and semantic competency in decoding context-bound prepositional values. The study concludes that standard pedagogical approaches fail to address L1 interference adequately. It advocates for a transition toward cognitively grounded, context-rich instructional methodologies that emphasize spatial-semantic mapping over rote memorization.*

Keywords— *English as a second language, Error analysis, L1 interference, Prepositions, Semantics.*

I. Introduction

In the contemporary globalized era, the English language has attained unparalleled status as the primary vehicle for international communication, commerce, science, technology and academic discourse. Used by millions of people daily for diverse structural and interpersonal purposes, mastery of English has shifted from a prestige asset to an essential socio-economic survival tool. For second language learners to navigate this landscape fluently and accurately, they must acquire a balanced mastery over the four primary macro-linguistic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these, the writing skill represents an exceptionally complex cognitive and psycholinguistic process. In contrast to spoken discourse, which gains from paralinguistic cues and immediate feedback loops, writing requires an advanced level of grammatical precision, structural coherence, and lexical accuracy. For second language beginners—particularly those embedded in institutional foreign or second-language environments—the production of grammatically accurate written texts remains a formidable challenge.

At the core of grammatical accuracy in English lies the proper command of closed-class functional categories, among which prepositions occupy a notoriously problematic position. Prepositions serve as vital structural essentials that establish spatial, temporal, causal, and logical relations between nouns or pronouns and other elements within a sentence. To use the English language with a high degree of precision, learners cannot merely memorize prepositions as isolated vocabulary items; they must internalize the subtle semantic shifts and situational contexts that dictate their appropriate placement within a sentence structure (Cabuk, 2009). The structural profile of English prepositions is highly idiosyncratic and polysemous, and it is closely bound to conventionalized phrasal combinations, which makes them exceptionally hard for non-native speakers to master.

This issue manifests clearly in both simple and complex communication modes, showing up as recurring errors in students' written essays, summaries, and formal texts. Because prepositions govern the semantic architecture of a sentence, any error in their usage does not merely disrupt grammatical elegance—it fundamentally distorts the intended meaning, leading to ambiguity or communicative failure. Despite years of formal English instruction in primary and secondary schools, undergraduate learners continue to display a striking inability to map out the conceptual boundaries of prepositions like 'in, on, at, to, and for'. This persistent gap points to an underlying cognitive misalignment. It suggests that learners are not processing prepositions through the conceptual framework of the target language, but are instead filtering them through a native-language lens. This problematic dynamic requires empirical, systematic research to uncover the root causes of

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these errors and chart the specific linguistic pathways from which they stem.

II. Research Questions

To explore these issues systematically, this study is structured around three central research questions:

1. What are the specific structural and semantic issues characterizing the use of prepositions in the written English communication of Sinhala ESL learners?
2. Why do these learners encounter pronounced difficulties when trying to select and use appropriate prepositions during sentence construction?
3. In what ways and to what extent does the learners' mother tongue (Sinhala) influence or interfere with their perception and conceptualization of English prepositions?

III. Research Objectives

To address the research questions outlined above, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

4. To identify and categorize the specific structural and semantic errors characterizing the use of English prepositions in the written communication of Sinhala ESL learners.
5. To investigate the underlying factors and cognitive difficulties that cause Sinhala ESL learners to encounter challenges when selecting and applying appropriate prepositions during sentence construction.
6. To evaluate the nature and extent of first-language (Sinhala) interference on how these learners perceive, conceptualize, and translate English prepositions.

IV. Methodology

4.1 Research Setting

This empirical research was conducted within the Department of English Language Teaching (DELT), located inside the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda. The DELT is responsible for providing English language instructions to undergraduates across various faculties, aiming to elevate their academic and professional communication skills. This setting provided an ideal environment for the study, as it hosts a large, linguistically diverse student population arriving from various provinces across the country, all bound by a common curriculum.

