The Effect of Transfer on Arab and Portuguese Learners' Use of the English Prepositions *to* and *for*.

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Abstract

The researcher has studied, in this paper, the effect of transfer on the Arabic and Portuguese learners’ using prepositions during their process of learning English as a second language. The prepositions that the study deals with are to and for. The aim of the study is to show the influence of the learner’s first language on the target language. The study draws upon literary sources such as Littlewood’s book Foreign and Second Language Learning (Littlewood, 1984), as well as practical experiments which are divided into a multiple choice test and a translation test. Through the analysis of the results of these tests, the study shows the extent of influence of the first language on the process of learning a second language. The answers of the students are analyzed by comparing the rules of using prepositions in the learner’s first language and English. The participants in this study are students in ACS international school in Qatar. The study also includes interviews with two teachers. The interviews are done in order to provide additional information on the effect of the learner’s first language on learning a second language. The teachers express their views which was formed after many years of teaching experience.

Keywords:

Contrastive, Second language learning, Translation, Test, First language, Learner, Errors.
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1. Introduction

Learning a second language is a field of study that came to light in the mid-1960s. It was accompanied by many studies which discuss the impact the native language has on learning a second language. Positive effects are related to the similarities between the two languages, while negative effects are related to the differences between them (Littlewood, 1984, p.17). A comparison between the learner’s native and second languages can be done using Contrastive Analysis Theory, aimed at identifying the problematic areas in the target language for the learner (18).

Learning a second language is also a creative process in which the learner discovers different rules of the target language. The learner combines the language structures he learns with his purpose of using them. The language that results from that combination has the structural properties that other languages have. In fact, the learner is the only native speaker of the resulting language. Other learners of the same language may sometimes be familiar with some aspects of this resulting language. Meanwhile, they are also native speakers of their own interlanguages resulting from an interaction between the language they learn and their mother tongues. (Corder, 1975, 410)

Translation also plays an important role in second language learning. Translation of sentences from the native language into the target language can also have an influence on the learner’s competence. However, translation exercises during the learning process can be useful but many students make mistakes in their grammatical choices because they follow the rules of their native language when translating sentences into English. Such mistakes may change the meaning of the sentence and, consequently, convey incorrect information to the reader. Language learning is affected by the grammatical choice of words, but it also requires an ability to express the same meaning in both the first and the second language (Littlewood, 1984, p.19).

Difficulties in second language learning differ according to many factors. These factors depend on the choices that the learner has in his comparison between his native language and the target language. Different theories discuss the levels of difficulty that the learners might face but the only way to check the credibility
of those theories is by practical tests in different fields such as grammar and phonology.

The present study deals with Arabic and Portuguese learners’ use of English prepositions and highlights the different difficulties that learners have in choosing suitable prepositions. Prepositions are tricky little words. It is difficult to use them correctly because they have several functions. The researcher has chosen to investigate some of the problems that Arabic and Portuguese learners have when they use some English prepositions because she thinks they play an important role in learning the language. Alex Boulton mentions in his book *Multiple Affordances of Language Corpora for Data-driven Learning* (2015, p.97), that

> Cosme and Gilquin observe that prepositions fall somewhere between grammar and the lexicon, and are often ignored by grammars and regarded as lexically empty by lexicographers.

Often teachers and students pay more attention to other parts of the sentence such as nouns and verbs etc... and pay less attention to the important role of prepositions in sentences. Chinese teachers, for example, consider that nouns and verbs form the main structure of sentences and therefore they pay more attention to them than to other parts of the sentence (Lu, 2017, p.82). Therefore, this study aims at adding more information about the difficulties some learners encounter when using confusing prepositions such as *for* and *to*. The prepositions *to* and *for* are mentioned as confusing prepositions in this study since they sometimes have similar functions which might confuse the learners. For example, both *for* and *to* are used to indicate time as in the following examples:

I work nine *to* six, Monday *to* Friday.

This is all I have *for* today.
2. Aim and Research Questions

The main theme of this study is to investigate some of the problems that Arabic and Portuguese learners have when using the English prepositions *to* and *for*, and to highlight some of the factors that affect the learners’ choice of prepositions. The factors that are discussed are related to the learner’s native language because the study discusses different cases of using prepositions when the learners translate sentences from their native language into English.

The study discusses the following questions:

1. How does the difference between the learner’s first language and English affect the learner’s competence of English prepositions?

2. How do Arab and Portuguese learners translate the prepositions *to* and *for*? What are the difficulties that those learners encounter when they translate these prepositions into English?

