

## Problems Arab EFL Students Encounter in Learning Prepositions

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**Abstract:** *This paper reports the findings of a study that aimed at identifying the difficulties that Arab EFL learners encounter in using prepositions at the levels of both recognition and production. Data were collected through a specially designed questionnaire that was given to 50 university students. It was found that the overall performance of the subjects was low as they encounter a number of tangible difficulties in acquiring English prepositions. A hierarchy of difficulty was established and the major causes of these difficulties were identified. The semantic complexity of prepositions, the multi-uses each preposition has and negative transfer from Arabic were found to be among the major causes of difficulty.*

### 1. Introduction

Prepositions are function words that serve to connect noun entities to each other or to any parts of speech in an utterance. Although prepositions do not always have independent meaning of their own, they play an essential role in the process of communication. In fact, prepositions form a major subset of function words that can be used to indicate different types of relations between their complements and other preceding elements in a sentence. These functional relations that can be signaled by prepositions include temporal, locative, and directional relations. A detailed analysis of the grammatical functions and semantic features of prepositions can be seen in Downing (2006: 540-555).

Prepositions, being function words, play a basic role in sentence structure, and as Pinker (1994:118-119) puts it, function words “delineate larger phrases into which NP’s and VP’s and AP’s fit, thereby providing scaffolding for the sentence.” He also adds “Function words also capture much of what makes one language grammatically different from another.”

Research in the acquisition of English prepositions by foreign language learners has been so far scanty compared with that in other language aspects such as phonology and syntax. Lowie and Verspoor (2004) conducted a study on 75 high school and college students to examine the effect of certain variables on their acquisition of English prepositions. They investigated the role of two variables in the acquisition process: similarity between prepositions in L1 (Dutch) and L2 (English), and the frequency of prepositions in the L2 input. It was found that lower level learners opted for more frequent prepositions and were more accurate where L1 was similar to L2. Another study was conducted by Maria and Catalan (1996) on Spanish learners of English. The study aimed at

determining the frequency of preposition errors in descriptive compositions written by Spanish students. The results of this study revealed that preposition errors are the most common of all errors.

The difficulties that Arab learners encounter in learning English prepositions have been the focus of a number of studies. Most of these studies endeavored to compare and contrast certain English prepositions with their Arabic counterparts. Other studies aimed at identifying the common errors committed by Arab learners in using English prepositions (Scott and Tucker 1974; Zoghoul 1979; Habash 1982; Mukattash 1984; Swan and Smith 1987; Hamdallah and Tushyeh 1993; Kharma, N. and Hajjaj, A.1997; Mahmoud, A. 2000; AbiSamra 2003). Hamdallah and Tushyeh's study (1993), for instance, attempted to accomplish two main objectives: to compare and contrast a selected number of English and Arabic prepositions and to identify the sources of error as well as the most common difficulties that Arab learners of English encounter in learning. In this study, the researchers selected nine English prepositions and compared them with their nearest equivalents in Arabic. They concluded that omission, substitution and redundant use of English prepositions constituted the major difficulties that EFL Arab learners encounter in learning prepositions. However, the major flaw of this study is that the researchers isolated one single meaning for each selected preposition and ignored the other various meanings that each preposition may have in different contexts.

AbiSamara (2003) analyzed the errors committed by Arabic-speaking students in writing English essays. The study aimed, among other things, to identify and categorize Arabic speakers' errors in essay writing in order to determine the sources of these errors and to suggest some remedial strategies. In scrutinizing the preposition errors, the researcher was able to identify a few instances of negative interference from Arabic into English. A major problem in this study is that it was not exhaustive enough to cover all types of difficulties that Arab learners of English may encounter in using English prepositions.

Having reviewed most of the studies that aimed at diagnosing the difficulties that Arab learners of English may encounter in learning English prepositions, the authors of this paper can confidently assert that the current study stands different from any previous related study in the following respects:

1. It is the first study that investigated the difficulties that Arab learners of English encounter in acquiring English prepositions at the levels of both recognition and production, using a meticulously prepared elicitation instrument.
2. It is a corpus-based study that identified the difficulties in the most frequent English prepositions. The target prepositions were selected according to their frequency in the BNC.
3. Unlike any previous investigation, four aspects of meanings or uses of each preposition were examined and tested in this study at the levels of recognition and production. (See methodology below).

The study proceeds as follows. Section (2) presents the objectives and rationale of the study. Section (3) explains the research methodology and describes the subjects and the data elicitation technique. The findings of the research are presented in section (4). Finally, section (5) is devoted to the conclusion and recommendations.