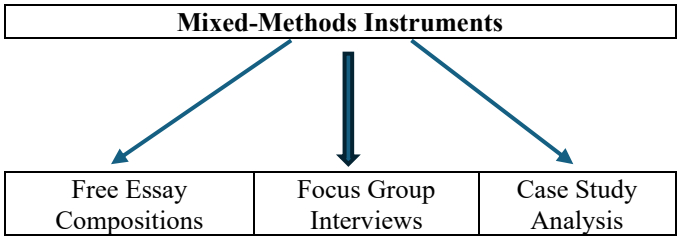
4.2 Participants and Sample Profile

The participant sample for this study consisted of 120 first-year undergraduate students enrolled during the 2023/2024 academic year. These students were drawn from Class Numbers 5 and 6, which are designated mixed-ability cohorts. This mix ensured a realistic representation of proficiency levels, spanning from lower-intermediate to upper-intermediate learners.

The sample included both male and female participants aged between 20 and 22 years. All 120 participants shared a homogeneous linguistic background: their first language (L1) was Sinhala, and they had grown up in non-English speaking home and social environments. At the university, these students were enrolled in a compulsory, credit-bearing English program designed to develop their general English. Selecting this specific demographic allowed the researcher to isolate L1 Sinhala interference as a primary variable, minimizing extraneous variables like early childhood bilingualism.

4.3 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

This research adopted a mixed-methods research design utilizing three distinct data collection instruments:



1. Free Essay Compositions:

Students were required to write spontaneous, free-form essay compositions during regular class sessions. The topics selected were general and descriptive (e.g., "My University Experience," "The Impact of Social Media on Youth"), ensuring that students' cognitive focus remained on language production rather than specialized topic research. These free writing samples served as the primary source for identifying real, unprompted errors, capturing how students naturally use prepositions when composing complete texts.

2. Focus Group Interviews:

To supplement the quantitative data, qualitative focus group interviews were conducted with small sub-sections of students from both classes. These semi-structured discussions focused on the students' self-perceived difficulties with grammar. Students were asked to explain their thought processes when choosing specific prepositions during writing tasks, allowing the researcher to gather direct evidence of active mental translation from Sinhala to English.

3. Case Study Analysis of Documents:

Using a qualitative case study approach, specific written portfolios and long-form assignments from selected students were tracked longitudinally. This method allowed for a detailed examination of how prepositions were integrated into complex sentence structures, tracking how errors persisted across different tasks and writing genres.

4.4 Administration and Task Parameters

The instrument was administered under standardized classroom conditions to ensure data uniformity and validity. The execution of the task adhered to the following strict parameters:

Time Allotment: Students were given exactly one and a half hours (1.5 hours) to complete the composition, providing sufficient time for planning, drafting, and execution while maintaining a controlled testing environment.

Length Restriction: Participants were instructed to compose an essay of approximately five hundred (500) words.

Operational Mode: The task was executed as a free-writing exercise, meaning students did not have access to reference

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materials, dictionaries, or electronic aids. This guaranteed that the resulting text was a direct reflection of their individual grammatical competence.

V. Method of Data Analysis

The research data was analyzed using a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative linguistic evaluation with qualitative thematic analysis. The text analysis was structured around Pit Corder's (1974) five-step Error Analysis methodology:

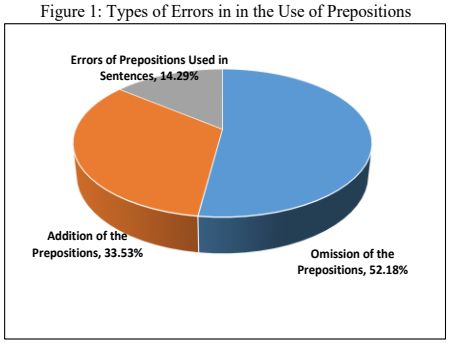
1. Sample Collection: Gathering free essay compositions from 120 participants under controlled classroom conditions.
2. Error Identification: Scanning the text corpus to separate accidental 'slips' from systematic competence 'errors.'
3. Error Classification: Categorizing the identified errors into three structural groups:
   Omission: Leaving out a grammatically mandatory preposition.
   Addition: Inserting a redundant or unnecessary preposition.
   Substitution: Deploying an incorrect or unidiomatic preposition.
4. Error Explanation: Conducting a contrastive analysis to identify causes like L1 Sinhala interference and overgeneralization.
5. Error Evaluation: Assessing how severely these errors impacted the readability and semantic clarity of the student writing.