3. How do Arabic and Portuguese learners differentiate between prepositions that cause confusion such as *to* and *for*?

   For example:
   
   *I sent a letter to Fiona.* / *I sent a letter for Fiona.*

4. What are the teachers’ views on the effect of the first language on learning English prepositions?
3. Theoretical Framework

This section introduces theoretical information about the basic theory on which the present study relies. Furthermore, the section will introduce previous research on transfer and the first language’s influence on learning a second language.

3.1 Literature Review

3.1.1 Contrastive Analysis Theory

During the 1940s, researchers started to focus on the similarities and differences between the native language of the learner and the target language the learner will learn. This approach was known as “Contrastive analysis approach”. It depends on distinguishing the structural differences between the two languages in order to specify the difficulties that the learner might encounter while learning the second language (Carasquillo, 1994, p.22). Carasquillo mentions that the contrastive analysis theory studies the influence that the mother language has on acquiring the second language especially the parts that do not exist in the first language (22).

The researchers who followed the behaviourist perspective believed that the habits of the first language can help the learner in learning some features of the second language (Littlewood, 1984, 17). Those features include various parts of language learning such as vocabulary and grammar (Byram, 2013, 633). The learner gets help from his native language due to the similarities between it and the target language and this is known as facilitation or positive transfer. On the other hand, the learner’s first language may cause confusion to the learner due to the differences between his language and the second language which is known as interference or negative transfer (Littlewood, 1984, 17). Byram mentions that transfer is associated with contrastive analysis so that it helps to predict the difficulties which a learner might have during learning a second language (Byram, 2013, 633).

Learners encounter different levels of difficulty in their learning process due to the difference between languages and language items. Littlewood mentions in his book *Foreign and Second Language Learning* (Littlewood, 1984), that Stockwell et al. classified those difficulties in schemes which were set up to anticipate systematically the possibilities of difficulty. The schemes basically depend on which
linguistic items the learner might select from his native language and the target language. Stockwell classified three types of choice:

1. No choice at all
2. Optional choice
3. Obligatory choice

The most difficult level is the first level in which the learner has no equivalent structures in his first language. Therefore, the learner has only the possibility to choose from the target language. For example, English learners of Spanish are confused when using the verbs *ser* and *estar* since they can only use *to be* in English for both cases. On the contrary, the easiest level is the third one in which the learner does not have to make any choices since the structures of the two languages are similar. For example, English and Spanish languages have the same plural ending for plural nouns *apple / apples, manzana / manzanas.* (Littlewood, 1984, 18)

According to Littlewood, Barry Taylor argues that the beginners of intermediate levels are the learners who mostly use transfer during their learning process due to the shortage of knowledge about the second language. Beginners use the rules of their first language and apply them when they seek a hypothesis that helps to form new rules. Such hypotheses can be confirmed according to the similarities between the learner’s language and the target language (Littlewood, 1984, 25). Transfer is often done unconsciously by the learner so that the learner thinks that the rules he learns in the target language are completely new and different from his native language, though the learner may already have transferred many rules from his native language (26).

### 3.1.2 Notes on Arabic Prepositions

As this study is concerned with studying the influence of the learner’s first language on using the English prepositions *to* and *for*, hence the following are functions of the Arabic prepositions 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic Preposition</th>
<th>English Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>إلى (ilā)</td>
<td>to, toward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>لَ (lāl)</td>
<td>for, to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>بَ (bī)</td>
<td>for, to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

as they are used in the analysis of the learners’ performance in this study. The noun which follows the preposition in Arabic changes from the nominative case to the genitive case
Preposition /li:/, ل
The preposition ل has the following functions:
• To indicate the owner of something.
• To indicate the person who receives something.
• To indicate the reason of an event.
• To refer to the transfer of ownership from one person to another.
• To indicate the final destination of an event.
• To indicate the period of an event.

Preposition /i:la/, إلـ
The preposition إلـ has the following functions:
• To indicate the final destination of an event or a trip.
• To indicate the reason or place of an invitation.
• To refer to adding something to another.

Preposition /bi/, ب
The preposition ب has the following functions:
• To refer to the way by which an event is done.
• To indicate the reason for an event.
• To indicate the price of something
• To emphasize the importance of something.

3.1.3 Notes on Portuguese prepositions
The researcher used the prepositions à, por and para in this study since they are equivalents to the English prepositions for and to. The following are functions of those Portuguese prepositions. There are other specific cases in which those preposition change in form but they are not mentioned here since they are not relevant to the study.

Preposition à
The preposition à has the following functions:
• To indicate the final destiny/ time.
• To indicate the direction.
• To indicate a movement towards something.

**Preposition por**

The preposition *por* has the following functions:

• To indicate the duration of an event,
• To express gratitude.
• To refer to the way by which an event is done.
• In passive sentences, to indicate the doer or the reason for something.

