

ISSN : 2347-503X

Research Chronicler

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol II Issue III : March 2014

Editor-In-Chief

Prof. K. N. Shelke

www.research-chronicler.com

Research Chronicler

A Peer-Reviewed Refereed and Indexed International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Volume II Issue III: March – 2014

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A Corpus Analysis of the Prepositions used in Letter Writing in English

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Abstract

The corpus analysis of the prepositions used and the errors committed in business letter writing in English reveals the linguistic and non-linguistic implications in both teaching and learning in the South Asian countries like Sri Lanka. This is a case study of the texts produced by the students of different language communities of Vavuniya Campus of the University of Jaffna in Sri Lanka. The study classifies the types and trends of the use and identifies the errors and their types, and analyzes their implications in the linguistic and discourse structures of the genre in relation to the mental schema acquired in the past. The written texts were collected from a systematic examination. The qualitative analysis dominates the methodology with some relevant quantitative data. The findings distinguish the errors typical of Sri Lankan as well as the students of other countries where English as a second language is used. The types such as prepositional phrase as subject, the confusion between preposition and conjunction, the use of double prepositions, the malformation of prepositional phrase, the use of wrong preposition (replacement), the absence of preposition (deletion), and unnecessary prepositional use (insertion) are discussed in this paper. It contributes to the identification and explanation of the patterns and trends of the use of prepositions and of the errors the students generally make.

Key words: preposition, error analysis, sequence, absence, addition

1. Introduction

Generally it is observed that the ESL users or learners do not master the use of prepositions in English. The use of preposition shows the relationship between a noun or its equivalent and other words in a sentence. They reflect practical link between items in real life situation or use in terms of time, place and linguistic function (Dirven, 73-97). It is said that a preposition is a function word that combines with a noun or pronoun to form a prepositional phrase that can have an adverbial or adjectival relation

to some other word. They convey syntactic and semantic functions (Bruce, 18). To a greater extent, the poor use of prepositions affects the teaching and learning of subjects taught in English medium. They somewhat impede comprehension and understanding in produced written texts. The use of prepositions or teaching and learning them has been a serious challenge and poses many difficulties for the learners of English as a second foreign language or even the members of English as a native language (South, 42 & 43). Prepositions are significant

structural elements and they are essential discourse devices in producing written texts (Carmen, 1133-0392).

2. The Need of the Study

The learners and users of English as a second language in Sri Lanka, like others in the non-native English speaking countries struggle to master the use of prepositions in English writing or in business English writing. Sri Lankans realize the need for being proficient in their use in their intra-national and international business communication and all the universities in Sri Lanka conduct English for Business Communication and Business English as a credit course, integral to their Degree programme. Business letter writing is one of the key genres in training their business English writing skills. Therefore, a proper understanding of the language structure of business English is necessary, especially of the use of prepositions because the natives of Sri Lanka speak Sinhala and Tamil which do not have this grammatical system of preposition. Therefore the deviation in their English discourse is very significant in relation to the use of prepositions. Their Languages have case systems in their grammatical structure to fulfill the communicative functions of the prepositions in English.

Analytical work on the use of prepositions needs methods for detecting and correcting context dependent mistakes. After the theoretical constructs developed by Pit Corder (p. 224-254; 256-294) on Contrastive and Error Analysis for improving learning and Teaching English as a second Language

in his internationally recognized book on *Introducing Applied Linguistics*, the ESL scholars have taken an interesting turn on this approach over the last two decades, and have focused on identifying and correcting mistakes made by non-native speakers of English to find out general patterns and systems in deviations as part of their interlanguage process (Selinker, 10: 209-241). Non-native writers make a variety of errors in grammar and word usage.