VI. Results and Discussion

The empirical data collected from the sampling survey highlights a distinct hierarchy in the types of prepositional errors committed by the participants. As illustrated in Figure 1, the omission of prepositions emerged as the most dominant error category, accounting for 263 (52.18%) of the total error corpus. This overwhelming majority suggests that learners frequently fail to supply a preposition where English syntax structurally demands one. From a psycholinguistic perspective, this high rate of omission strongly points toward negative transfer (interference) from the students' first language (Sinhala). Because Sinhala relies heavily on morphological inflections (suffixes) and postpositions rather than pre-nominal particles to denote spatial and temporal relations, learners appear to replicate their native grammatical framework, resulting in the zero-realization of mandatory English prepositions.

Conversely, the addition of prepositions constitutes the second most frequent error type at 169 (33.53%). This substantial percentage indicates a tendency toward overgeneralization and hypercorrection. As learners become consciously aware of the critical role prepositions play in English sentence structure, they begin to excessively insert them into contexts where they are grammatically redundant. Finally, errors of substitution—categorized as 'Errors of Prepositions Used in Sentences'—represent the smallest portion of the data at 72 (14.29%). This reveals that while selecting the incorrect preposition remains a challenge, it is significantly less pervasive than the broader structural struggles of leaving prepositions out entirely or inserting them unnecessarily.

Figure 1: Types of Errors in in the Use of Prepositions



Source: Sampling Survey, 2023-2024

6.1 Breakdown of Error Types

Omission of Prepositions 263 (52.18%): This is the leading error category. It indicates that learners frequently drop or completely leave out necessary prepositions when constructing English sentences.
Addition of Prepositions 169 (33.53%): This is the second most common error. It occurs when learners redundantly insert unnecessary prepositions into their sentences.
Errors of Prepositions Used in Sentences 72 (14.29%): This represents the smallest category, involving the substitution or incorrect selection of a preposition (e.g., using "at" instead of "in").

6.2 Omission of Prepositions

As Dulay et al. (as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 56) define it, omission refers to the "absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance." Within the corpus of the students' written essays, the omission of necessary prepositions emerged as a pervasive structural issue. This systematic absence is clearly demonstrated in the target utterances (a) through (i) below:

a) *We can do lots of things __ this period.
b) *Then we were selected __ the university.
c) *We have very good lecturers __ our university.
d) *They share all the things __ us.
e) *__ poyaday we go to Pillewa temple.
f) *Then we have to talk __ them.
g) *__ other districts students came to our university.
h) *We have to wait __ long time to get our foods in the canteen.
i) *I go to an English class __ my friends.

To establish grammatical accuracy, these target utterances require the integration of specific prepositions alongside minor syntactical adjustments, as demonstrated below:

a) We can do lots of things **in** this period.
b) Then we were selected **to** (or **for**) the university.
c) We have very good lecturers **in** our university.
d) They share all the things **with** us.
e) **On** Poya days, we go to the Pillewa temple.
f) Then we have to talk **to** them.
g) **From** other districts, students came to our university.

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h) We have to wait **for** a long time to get our food in the canteen.

i) I go to an English class **with** my friends.

Richards (as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 59) posits that an "incomplete application of rules... involves the failure to fully develop a structure." Applying this theoretical lens to the data, the systematic omission of prepositions indicates that learners have not yet fully internalized the syntactic requirement of prepositions in English sentence construction. Rather than a series of random slips, these omissions reveal an incomplete mastery of the target language's prepositional system.

Furthermore, this pattern reflects a structural divergence from the learners' mother tongue (Sinhala). In Sinhala, grammatical relationships, directions, and locations are typically encoded through postpositions or noun case inflections (suffixes) rather than preceding independent particles. Consequently, the learners frequently exhibit a blank syntax (zero-realization) where an English preposition is structurally mandatory, demonstrating a transitional phase in their interlanguage development.