**Preposition para**

The preposition *para* has the following functions:

• To indicate the final destiny.
• To indicate the recipient of something.
• To indicate the purpose of something.
• To indicate the reason for something.

### 3.2. Previous Research

Many studies have been made on second language learning difficulties. Patricia Boquist discussed in her thesis *The Second Language Acquisition of English Prepositions* (2009), the mismatch of prepositions between English and other languages. For example, the preposition *at* has more than one equivalent in Spanish. It is translated to the Spanish preposition *en* in the translation of the sentence “She is at the house”, while the preposition *a* is the equivalent to *at* in the translation of the sentence “I will meet you at the bus stop”. Boquist also argues that there is a perceived inconsistency in English itself as some prepositions can be applied in one form, but not another. For example, a person can meet someone *in* but not *on* a house while a person can meet someone *on* a corner but not *in* it. Boquist’s study was based on a theoretical framework proposed by Evans & Tyler which helps to understand the functions of prepositions. The theory argues that the meaning of each preposition can be presented with “a visual scheme”. Boquist presented diagrams to clarify the way we use prepositions. The diagrams are presented as a new strategy in order to help teachers in the classroom. The diagrams present illustrative images of the different
functions of prepositions. Furthermore, Ingatan Gulö and Ni Ketut Ayu Widianingsih discuss in their study *Grammatical Difficulties Encountered by Second Language Learners of English* (2016), the grammatical mistakes that students make during the learning process but their discussions concentrated on the use of plural marks, tense, determiners and verbs. In addition, James B. Wold discusses in his study *Difficulties in Learning English As a Second Language Or Foreign Language* (2006), the problems that second language learners face in their learning process according to the participants’ experiences in learning English. Wold’s study was based on the experience of a Chinese woman who immigrated to the United States. The study explained the difficulties this Chinese woman encountered while learning English as a second language. Many other studies are made on the same subject where the researchers are more interested in the grammatical or theoretical part. However, the present study concentrates on some prepositions that cause confusion to the learner and which form an important part of the grammatical errors that students make. This study will also pay attention to the effect of the learner’s native language on his use of prepositions when translating sentences that include English prepositions.
4. Method and material

The study presents some linguistic definitions and previous research on the topic. For this purpose, the researcher used some books and literary reviews. The researcher used, among others, Angela L. Carrasquillo’s book *Teaching English As A Second Language* (1994), Andrew Bruckfield’s grammar book *Prepositions: The Ultimate Book- Mastering English Prepositions* (2011), and Martin Hewings’ grammar book *Advanced Grammar in Use* (2013). The researcher also used Michael Rundell’s English dictionary “Mackmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners”. Moreover, the researcher used her knowledge of Arabic language and Arabic prepositions and also used an Arabic grammar book *Alnaho Alarabi* (2007), in order to provide more accurate information about the use of the selected prepositions. She also got help of a Portuguese teacher to get information about the Portuguese language and used some information from a website “Easy Portuguese”, which explains the rules of using Portuguese prepositions. The information that was used from the website were checked by the Portuguese teacher for the purpose of accuracy.

The study dealt with non-English learners’ use of English prepositions. The participants in the investigation were students at the ACS International School in Qatar and they were sixteen years old. They were at the upper intermediate level according to the LSE class level classification. The participants were divided into groups according to the differences in their origins. The learners were in two groups and each group consisted of three learners. The native languages of the learners are Arabic, and Portuguese. The researcher chose Arabic and Portuguese languages since they are systematically different. Arabic is a Semitic language and Portuguese is an Indo-European language. The learners were tested in two stages. The first stage dealt with the grammar part. The learners answered multiple choice questions in which they chose the suitable preposition that completed the meaning of the sentence. The second stage dealt with the effect of their native language on their choice. This was done by giving the students paragraphs from short stories which were written in their mother language and asking them to translate those texts into English. The multiple choice
test and the translation texts were selected from English short stories as well as grammar exercises. The aim of this stage was to know if there is a difference in the choice of prepositions when the learners have the texts in their native language instead of English.

Two interviews with teachers were also part of the study. The questions of the interviews were conducted by the researcher. These interviews formed a supporting document to the practical part. The teachers presented views formed after a long-time experience in teaching English as a second language. First, the researcher interviewed a teacher who teaches English grammar lessons in the school, then she interviewed a learning support teacher who is a specialist in students’ difficulties in learning English. The researcher also got help from a teacher who was the supervisor of the test. The task of the supervisor was to observe the students and to monitor their performance during the tests.