3. Theoretical Background

Syntactically the function words of relation are positioned in front of nouns or pronouns in English so they are called prepositions. There are two types of prepositions—simple prepositions and compound prepositions but in Tamil and Sinhala, they are positioned at the end of nouns or pronouns and are called postposition. Once they are positioned thus, they become prepositional phrases which can be located with or within many types of other phrases and clauses as embedded forms. Preposition and postposition can be placed based on ‘time’, ‘place’, ‘direction’, ‘movement’, ‘attachment or detachment’, ‘possession or dispossession’ and ‘context’. In different contexts, different prepositions may create different meanings causing meaning confusion. As quoted by Ali Abu Humeid (98-114), compound preposition consists of more than one word and behaves just like a single preposition and prepositional phrase consists of the preposition and the prepositional complement, usually a noun phrase (Chalker, 214). Stageberg (169) states that prepositions are “words like *of*, *in* and *to* which are usually followed by a noun, noun phrase, personal pronoun, or noun-substitute

called the object of the preposition. The unit of preposition-plus-object of preposition is called a prepositional phrase.” There are two-word sequence and three-word sequence prepositions available in the English language (Quirk *et al.*, 669).

The difficulties and challenges could be due to their functions with rule breaking tendencies, (Jafarpour and Koosha, 49, 1-30) the differences between English and the native language of the learners and the consequent transfer, comparatively large number of English prepositions (about 124) (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983); the complexity of the preposition system in English – no one to one relationship between the form and function; Different prepositions with different derivatives of the same word (Kharma and Hajjaj, 331-345), seldom stressed nature leading to poor hearing and the differences between British English and American English (Hendricks, 24-29). According to Cuyckens and Radden (237-260), prepositions and adverb particles in English Language demonstrate varied meanings in which some of them are very challenging and need high cognitive and mental work from language users’ part.

4. Methodology

The methodology is qualitative and quantitative. It is a textual analytical approach under applied linguistics. It analyzes a business letter writing exercise in English by the second year students of the BBM programme of the Faculty of Business Studies of the Vavuniya Campus.

During a Business English test, as a part of the test, the students were asked to write “a letter of complaint to the Branch Manager of the Ceylon Electricity Board of their district regarding power cuts. As a customer and consumer of electricity power supply in their respective area, over the last three months, they have experienced severe, unscheduled, sudden and prolonged power cuts which have caused immense difficulties in managing day to day life in the area”.

The texts from 84 students were collected in the corpus which had been written in an examination. They were referred for authentic structural, textual and linguistic relations and errors on the specified issues. An error analysis with both structural and functional analyses of the use of prepositions in the discourse of business letters was conducted. The psychological, social, discourse constructions and dimensions and were traced behind the linguistic dimensions of the use of prepositions.

5. Analysis and Findings

5.1. Preposition in the Discourse of a Letter of Complaint

Table 1 illustrates the quantity of the prepositions used by the percentage of the students. Surprisingly the preposition, *in*, was used generously by all the students in their letter of complaint on power cut. They used this preposition to denote place

predominantly, for example, *in this area, in the area, in my area, in our area, in our district area, etc.*, at the secondary level, to denote time: *in the mid night, in the*

morning time, in recent year and finally to denote manner: *in a proper way, in the wrong way, in order* etc.

Table 1. The percentage of students using the prepositions in the Letter of Complaint

1-10%	11-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%
above	as	about	to	in
According to	at	for		
after	Because of	Over (duplicative)		
against	by			
around	Due to			
before	from			
during	of			
forward	on			
Like	Over (creative)			
near	regarding			
off	with			
Out, out of	without			
since				
still				
through				
within				