## **2. Objectives and rationale**

This study aims at identifying the difficulties that Arab learners of English encounter in learning prepositions. More specifically, the paper is an attempt to answer the following questions.

1. How well have Arab learners of English acquired English prepositions?
2. What are the most noticeable preposition errors that Arab learners of English may commit in recognizing and producing prepositions?
3. What are the possible causes of error in using English prepositions?
4. What implications may such a study have to teaching English?

The rationale behind conducting such a study lies in the fact that prepositions, being function words, are semantically and syntactically complex. They tend to be difficult to master even for native speakers, let alone foreign language learners. In fact, prepositions constitute a difficulty that keeps manifesting itself even at the advanced stages of learning a second or foreign language. No matter how competent a learner can be, there will always be some non-familiar uses of certain prepositions. A quick scrutiny of any source that deals with the most common errors in grammar in Arabic or English, and probably in most languages, will show that prepositions are the thorniest spot (see Kharma and Hajjaj, 1997, for example).

Prepositions are essential sentence elements to comprehension since they can signify different functions such as temporal, locative, and directional, among other things. Hardly, if ever, can one produce or listen to a sentence that has no preposition. This entails that foreign language learners are bound to encounter difficulty in leaning and using them properly. This complexity is exacerbated by the fact that prepositions in each language have their own unique syntactic and semantic specifications, a matter that leaves a great deal for L1 transfer to occur in the process of learning English by foreign language learners. This is true especially in the case of Arabic and English, which have very little in common since each language belongs to a different language family. Another aspect of the difficulty Arab learners of English encounter in acquiring prepositions has to do with the fact that prepositions do not receive proper attention in foreign language teaching textbooks and curricula. By and large, ELT textbooks do not provide foreign language learners with detailed information on prepositions. Hence, Arab learners of English are expected to encounter problems in the process of learning English prepositions.

### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1. Subjects

Data were collected from 50 junior and senior English majors studying at the University of Sharjah during the academic year 2006 and 2007. Most of these students were public school graduates and some of them graduated from private schools, which means that they had been learning English for at least 14 years prior to this study. They also had fulfilled the requirement for joining the Department of English by obtaining a minimum score of 500 on the TOEFL. Moreover, they had successfully completed most of the compulsory and elective requirements of the department. These courses include syntax, advanced language skills, morphology, introduction to literature, translation, advanced writing and extensive reading. Four sections consisting of 53 students were randomly selected. Responses of three students were rejected because two of them did not complete the tasks and the third left most of the task items unanswered.

#### 3.2. Data collection

Data were collected through a questionnaire especially designed to assess the subjects' ability to use the most frequently used prepositions in English at the levels of production and recognition (see appendices). To determine which prepositions tend to be the most frequent in English, the authors utilized two sources: 1) The British National Corpus (BNC) and 2) a number of renowned EFL Internet learning sites. The authors calculated the frequency of most of the prepositions in the language according to the BNC. For instance, the preposition 'in' occurs (1931797) times in the BNC while 'on' occurs (731142) times. On the other hand, a preposition like 'beneath' occurs (4779) times only. Thus, based on the criterion of frequency, the first two prepositions, 'in' and 'on', were used as part of our questionnaire but not the third. The authors used the second source, EFL learning sites, to see if the list of the most frequently used prepositions as revealed by the BNC was also as frequent in these highly used EFL sites. In the cases where the frequency of use was extremely close, the authors made the choice. The following table shows the prepositions targeted in the questionnaire and their frequency as revealed by the BNC.

Table 1: Frequency of Target Prepositions According to the BNC

No	Preposition	Frequency
1	in	1931797
2	on	731142
3	at	522790
4	over	130923
5	between	90612
6	under	61002
7	within	45702

8	above	25179
9	behind	22439
10	below	14111

Each one of these prepositions was represented in four tokens or four uses in the questionnaire: 1) a use where the preposition indicates time, 2) a use where the preposition indicates place, 3) a use of the preposition as part of a verb, i.e. a prepositional verb and 4) a use of the preposition as part of an idiom or saying. Thus the questionnaire comprises 40 items.

The questionnaire consisted of two tasks, each of which comprised 40 items. In the production component the subjects were asked to fill in the most appropriate preposition from a given list. This task was intended to evaluate the students' ability to use prepositions correctly (Appendix A). The second task consisted of forty multiple-choice items designed to assess the subjects' ability to recognize the proper use of prepositions (Appendix B). In this section, the subjects were asked to circle the correct answer in each item. The production version of the questionnaire was administered first and a week later the subjects were given the second part, the recognition version. That is, the subjects were asked to answer the production part first so as not to be influenced by the alternatives found in the recognition part. The subjects were given enough class time to do the required tasks.