As stated before, the participants in this study were students and teachers in an international school. The researcher communicated with the participants via video calls on Skype. She was in contact with the department of administration and some teachers in the school by e-mail and mobile phone. They helped in arranging suitable rooms for the tests and the interviews. The researcher prepared the tests and sent them by e-mail and the interviews were made after the tests. The researcher used his/her computer to prepare the test papers and for communications by Skype and email. She also used a notebook in order to write notes when needed.

This study is conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The full names of the students were anonymized and the students were given a coding number to use. Thus the students could easily withdraw from the study if they wished.
5. Results and Analysis

This section includes an analysis of the results of the multiple choice questions test and the translation test. It also includes the interviews with the English teaching teachers.

5.1 Students Tests

As mentioned earlier, the test that the students took consisted of two parts, a multiple choice questions test and a translation test.

5.1.1 Multiple Choice Questions Test

The first part of the test was based on questionnaires that test the students’ efficiency in using confusing prepositions such as to and for. The test included twenty-five sentences in which the student had to select the correct preposition to complete the sentences. Each sentence had four possible answers but only one of them was correct. The total time for this portion of the test was twenty minutes so the students had 48 seconds for each question.

A. Arabic Language Students

After checking and marking the students’ answers, the researcher noted that the students made some errors in the first part of the test. The analysis of the errors shows that the students made similar mistakes in distinguishing between confusing prepositions. The students were able to choose the correct preposition in most of the sentences but they also encountered difficulties in some other sentences. The results of the students varied but they were close together. The results of the Arabic students are shown in the following chart:
The performance of the students varied from one sentence to another. However, all the Arabic students had correct answers in some sentences such as the following sentences:

1. He goes shopping for his grandmother because she cannot do it herself.
2. His parents lent them the money for the boat and he paid it back to them over a period of a year.
3. The frame was slightly damaged so they sold it to me half price.

After analyzing the answers in relation to the contrastive analysis theory, by comparing the students’ use of prepositions in their native languages and English, the researcher noticed that the prepositions in the sentences (1), (2), and (3) have functions which are similar to the functions of their counterparts in Arabic. For example, in the sentence (1) the preposition *for* is used to introduce the person who receives help. A comparison between the use of *for* in English and its equivalent in Arabic *لَيْهُ*, /l̞iː:/, shows that *لَيْهُ* is also used for the same purposes. Similarly, the preposition *to* in the sentences (2) and (3) has the same function as its counterpart in
Arabic ِإلى, /iːlaː/. They both introduce the person who receives something, the money, for example. According to the hierarchy of difficulties classified by Stockwell (see literature review), the students had obligatory choices from English prepositions since the functions of both Arabic and English prepositions were similar in these sentences. Moving on to the next step, analyzing the errors that the students made in the first part of the test, most of the errors of the students were in the following sentences:

4. Sara has invited us for a party
   Correct: Sara has invited us to a party.
5. Sara has invited us to dinner
   Correct: Sara has invited us for dinner.
6. I bought a bone to my dog
   Correct: I bought a bone for my dog.

The prepositions in the sentences (4) and (5) were the most confusing for the students. Both sentences present an invitation but the reason for invitation differs. Comparing the two sentences to similar ones in Arabic, the researcher found that only one preposition is used to express both situations in Arabic, which is the preposition ِإلى. In these cases, the students had optional choices from the target language since two prepositions to and for are used in English and they are equivalents to the preposition ِإلى in the sentences (4) and (5).

Another example of the difference in using prepositions is in the sentence (6) where the preposition for is used in English to introduce the person or thing who / which receives something in this case food / bone. The previous examples (2) and (3) showed that the Arabic preposition ِإلى is used in such cases while in the last example, the preposition ل must be used as the equivalent to for. Thus, the students had no choice but to choose the preposition for in order to answer correctly.

**B. Portuguese Students**

The total number of errors the Portuguese students committed is similar to that of the Arabic students but the errors are completely different. Most of the Portuguese students’ answers were correct but the students encountered difficulty in choosing the
right preposition in some sentences which made them answer incorrectly. The results of the Portuguese students are shown in the following chart:

![Bar chart showing correct answers and errors for three students.]

The answers of the Portuguese students were also analyzed in accordance with the contrastive analysis theory. The results of the analysis showed that all Portuguese students had correct answers to sentences such as the following:

7. She is going to the library in order to borrow a book.
8. I bought a bone for my dog.
9. He was tried for murder and found guilty.