Source: Primary data

The preposition, *to*, was used by around 51-75% of the students. They use it to denote the relationship with persons, place and matter, for example, *to me, to my shop, to our problem, etc.* The prepositions, *about, for, and over*, were used by around 26-50% of the students. They related about with problems, difficulties, failure and mistakes in this context; *for* with persons, objects and activities such as *for us, for the computers, for jobs etc.* The use of *over* is just reproduction of the extract of the

question given to the students so it cannot be justified however, it reveals their inability to use it in their own creative expressions. The use of *in, to, about, for, by, from, with, without, within* are comparatively easier for both Tamil and Sinhala students because they have case ending equivalents in their mother tongues and more or less there is one to one relationship in semantic and pragmatic meaning in many contextual application in English as well as the Sri Lankan

languages. The prepositions, *as, at, because of, by, due to, from, of on, over, regarding, with, and without* were used by 11-25% of the students. Compared to the first three categories, this group of prepositions poses challenges to the students as they have different functional uses in different contexts. The last but the least used prepositions include *above, according to, after, against, around, before, during, forward, like, near, off, out, out of, since, still, through, and within* which were used by less than 10% of the students. However,

the quantity of the use is determined by the theme of the letter.

Further, prepositions are used mostly in the adverbial phrases and clauses. In average, for example, if a sample letter of student No 18 is surveyed, there are 22 phrases and 110 words. Within the phrases, there were noun, adjectival, and adverbial phrases. Out of 22 phrases in the letter, 10 phrases (around 45%) are prepositional phrases. The prepositional phrases used within these phrases are given in Table 2.

Table2. The prepositional phrases used in the discourse structure of the letter of complaint of Student Number18

Discourse structure	In Noun Phrase	In Adjectival or complementary Phrase	In Adverbial Phrase
Heading	1.The letter <i>about the power cut</i>		
Paragraph 1: Introductory		1.Many problem(s) <i>by this power cut</i>	1. <i>In Amapara</i> 2. <i>For the last three months</i> 3. <i>in our area</i>
Paragraph 2: Problem	2.A lot of <i>child(ren)</i>	2.Very important facility <i>for us</i>	
Paragraph 3: Consequence	3.The number of <i>people (public)</i>		
Paragraph 4: Solution		3.The immediate action <i>for this problem</i> 4.The decision <i>about this problem</i>	

Source: Primary Data

Mostly they are used as adjectival or complementary and adverbial phrases and the students find it easier, compared to their positions within other phrase structures like

noun phrase or verb phrase as particles. They write the noun phrases with less or no prepositions, for example, *the power cut problem* (not *the problem of power cut*), *the*

electricity power supply (not *the supply of electricity* or *of electric power*), *school children education work* (not *the education work of school children*), *our area most people* (not *most people of our area*). Further, only four compound prepositions have been used: *according to*, *out of*, *because of* and *due to*. Further, it is not surprising to observe that no student has

used verb particle (the additional functions of prepositions when they join with verbs, for example, *come up* etc.) in their writing. It shows that Sri Lankan students are still reluctant or ignorant to use two or three word sequence prepositions or phrasal verbs (verb + particle) comfortably in their creative writing.

Table 3 The Performance in the texts of the seven students in the campus

Code	Total	the letter	NP	PP	words	Errors in PP	Type of Error
83	27	03	07	11	70	02	insertion
31	40	04	09	10	84	06	replacement
02	52	04	11	14	96	04	Ins(2) Rep(2)
18	55	04	12	10	110	03	replacement
41	61	05	15	16	122	04	replacement
37	72	07	10	12	116	01	replacement
79	83.5	08	15	15	148	00	-----
Av	40-60	05	10-16	7-15	70-150	04	Replace

(Total: the total marks of the complete test (3 hours testing all the four skills plus grammar); the letter: the marks given for the letter out of 10 marks; NP: the number of Noun Phrases; PP: the number of the prepositional Phrases; words: the number of words in the letter; Errors in the PP: the number of errors in the prepositional Phrases used; Av: the average)

Source: Primary Data

Table 3 shows a case study of the texts of 7 students. There is uniformity between the increase of marks in both the total test and the essay and that of the number of words used. There is balance in using prepositional phrases in par with noun phrases (around 10-15 in number). Another interesting trend is that both the lowest (02) and the highest (01 or 00) performers commit less number of errors compared with that of the medium level performers. The reason for the former (the lowest) is that they wrote less and scored less that

means their contribution was quantitatively and qualitatively very less and poor. They made mistakes in all types of error including prepositional even within the small quantity of words they used. Another notable result is that the dominant type of error is replacement or wrong selection.