6.3 Addition of Prepositions

Dulay et al. (as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 56) define addition as "the presence of an item that must not appear in well-formed sentences." According to them, the insertion of an unnecessary constituent compromises both the syntactic correctness and the semantic clarity of an utterance. Within the collected data, the redundant addition of prepositions constitutes 169 (33.53%) of the total errors. This phenomenon is clearly illustrated in the student utterances (a) through (j) below:

a) *We can improve our knowledge day by day <u>in</u>.
b) *They always work <u>in</u> together.
c) *We help <u>to</u> them.
d) *I came <u>in</u> last February 14.
e) *I entered <u>to</u> the university.
f) *University students are attending lectures <u>in</u> happily.
g) *I eat <u>by</u> outside.
h) *I respect <u>for</u> my seniors.
i) *Some students joined <u>with</u> us to do activities in groups.
j) *They also help us <u>in</u> every time.

To achieve grammatical conformity in standard English, these target utterances must be amended by removing the redundant prepositions, as shown below:

a) We can improve our knowledge day by day.
b) They always work together.
c) We help them.
d) I came last February 14. Or I came on February 14th.
e) I entered the university.
f) University students are attending lectures happily.
g) I eat outside.
h) I respect my seniors.
i) Some students joined us to do activities in groups.
j) They also help us every time. Or They always help us.

The inclusion of these superfluous prepositions reveals that the learners' command of English prepositional constraints is still developing. This specific error pattern can be attributed to two main psycholinguistic factors: overgeneralization and L1 syntactic transfer.

First, as an overgeneralization strategy, learners who are transitioning through their interlanguage phase often assume that English verbs or adverbs must always be paired with a preposition to establish relational meaning. Second, direct first-language interference from Sinhala plays a major role. In Sinhala syntax, verbs like "help" (udaw karanawa), "enter" (athulata wenawa), and "respect" (garu karanawa) require the preceding noun to take the dative case marker *-ta* (meaning "to" or "for"). For example, "helping them" translates to *ovunta* (to them) *udaw karanawa*. Consequently, learners directly transfer this native case-marking system into English, resulting in incorrect literal translations such as "help *to* them," "entered *to* the university," and "respect *for* my seniors."

6.4 Substitution of Prepositions

The final error category involves the incorrect selection or substitution of prepositions, which constitutes 72 (14.29%) of the total error corpus. In these instances, learners recognize the structural necessity of a preposition but fail to select the contextually and idiomatically appropriate particle. This erroneous substitution obscures the clarity of their written expressions and occasionally creates semantic ambiguity for the reader. This pattern is evident in the target utterances (a) through (j) below:

a) *I learned lots of things among for month in my university.
b) *The culture of the university is more different than other cultures.
c) *We can live with our friends with brotherhood.
d) *I was selected for the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.
e) *Our brothers and sisters taught us of university life and gives us beautiful poems.
f) *We do not have lectures of weekends.
g) *We should participate for public works.
h) *We go to lecturers in Saturday mornings.
i) *In poya days we go to Bellanwila temple and pillewa temple.
j) *In eleven o'clock in night we go to bed.

To rectify these semantic deviations and restore idiomatic precision, the sentences must be reconstructed as follows:

a) I learned lots of things **within** four months at my university.
b) The culture of the university is different **from** other cultures.
c) We can live with our friends **in** brotherhood.
d) I was selected **to** the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.
e) Our seniors taught [or: told] us **about** university life and gave us beautiful poems.
f) We do not have lectures **at** (or: **on**) weekends.
g) We should participate **in** public work.
h) We go to lectures **on** Saturday mornings.
i) **On** Poya days, we go to the Bellanwila and Pillewa temples.
j) **At** eleven o'clock **at** night, we go to bed.