The sentence (7) expresses an event that includes movement. In such cases the preposition à is used in Portuguese to indicate movement. Similarly, the preposition to is also used in English to indicate movement towards something. The answer to the sentence (8) can be analyzed in the same way. It is obvious now, as stated above, that the preposition for is used in English to introduce the person or thing who / which receives something. In Portuguese, the preposition para is used to indicate the
recipient of something. Likewise the preposition *for* in the sentence (9) has the same function as its counterpart in Portuguese *por* where both of them can be used in passive voice sentences to express the reason for something. As can be noticed, the functions of the Portuguese and English prepositions were similar in those sentences; hence the students had obligatory choices from English prepositions. However, the Portuguese students had wrong answers to some of the sentences on the test. Some mistakes were individual ones, that is, only one student selected the wrong answer to the analyzed sentence while other mistakes were common among the students. The errors that the students made were in the following sentences:

10. *We bought a new sofa to the longue.*
   Correct: We bought a new sofa *for* the longue.

11. *My family went for Italy to visit my aunt*
    Correct: My family went *to* Italy to visit my aunt.

12. *I go to work to / for money* (Some students selected the two prepositions in their answer).
    Correct: I go to work *for* money.

The students could not select the correct preposition in the above sentences and the supervisor noticed that the students hesitated before choosing a preposition and yet they had wrong answers. After reviewing the answers of the students, the researcher compared them to their equivalents in the students’ native language *Portuguese*. In the sentence (10) and (12), the preposition *for* is used for indicating the purpose of the action, and *to* is used in the sentence (11) to indicate direction or a final destiny, whereas the preposition *para* is used in Portuguese to indicate all the situations in the above sentences. Thus, the Portuguese students had optional choices from English prepositions since they use the preposition *para* to indicate the purpose of the action as well as the final destiny while they had more than one choice from English as equivalents to the preposition *para* in those sentences.
5.1.2 Translation Test

The second part of the test was a translation task. The students had to translate two texts from their native languages into English. The aim of this test is to examine the students’ efficiency in using appropriate prepositions within a text and to compare their errors in the multiple choice questions test with their errors in the translation test.

A. Arabic Students

After analyzing the responses of the Arabic students in the translation test, the researcher noted that the students committed many errors in translating the texts from Arabic into English. The errors were discussed in accordance with the main concern of the study. Thus, the errors that were analyzed are errors in choosing the correct preposition. The supervisor went over the other grammatical errors to the students but they were not analyzed in this study.

The total number of errors, as shown in the chart, vary in their quantity where one student committed five errors, another student committed six, while the third student had only two errors. The following sentences are some of which seemed difficult for the Arabic students:
13. *He asked other animals help.*
   Correct: He asked other animals *for* help.

14. *He cried help.*
   Correct: He cried *for* help.

15. *They are easy to feed and care to. / They are easy to feed and care with.*
   Correct: They are easy to feed and care *for*.

Some of the students translated the sentences (13) and (14) without using any preposition while one student used the correct preposition *for* in the sentence (13). A comparison between the sentences in Arabic and their correct translation into English showed that the sentence (13) and (14) can be written in two ways in Arabic; hence the learner writes using the preposition *for* without any preposition at all. A correct translation of the sentence shows that the students had no choice but to choose the preposition *for*. Similarly, the sentence (15) was incorrectly translated by the students since they used wrong prepositions such as *with* and *to* instead of the correct preposition *for*. After comparing the structures of the two languages, the researcher noticed that the preposition that is used in Arabic in the correct translation of the sentence is *ل*, *written in Arabic* ل, which has a different function than the preposition *for*. In a correct translation of the sentence, the students had no choice but to choose the preposition *for* since the prepositions *ل* had no equivalent in English in this case. Nevertheless, the students correctly translated other sentences from the same texts such as:

16. *That was a bad day for our Mr. Lion King.*
17. *They took it easy for a couple of years.*

The sentence (16) explains that something was bad for Mr. Lion so Mr. Lion had a bad day and by that Mr. lion became a recipient of an event. The preposition that is used in Arabic for such cases is *ل* which is equivalent to the preposition *for* in English. In sentence (17), the preposition *for* is used to indicate a period of time during which an event took place. The counterpart of the preposition *for* in Arabic is the preposition *ل* which has the same function as *for* when they indicate the period of an event. As
can be noticed, the students had obligatory choices in these sentences; hence the functions of Arabic and Portuguese prepositions were similar.

**B. Portuguese Students**

The responses of the Portuguese students also included errors when choosing the appropriate preposition in the translation of the texts. The errors were partly different from those of the Arabic students.

According to the answers of the students, shown in the chart, one of the students made six mistakes in his translation of prepositions, another student made five, while the third student made four mistakes. Some of these mistakes included different answers from the three students, when they could not recognize which preposition was appropriate for the sentence and used different ones instead of it. The researcher analyzed only the errors the Portuguese students committed in choosing the correct prepositions while the other errors were mentioned to the students as feedback. The students hesitated and made mistakes in translating the following sentences:
18. *He asked other animals to help.* / *He asked help.*

- Correct: He asked other animals *for* help.