The overall findings reveal that the students committed errors in the use of prepositions which are not very much different from the errors made by the students of English as a Second Language in many countries. The error types such as prepositional phrase as

subject, confusion between preposition and conjunction, the use of double prepositions, malformation of prepositional phrase, the use of wrong preposition (replacement), absence of preposition (deletion), unnecessary prepositional use (insertion), and full stops after a prepositional phrase

title are some of the examples discussed in this paper. Table 4 gives a comparison of the three types of errors in the use of preposition between Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhala students and those of the languages of other countries.

Table 4: Distribution of preposition mistakes by error type and countries of the writers

Countries	Replacement	Insertion	Deletion
Sri Lankan	32%	51%	39%
Bulgarian	58%	22%	11%
Chinese	52%	24%	22%
Czech	51%	21%	24%
Russian	53%	21%	17%

Source: Rosovskaya and D. Roth. (2011). the statistics of Tamil and Sinhala belong to the primary data of this paper.

Compared to other language speakers, Speakers of Sri Lankan languages fare well in using the correct prepositions because the percentage of error is only 32% but it is above 50% among other language speakers. On the other hand, it is reversed in the error type of insertion. However, the former comprises 39% while the latter reaching less than 24% in the error type of deletion. This statistics reveal that the Sri Lankan students make more insertion and deletion errors than replacement error. The Sri Lankan students are, still significantly ignorant, and are in the developmental stage in properly identifying the places between the words and phrases where prepositions can be used or cannot be used but when they have identified the positions, they use the prepositions with considerable level of appropriateness. One of the reasons is that the unnecessary additions or insertion and deletion of preposition occur due to

the L1 influence, Tamil and Sinhala, in which case endings or suffixes are used with the object or subject of the sentences instead of prepositions.

5.2. Analysis of Deviation in Discourse

The deviations in the use of prepositions have been listed below. There are nine types identified. The codes have been assigned for each error type for the analysis. The number code given within the brackets at the end of each extracted sentence refers the student who made the deviation.

Prepositional phrase As Subject

e.g. *In our area always has power cut so we unable to plan our work (1)*

Less commonly, the Subject may be realized by a prepositional phrase, for example, *After dinner is a good time to talk*. It is an inverted subject verb adverb or complement structure. The prepositional phrase has been fronted: *Among the students selected to*

follow the course are a blind student and a deaf student. = A blind student and a deaf student are among the students selected to follow the course. Prepositional phrases as Subject typically refer to time or to space (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/internet-grammar/function/subjpp.htm>).

A prepositional phrase may be positioned as a 'sort of' subject by pulling it to the beginning. However, the resulting sentences are 'pretty lame'. Not all grammarians will likely agree that these phrases are true subjects, since the sentences can be analyzed as something like cleft transformations of an underlying sentence with a different 'true' subject.

There can be a deep level difference apart from its surface level appearance. Though there are examples with a prepositional phrase occupying the position of a surface subject, a prepositional phrase cannot ever be a subject. To become a subject it would have to relinquish its true predicative function and become a referring expression.

Preposition and Conjunction Confusion

e.g.: S1: I am unable to inform you **Because of** our area power is always fluctuation and cuts in last three months. (1)

S2: This area children to elders face most of the problem **because** the power cut. (2)

S3: It is very big problem all of us and it is influenced our day to day life **because of** our most of activities are engaged with Electricity power. (3)

S4: We face the difficulties Over the last three months **because of** we have experienced severe, unscheduled, sudden and prolonged power cuts in our Mawenalle area. (4)

Words that are sometimes conjunctions can act as prepositions. The subordinating conjunctions BECAUSE, BEFORE, AFTER and UNTIL can act as prepositions when they are followed by objects rather than dependent clauses. A clause has a subject and a verb. A prepositional phrase does not, for example, *Charlie will wait*