These selection errors highlight that learners are actively operating within a transitional interlanguage grid where they struggle with context-based prepositional constraints. From an

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educational and contrastive linguistics standpoint, this issue stems from the absence of one-to-one semantic mapping between the source language (Sinhala) and the target language (English). For example, temporal and locative expressions in Sinhala often rely on a singular postposition or case marker—such as the locative suffix *-dī* (e.g., *rātrijedī* for "at night" and *poya davasedī* for "on Poya days"). Because a single Sinhala marker conceptually covers multiple English spatial and temporal vectors, learners struggle to differentiate when to deploy *in*, *on*, or *at*. Similarly, fixed prepositional collocations in English (such as "different *from*" or "participate *in*") do not possess direct structural equivalents in Sinhala. Consequently, learners rely on literal translation or intuitive guessing, leading to the substitution errors observed above.

VII. Conclusion

This study set out to systematically investigate the structural and semantic challenges Sinhala ESL learners encounter when using English prepositions in written communication. By analyzing the empirical data, the study successfully addressed its core research objectives. The quantitative findings revealed a distinct hierarchy of errors: the omission of prepositions emerged as the most dominant error type 263 (52.18%), followed by the addition of redundant prepositions 169 (33.53%), and incorrect substitutions 72 (14.29%).

Theoretically, these errors provide a clear window into the learners' active interlanguage development. Applying the frameworks of Dulay et al. and Richards (as cited in Ellis, 1994), the pervasive omission of necessary particles points to an incomplete application of target language rules. Concurrently, the frequent addition of redundant prepositions indicates a strategy of hypercorrection, where learners over-apply rules as they become consciously aware of the structural importance of prepositions in English.

Crucially, the study confirms that first-language (L1) interference from Sinhala heavily shapes these error patterns. Because Sinhala utilizes morphological case suffixes and postpositions rather than autonomous pre-nominal particles, learners experience a persistent cognitive and structural mismatch. This typological divergence directly explains the high rate of omission (zero-realization). Furthermore, the lack of one-to-one semantic mapping between the singular locative/temporal suffixes in Sinhala (e.g., *-dī*) and the nuanced English triad of *in*, *on*, and *at* leaves learners susceptible to arbitrary substitution errors. In conclusion, prepositional errors among Sinhala ESL learners are not random slips, but systematic, rule-governed manifestations of cross-linguistic influence and interlanguage transition.

VIII. Recommendations

Based on the insights gained from this research, standard traditional grammar teaching methods—which often rely on rote memorization—are insufficient for helping learners master English prepositions. The following pedagogical recommendations are proposed to address the specific error types identified in this study:

1. Implementation of Contrastive Linguistics in the Classroom

Since L1 interference is the primary driver behind preposition omissions and substitutions, educators should explicitly introduce contrastive analysis to learners.

- Teachers should explicitly highlight how spatial and temporal relations are achieved via suffixes in Sinhala versus prepositions in English.
- By raising metalinguistic awareness about these structural differences, learners can consciously anticipate and override the tendency to omit prepositions in their writing.

2. Shifting from Isolated Memorization to Contextualized Collocations

To mitigate substitution errors (14.29%), prepositions should never be taught as isolated words. Instead, they should be introduced through lexical chunks and fixed collocations (e.g., teaching "different from" or "participate in" as single lexical units). For temporal expressions, teachers should use visual matrices to clearly demarcate the specific domains of *in* (seasons, months, years), *on* (specific days, dates), and *at* (precise times).

3. Targeted Corpus-Based Error Correction

To address the overgeneralization that leads to prepositional additions (33.53%), teachers should design tailored proofreading exercises. Using the exact error patterns discovered in this study (such as *discuss about*, *entered to*, or *help to*), educators can create "find the redundant word" activities. This helps students internalize which English transitive verbs directly take direct objects without requiring an intermediate preposition.

4. Adoption of the Communicative Approach with Visual Scaffolding

Abstract spatial prepositions can be made concrete through physical mapping, diagramming, and interactive tasks. Moving away from rigid fill-in-the-blank worksheets toward communicative writing tasks—where students describe physical university layouts or weekly schedules—will allow them to practice using prepositions meaningfully in active sentence construction rather than relying on literal L1 translation.

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