19. *We were looking at inspiration to our next business.*

We were looking to inspiration of our next business.

- Correct: We were looking *for* inspiration *for* our next business.

Two of the students chose the infinitive verb *to help* in their translation of the sentence (18) *He asked other animals to help* while the third student translated it without any preposition *He asked help.* Turning back to the rules of Portuguese grammar, the preposition à is used to indicate movement and it is equivalent to the preposition *to.* Portuguese also has some specific expressions and irregular cases. Consequently, a correct translation of the sentences (18) clarifies that the sentence has the preposition à as an equivalent to the preposition *for* which is different from the regular cases that the learner is familiar with. In this case, the students had no choice but to choose the preposition *for* in order to have a correct translation of the sentence. Similarly, the students selected wrong prepositions in their translation of the sentence (19). In the first part of the sentence (19) *We were looking for inspiration,* two of the students used the preposition *at* in their translation while the third student used the preposition *to.* According to the Portuguese grammatical rules, this part of the sentence can be written in two ways using the preposition *por* or the preposition à. However, the students had no choice but to choose the English preposition *for* in order to translate this part of the sentence correctly. Furthermore, the students made mistakes when they translated the second part of the sentence *for our next business.* Only one student used the correct preposition *for* while the other students used different prepositions such as *to* and *of.* The Portuguese students write this part of the sentence using *para* or à when writing a Portuguese sentence. However, the students had no choice but to choose the English preposition *for* in order to translate the sentence correctly.

Nevertheless, some sentences were perfectly translated by the Portuguese students such as the following sentences:

20. That was a bad day *for* our Mr. Lion King.

21. They are easy to feed and care *for.*
Mr. Lion in the sentence (20) is a recipient of something which is a bad day for him. The preposition para is the counterpart for the preposition for as they are both used to indicate the recipient of something. Similarly, the subject They is a recipient of care so the preposition for as well as its counterpart para are used to indicate the recipient of something. In both sentences (20) and (21), the students had an obligatory choice of the preposition for since the functions of for and para are similar in these sentences.

5.2 Interviews with Teachers

The next step in the study was to interview two teachers. The first teacher is a teacher of English grammar who will be mentioned here as teacher L and the second teacher is a teacher who is specialist in students’ difficulties in learning English and he will be mentioned in this study as teacher M.

5.2.1 Teacher L

The interview with teacher L included questions that are related to the main concern of the study as well as to the questions which this study discusses. According to teacher L, the first languages of the students affect their process of learning English in different fields such as phonetics and grammar. This effect may cause serious problems to the learner, for example Arabic learners have a lot of difficulty in using the preposition at and some learners can never overcome such problems. Teacher L also explained that the students who have the same first language, make similar mistakes during their learning process due to what is known as mother tongue interference. In addition, teacher L said that from her experience in teaching foreign language students she found that the difficulty of learning English prepositions is also affected by the first languages of the students so that they tend to use prepositions as they could be used in their first languages. An example that is mentioned by teacher L is the sentence I like of you which is written by a Persian student where the student used the sentence structure as it is used in his first language. Furthermore, teacher L pointed out that there is a difference between the students’ errors when they use prepositions in a single sentence or within a text. Moreover, there is also difference
between the students’ errors when they translate texts from their first languages into the target language and vice versa. She explained that the students find it easier to translate texts from English into their first languages because they already know the rules of their grammar while they have to think which preposition to use when they translate into English.

5.2.2 Teacher M

The interview with teacher M included the same questions which were asked to teacher L in order to get different points of view about the problem which this study discusses. According to teacher M, the mother tongues of students definitely affect their learning of English. Students whose first language is closely related to English (such as Dutch, Danish) find it easier to learn English. The alphabet of these languages are the basic Latin alphabet therefore they are similar in their scripts. Pronunciation and grammar structures are also similar which make them easier to learn. Students already have a similar underlying language system which makes them know a lot about the language even before they learn it. Unlike teacher L, teacher M thinks that students who have the same first languages do not necessary make similar errors in their process of learning. Other factors need to also be considered. For instance, students who are less motivated to learn English or who have greater problems understanding concepts and structures than their peers will find it more challenging to improve their English language skills. Furthermore, teacher M believes that nearly all English language learners find it difficult to learn and use prepositions correctly. For example, some students can hardly recognize the difference between in a corner and at a corner, the difference between to someone and for someone, or the combination of nouns, adjectives and verbs with specific prepositions. In addition, he stated that prepositions may cause problems to the learner for different reasons. It might be problems due to confusing prepositions such as looks for vs. looks after where the student may make mistakes when choosing the appropriate preposition. Another reason could be the exceptions of some to the rules which have to be remembered by the learner such as on a bus, on a ship, but in a taxi, in a car. Moreover, phrasal verbs combined with prepositions also constitute a challenge to the learner such as look up
at vs. look forward to. Similarly to teacher L, teacher M also believes that there is a difference between the students’ errors when they translate a text and when they do exercises. She says that this difference is noticed not only when the students use prepositions but with all grammatical rules. When doing exercises, the task is mostly guided, students concentrate on the rules and then try to apply them. Whereas during translations, the rules cannot always be applied in all cases.
6. Discussion