The student expression reveals the result of his/her interlanguage learning process. Psycholinguistically, one deep level structure resulted into two surface level structures: (1) *power cut is always in our area so we are unable to plan our work* and (2) *our area always has power cut so we are unable to plan our work*. The common semantic rules of L1 and L2 might have led to common deep syntactic structure of L1 and L2. However, the student might have confused the transformation rules of L1 and L2 and produced this sentence. Further, both Sinhala and Tamil spoken languages, there is a trend to topicalize and foreground the adverbial expression of time and place. However, the spoken form needs a coma in the written form: *In our area, we always have/experience power cut so we are unable to plan our work*. The student wants to assert or emphasize 'in our area' compared to other areas.

here **until** we finish the test. 'Because' and 'because of' are both used to introduce reasons. The expression, *Because* is a conjunction, and is followed by a subject and verb and *because of* is a preposition, and is followed by a noun phrase or verb-ing. Some prepositions also function as subordinate conjunctions. 'Because of'

needs an object not a subordinating clause so the first sentence is wrong. In the second sentence, in the expression, *because the power cut*, it must be *'because of'* as it is explained above. S3 and 4 reflect the same error type.

English differs in the use of its forms for the communicative functions of preposition from Tamil and Sinhala. Prepositions can occur in isolation but in Tamil and Sinhala, case replaces preposition for this particular function. Case is a grammatical category whose value reflects the grammatical function performed by a noun or pronoun in a phrase, clause, or sentence. In some languages, nouns, pronouns and their modifiers take

different inflected forms depending on what case they are in. English has largely lost its case system, although case distinctions can still be seen with the personal pronouns (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammatical_case). Sinhala distinguishes several cases. Next to the cross-linguistically rather common nominative, accusative, genitive, dative and ablative, there are also less common cases like the instrumental (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinhala_language#Cases). Case cannot occur in isolation. Therefore the student might have been in ignorance of the grammatical distinction between *'because'* and *'because of'*.

Double Preposition

e.g.: S1: *I'm writing to you **regarding about** power cuts (1)*

S2: *They face many difficult situation such as children education, **for in** cooking, in cloth ironing, in watching TV and etc. (2)*

S3: *Therefore, children and office workers also go to work very late. **as like** that the power was cut at 12'clock, 4'clock and then evening from 7'clock to 10'clock. Therefore children face most difficult. (3)*

It is a nonstandard construction. There are actually two incorrect ways to double prepositions. The first involves using two consecutive prepositions when only one is necessary. Examples are *off of* and *off to*. Instead of saying *Pens roll off of the desk*, simply say, *Pens roll off the desk*. The second incorrect doubling involves using a preposition within the sentence and again at the end. Here is an example: *It was a mystery of which he knew nothing about*. Eliminating either one of the prepositions - "of" or "about" - corrects the sentence: *It was a mystery of which he knew*

nothing, or It was a mystery which he knew nothing about. In S1, the writer has used *regarding about* in which both means the same function here. The writer might have thought to reinforce the idea or simply made the error of repetition. In S2 also, the same can be explained. Both the prepositions, *for* and *in*, have the same function here.

Like is a preposition, which means that it can come before a noun but it should not come before a whole clause containing a verb. *As* is a conjunction, and it can be used before a clause containing a verb. For example, *As I told you, the car was parked*

behind a tree. We could take a trip to the coast, just like old times. In sentence 3, 'as like' combination is used for listing the power cut times. Here the writer might have overlaid the two structures, *as the power was cut at* and *like* (many times

consecutively) at 12'clock, 4'clock and then evening from 7'clock to 10'clock. The student might have used the semantic interpretation of like (similar in these times) of Tamil language in the use of English preposition.

Malformation of Prepositional Phrase

e.g.: S1: *please don't cut electricity **without** unscheduling.* (1)

S2: ***For** cuts the electricity power* (as a subject heading of the letter) (2)

S3: ***In the recent**, we have to face severe, unscheduled, sudden and prolonged power cuts.* (54)

S4: *They are cutting the power **in unscheduled, sudden and prolonged*** (33)

S5: *I hope you will make good arrangement **for solve** this problem* (66)

When the prepositions *in, at, with, of, for, about* and so on are used before a verb, the verb must use *-ing*. In S1, the writer has used a negated *-ing* form instead of using *without pre-scheduling*. This is simply a matter of overgeneralization in the interlanguage learning process. In S2, instead of an *ing* form, the plural noun form or third person singular verb form 'cuts' has been used. In S5, a root verb has been used with the preposition.

In S3 and S4, the students have avoided using a noun after the pre-modifier consisting an adjective preceded by an article or not: *the recent* (times, years, months), *in unscheduled, sudden and prolonged*. A noun should occur with an adjective modifier to have a preposition

to be used with the noun phrase to use it as a sentence adverb, for example, *In the recent years, the influence of internet on students has grown rapidly in our campus.*

The reason for this can be attributed to its Tamil equivalent for, '*anmaiyl*' [in (the) recent (time)] but it is a noun with the temporal case in Tamil, '*il*', not an adjective. At the same time, it is possible to have the article, *the*, with an adjective to form a noun in the English language but this particular expression, '*the recent*' in isolation is rarely used. Further, using a preposition of time in front of this expression is not in practice.

The Use of Wrong Preposition

e.g.: S1: ***Before** three month **since** now **to** every day power out.* (26)

S2: *I am writing **to** complained **for** you unscheduled, sudden and prolonged power cuts in our area.* (35)

S3: *The industries and household works also cannot be done **by** the power cuts.* (41)

S4: *Regarding Power Cut **of** my area.* (56)

S5: *I think if you scheduled this power cuts and informed that **for** us we can face this problem better than past. (67)*

S6: *The educational people affect **to** the power cut. (78)*

S7: ***According to** the above address area, we are facing lot of inconvenience everyday. (81)*

S8: *So I kindly request **for** your attention **for** this problems, and I hope you will get suitable solution for these problems. (82)*

S9: *Please kindly listen **over** problem. (26)*

S10: *The school children, teachers, government works, farm workers, university student and etc severity impact **on** this problem. (71)*

Around 32% of the students committed this type of errors. One acceptable form of S1 is 'For the last three months (till now), (there has been) power cut every day.' Again it shows the mother tongue interference. There is a temporal case expression in Tamil, 'munpirinthu' which means a combined semantic notion 'from before'. The singular form, *month* is used because in Tamil grammatical use, a singular noun is expected in this grammatical-semantic context. This L1 knowledge might have influenced the student to form, *before three month(s)*. The binary of *since* and *till* is misunderstood. An addition of 'to' with *every day* is redundant.

In S2, '*complain for you*' is incorrect if it really means '*complain to you*' but it seems that the student might have missed the possessive pronoun form, *your*, after the expression, *complain for*. In S5 too, it is *informed that to us*, not, *informed that **for** us*. The Sri Lankan students often continue to use the pair of prepositions, *for/to* and *in/on* inappropriately. The reason can be easily attributed to the impossibility of generalizing the rules and regulations prevailing in the use of English prepositions in general and this irregularity and context based use prevent many

learners and users of English as a second or foreign language from properly understanding as well as applying them appropriately in different contexts. In S8 also, the acceptable form is *I kindly request your attention to these problems*. If the word request is a noun, then *the request for the attention* is acceptable. In the same way, in S9, it is '*listen to the problem*'.