In light of the results from the multiple choice test, which were analyzed, it was noticed that the number of errors was different for each student though some errors were common among students who have the same first language. The Arabic students encountered difficulty in choosing an appropriate preposition in examples that included an invitation. They were confused if they would be invited to or invited for a party/ a dinner. Compared with their native language, only one preposition is used for both cases which might be a reason for their errors. Moving on to the third common error among Arabic students, it was also noticed that the preposition for has more than one counterpart in Arabic where it is equivalent to the preposition ل in some sentences and to the preposition إل in other sentences. However, it was also noticed that the students chose correct prepositions when the sentences had similar structures in their native language. In those sentences, the prepositions have similar functions in both languages. Consequently, it was observed that the students are influenced by their first language in their process of learning English so that they master the language when the rules are similar but they get confused when rules differ. As the interviews with the teachers were made after the tests, the teachers’ views appended practical as well as theoretical documentation to the findings of this study. The teachers confirmed the influence of the learner’s first language on his English learning process in different fields including prepositions.

Similarly, the analysis of the results of the Portuguese students showed that the total number of errors was different among students. It was difficult for the Portuguese students to recognize the difference between for and to in the analyzed sentences because both prepositions have one counterpart in their first language para when they indicate direction or inform about the purpose of the action. Presumably, this difference between English and Portuguese caused confusion for the students in their choices of the suitable preposition. The students committed common mistakes when the prepositions had different functions while on the contrary they were successful in choosing the correct preposition when the functions are similar.

Discussing the results of the translation test, the researcher noticed that both the Arabic and Portuguese students made a lot of mistakes in their translations of the texts from their native languages into English. The analysis of the results of the
students showed that both Portuguese and Arabic students had encountered difficulty in choosing appropriate prepositions within the texts. The number of the errors was different among students but it was obvious from the students’ answers that the errors that the Portuguese students committed were similar when they translated the texts. Likewise, similar results have been shown after analyzing the Arabic students errors where the students made similar mistakes, though the analysis showed that one of the students made much fewer mistakes than the others. Apparently, the students were influenced by their first languages so that they made a lot of mistakes when the rules of prepositions differ between the two languages while it was easier to choose a correct prepositions when the structure of the sentence was similar to their native language.

To summarize, the first languages of both the Arabic and Portuguese students affected their process of learning English in such a way that it facilitated the task for them when the structure of sentences was similar to what they were familiar with, that is, to the structure of sentences in their native languages. This is also known as facilitation or positive transfer since the learners got help from the rules of their first languages when the structures of English were similar to those of Arabic and Portuguese. These similarities, according to teacher M, the students already know a lot about the use of English prepositions since they have a similar underlying language system. However, the effect of the learners’ first languages formed an obstacle to mastering the language when the structures of sentences differed, because the students were confused and hesitated in their choice of prepositions. This can be mentioned as negative transfer or interference since the differences between the learners’ first languages and English caused confusion to the learners during their learning process.

The common errors of the students were mostly similar when the students had the same first language. These results confirm teacher L’s view that the students who have the same first language make similar mistakes. So, the study shows that the student’s first language affects the process of his learning another language. This effect can be positive and helpful to the learner, but it can also form an obstacle to learning the new rules of the target language. However, the results of the translation test of the Arabic students had one exception where one student had much fewer errors.
than the others but other factors can be applied in this case such as better competence of the language. Moreover, it must be noted that the errors of this student were similar to the errors of the other Arabic students which means that part of the mistakes were due to the influence from the student’s native language.
7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to study the difficulties in using prepositions during the process of learning English as a second language as well as the influence of the first language on learning English as a second language. The study was conducted through empirical experiments which were based on multiple choice and translation tests for students in the ninth grade in an international school as well as on interviews with two teachers in the same school. The study focused on the use of the prepositions *to* and *for*. The results of the tests were a little better in multiple choice questions than in using the right preposition while writing a text, though students made some mistakes even in the multiple choice tests. The students tended to give their answers according to the rules of their first language instead of English when they translated a text from their native language to English. Analyzing the errors the students made it became obvious that students transfer their first language habits while learning English and that the negative transfer causes interference between the two languages when the rules do not correspond to each other (Littlewood, 1984, 17). In fact, the influence of the negative transfer from the students’ native languages to English can be related to the differences between the two languages which is consistent with the assumption of Robert Lado (as cited in Littlewood, 1984) that “Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him and those elements that are different will be difficult” (Littlewood, 1984, 17).