In S3, it is *due to the power cuts*, not '*by the power cuts*'. The reason may be attributed to the interlanguage, the result of the language learning process. The students are given examples or exercises or are always exposed to passive sentences with the agents denoted by the preposition, *by*. Very rarely they are exposed to or given explanation to the passive construction where the agents are omitted so there is no need for the preposition, *by*. Here the student uses a passive construction so naturally he/she identifies an agent with the preposition, *by* but interestingly the direct agent of the action, *cannot be done* is confused with the indirect cause, power cuts. It is the industrialists and household people who are the real agents who cannot do (the more appropriate form is *are not able to do*) the industrial and household works. In S6, a similar deviation has been

committed but in a different form. The acceptable form can be *the educated people are affected by the power cut*. This student did not use the preposition, *by*, because s/he could write this sentence in passive construction. In S10, the standard form is *...are severely affected by this problem* but the student has used the popular expression, *impact on* in this context wrongly. The use of active voice further creates confusion as if the affected people have an impact on the problem but it is the problem which has an impact on the professional life of these people. The use of the expression, *impact on* is very familiar in their academic reading and writing and speaking and listening in relation to management discipline so they often overuse this expression.

Further the mother tongue interference may be another reason. The students, due to the unavailability of prepositions in their mother tongues, prefer to understand each expression with a direct Tamil equivalent available in its case system, dative case '*ku*' with the English preposition, '*to*'; ablative case, *irunthu* with the English preposition, '*from*'; the genitive case, '*udaiya*' with the English preposition, '*of*'; the locative and temporal cases '*il*' with the English

preposition, '*in*' and finally the instrumental case, '*aal*' with the English preposition, '*by*'. However, this case expression in Tamil can communicate the meaning of the function of the preposition, *due to* and also, the position in the sentence moves to the front: *Due to the power cuts, the industrial and household works cannot be done*.

In S4, there is a confusion of the use of the preposition '*of*' from the use of the preposition, '*in*' in this context. The situation of power cuts caused by external agents and moved in the area; the situation of power cuts is not the part and parcel of or originated from the area so the standard form is *power cuts in the area*. It seems that the students are still ignorant about the distinct semantic and pragmatic functional meanings in the use of these two prepositions acceptable in the language.

In S7, the student uses, *according to*, instead of the preposition, *in*. This can be resulted due to their exposure to letter writing in English which embody expressions starting with '*according to*' in business letter writing so this is due to their over-familiarity with the preposition, *according to*.

The Absence of Preposition

e.g.:S1: *Further this caused, occurred (**during**) our exam. (01)*

S2: (**In**) *some areas they supply electricity by using informal scheduled. (13)*

S3: *I am writing this letter one important matter to discuss (**with**) you. (29)*

S4: *It is very big Problem (**for**) all of us. (46)*

S5: (**In**) *above the heading I mention to tell you we are living in the Beruwala, Muruga nagar. (57)*

S6: *Students want to participate (**in**) A/L examination after three month. (61)*

S7: (**In**) *Our area most people have electric Grinder company and also Garment company. (73)*

S8: *This area people (are) affected (**by**) the power cut. (78)*

Around 39% of the students committed this type of errors. The omitted prepositions in each sentence are given in bold letters within the brackets. Again, this type of deviation, absence of preposition, can be attributed, in general, to the unfamiliarity

Unnecessary Prepositional Use

e.g.: S1: *It is affected **by in** our day to day works.* (36)

S2: *Before one month I send **to** your letter about this matter.* (46)

S3: *Regularly power affect **in** our education.* (55)

S4: *If you want to disconnected electricity please will inform **to** your consumers.* (63)

S5: *Please help **to** the area people.* (78)

S6: *Therefore most important electricity but power cut of electricity because I can't reach **to** target for shipment.* (84)

S7: *some of the persons do some activities **in** wrongly.* (38)

S8: *we can't do our business work and school children education work **in** properly.* (35)

S9: *we all are expect the proper or sharp electrical power to do our casual work **in** orderly.*