With regard to the results of the tests, it was noticed that the teachers’ views conformed to the findings of the study. The students mastered using prepositions when their functions are similar to their native language while they made mistakes in choosing the right preposition when the preposition’s function is different from their native language. In fact, they tended to use the preposition in a similar way to how the sentence is structured in their first language. Statistically speaking, the students were better in the multiple choice test than in the translation test so it can be concluded that it was easier for the students to choose the right preposition from specific choices than finding the right preposition to use while writing a text.
8. Future Work

The analysis of the students’ results in the tests shows the effect of the first language on the target language. However, there are some errors that can be attributed to transfer as well as to other factors. As this study was limited to analyzing the effects of one factor “transfer”, a future study may analyze the effects on the process of learning a second language, of other factors such as generalization and simplification. This future study can be organized using the theory of error analysis so that the responses of the students will be analyzed to show the influence of different factors on learning a second language.
References


Appendix

Multiple Choice Test

1. Max was looking …… his mother but she was not at home.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

2. He goes shopping ……. his grandmother because she can’t do it herself.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

3. We bought a new sofa ……. the lounge.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

4. Please give this message ……. Simon.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

5. Sara has invited us ……. a party.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to
6. Sara has invited us …… dinner.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. in

7. I made this lesson …… you.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

8. I gave the beer …… her.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

9. Ok. I will do that …… you. I will sing …… you
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

10. I bought a bone …… my dog.
    a. on
    b. at
    c. for
    d. to
11. I go to work .... money.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

12. There is a parcel waiting for him at the post office. Can you collect it .... him on your way home?
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

13. His parents lent them the money for the boat and he paid it back .... them over a period of a year.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

14. The frame was slightly damaged so they sold it .... me half price.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

15. She cooked a special meal .... Lisa on her birthday.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to
16. The garage door was broken but Adam was able to repair it …… his mother.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

17. That's Professor Lucile over there. Brigitte will introduce you …… her if you like.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

18. She can't reach the screwdriver. Can you hand it …….. her?
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

19. I like to ski. These boots are …… skiing.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

20. “I gave the book …….. my sister.”
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to
21. “Could you carry these books …….. me?”
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

22. He was tried …….. murder and found guilty.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

23. We provide help …….. victims of war and natural disasters.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

24. She was promoted …….. manager
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to

25. She was promoted …….. her dedication.
   a. on
   b. at
   c. for
   d. to
Translate the following into English: (I will put the texts here in English but the students had the texts in their native languages):

1. The city of Armada opened its arms to a new business. The store, called Turtle Dove, is a pet shop specializing in two kinds of animals. The owners of the store are two brothers, Bill and Bob Pidgin. They took it easy for a couple of years, traveling throughout the States. "We visited almost every zoo in the country, partly because we love animals and partly because we were looking for inspiration for our next business," said Bill. They finally decided on turtles and doves. "They're easy to feed and care for, and both animals live a long time," said Bob. The store will be open from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday.

2. That was a bad day for our Mr. Lion King. During his chase to catch a rabbit he sprang into a small bush from where he came out not with the rabbit but with a large thorn in his palm. He cried for help. He tried his best to pull out the thorn. He shook his hand, tried to pull out the thorn with his mouth etc. but all his efforts were in vain. Then he asked other animals for help. But they all feared the lion. So no animals came to help him. There comes a little porcupine. He pulled out the thorn with great ease. The pain in the palm of the lion was reduced. But his mind became filled with anger, grief and disappointment.

Interview Questions:

1. According to your experience of teaching English in multilingual classes, do the first languages of the students affect their learning of English and in particular, English prepositions? If yes, in which way?

2. Do students with the same mother tongue make similar mistakes during their learning process?

3. Can the students easily differentiate between prepositions that cause confusion such as “to” and “for”?

4. What are the problems that students have when using those prepositions?

5. Is there a difference between the mistakes that students make, in choosing the appropriate preposition, when doing exercises and their mistakes when translating a text? If yes, can you explain how do those mistakes differ? What do you think is the reason for this difference?