Around 51% of the students made this type of errors. In these sentences, the students have unnecessarily added or used prepositions to the positions where they should be absent. In S1, the mental schema of the passive construction and adding preposition in front of popular expressions like *day to day life/works* causes the insertion of *by in* in the sentence. The acceptable form is *it affects our day to day works*. Similarly, in S3, it is *regularly, power cuts affect our education*. Further students use '*in our education*' assuming that the verb, 'affect' gives the idea of 'make or cause problems'. Thus the students assume a combination of two syntactic and semantic expressions— verb +object— in a single verb. Therefore they use a prepositional phrase like *in our education*' as adverb or the modifier of object or complement. In S2, there is a confusion about the forms of object

and unavailability of the system of prepositional use in their L1 systems and the consequent result of their interlanguage in the second language learning process. Some omissions could have happened due to indifference and carelessness as well.

pronoun and possessive pronoun of the common second person pronoun, *you*. Further the students are very much familiar with 'your letter' expression. The acceptable form is *before one month, I sent you a letter about this matter*. Generally when an object pronoun is positioned as an indirect object immediately after a transitive verb in the sentence pattern, SVOO, it does not accept a preposition. The students are confused between this pattern with the SVOO pattern which has the indirect object pronoun as the object of preposition, for example, *before one month, I sent a letter to you about this matter*. Further, in S4, S5, and S6, the unnecessary additions of preposition occur due to our L1 influence because in Tamil and Sinhala, case endings or suffixes are used with the object of the sentences: for example, in Tamil, dative case (*-ikku*) is used with *your*

consumers and the area people and accusative case (-ai) is used with the target.

S7, 8 and 9 occur due to the confusion of two adverbial forms students generally use: one is single worded: *wrongly*, *properly* and *orderly*; the other is phrase: *in the*

Full stops after a Prepositional Phrase Title

e.g.: T1: *Regarding the Electricity power supply in Kilinochchi area.* (52)

T2: *Regarding the electricity Power Supply in our area.* (48)

T1 and T2 show the poor understanding of the students regarding the punctuation use with the phrases or titles of the texts. Normally sentences are punctuated with full stops but students over generalize and use the full stop at the end of the single or isolated phrases used as titles of body text or listed as points.

6. Conclusion

The majority of Sri Lankan university students experience serious challenges in producing and recognizing prepositions as the total number of their correct responses significantly insufficient. In addition, most of them do not recognize the position of prepositions because they perceive that each preposition following or preceding any word or phrase understood and applied on a one-to-one basis of functional meaning they assign in relation to respective case-ending in their mother tongue. Furthermore, most of them fail to acquire prepositions correctly. The majority of textbook writers and syllabus designers do not give the functional meanings of prepositions when they are used within the reading passages and listening sessions. Therefore many students are confused in the distinct and non-distinct uses of the preposition triad— (1) *in*, *on*, and *at*, (2) *to*, *for* and *of*, (3) *by*, *with* and *as* (4) *since*, *till* and *from*. A substantial

wrong way, in a proper way, and double worded: *in order*. The students use these two forms so freely that both forms get mixed up like *in wrongly*, *in properly* and *in orderly*.

recommendation can be that the Sri Lankan school text book and syllabus designers should incorporate a comparison of the functional use of respective preposition in relation to case ending in Tamil and Sinhala because they do not know various meanings and functions of each single word or compound preposition.

The findings of this paper further reinforce the following factors attributed to the students' errors as identified by Ali Abu Humeid (98-114): (i) *interlingual transfer*, the use of Tamil or Sinhala literal meaning separately for each preposition rather than giving the meaning for them as a whole phrase or clause, (ii) *intralingual transfer*, the use of the prior knowledge of the L2, and interlanguage production during the second language learning process (iii) *context of Learning*, poor or no explanation of prepositions in terms of communicative competence and function by textbook writers and instructors, and (iv) *communication strategies*, the selection of idiosyncratic or idiolectal expressions to fill the gap of their knowledge in English, in which they intentionally or unintentionally use or do not use prepositions.

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