The following table shows the distribution of the prepositions in the questionnaire based on their use or function.

Table 2: Distribution of the prepositions and their functions in the questionnaire

No	Type of prep and item no. in the questionnaire				
	Preposition	Time	Place	Prep V	Idiom/saying
1	at	19	18	4	11
2	in	13	14	2	15
3	on	5	1	8	9
4	above	26	40	30	27
5	behind	10	7	25	6
6	below	33	22	37	16
7	between	28	20	23	21
8	over	24	32	39	31
9	under	29	36	12	35
10	within	34	3	38	17

Despite the fact that most of the sentences in the questionnaire were adapted from such sources as the BNC, EFL textbooks, short stories and EFL learning sites, the authors had two native speakers of English, colleagues in the Department of English, go through the two versions of the questionnaire before

distributing them to the subjects. They were also asked to answer them in order to see if they would find any problem with the context created for each item. Their feedback was highly appreciated in finalizing the questionnaire.

### 3.3. Method of analysis

The researchers graded the subjects' responses and identified the errors in each section. Percentages of correct and wrong answers were calculated for all the items of the two tasks. Furthermore, the percentages of wrong answers were computed for each preposition separately in order to see which of the tested prepositions was the most problematic, i.e. to establish a hierarchy of difficulty. Results were tabulated in order to facilitate the process of establishing a hierarchy of difficulty and to simplify comparing the subjects' performance on both parts of the questionnaire.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Recognition

In what follows, we will attempt to present the results of the analysis of the questionnaire starting with the recognition version followed by a discussion of the subjects' responses to the production version. Then the paper will proceed to highlight the major difficulties that the learners encountered in producing sentences with appropriate prepositions.

The following table summarizes the subjects' responses to the recognition version of the questionnaire.

Table 3: Recognition: Percentages of correct answers rank ordered from the most to the least difficult

No	Preposition	No. Of Correct Answers	%
1	within	80	40
2	at	96	48
3	under	115	57.5
4	over	126	63
5	behind	134	67
6	on	141	70.5
7	between	140	70
8	below	156	78
9	above	157	78.5
10	in	169	85
	<b>Average</b>	<b>131.3</b>	<b>65.7</b>

The table shows the prepositions in the study, rank ordered from the most to the least difficult according to the subjects' responses. As can be observed, the

overall performance of the subjects indicates that prepositions constitute a tangible difficulty for EFL learners. The average of correct responses is only 65.7, a remarkably low percentage indeed. This means that more than 34% of the subjects' responses are incorrect. This percentage of incorrect responses is quite high given the fact that this version of the questionnaire requires merely recognition of the correct answer. Scrutinizing the subjects' responses to each item, we were able to observe that the preposition 'in' tends to be the easiest for the subjects. Out of the subjects' two hundred responses to the items exhibiting this preposition in the questionnaire, 169 were accurate answers. This high percentage of correct responses may be attributed to the fact that 'in' is one of the most frequently used prepositions. On the other hand, 'within,' which tends to be one of the least frequently used prepositions, emerged as the most difficult for the subjects; only forty percent (40%) of the total number of responses to the items representing this preposition received accurate answers. The use of this preposition as part of a prepositional verb was particularly difficult for the subjects. Out of the 50 responses to the sentence that contains this preposition as part of a prepositional verb, only 18 were correct. This sentence is repeated below:

1. This is a brochure. It says, "Saturday staff needed – inquire (a. in b. on c. within.) Let's open it and see what kind of staff they are looking for."

Many of the subjects opted for 'in' probably because of the fact that the information is inside the brochure. We will present examples of the subjects' erroneous uses below when discussing their responses to the production version of the questionnaire.

One of the most intriguing points that the results of the analysis reveal is the position that 'at' occupies in the hierarchy of difficulty– it is the second most difficult preposition. In examining the subjects' responses to the items representing this preposition, it was found that most of the subjects' answers to items 2 and 11 in the questionnaire were wrong. These two items are:

2. I am not interested (a. in b. at c. for) listening to your false stories.
3. I am afraid I don't have the amount that you need. Why don't you ask Tom? He has a large sum of money (a. on b. at c. in) his disposal.

As can be observed, these two sentences represent two of the major functions or uses tested in the study, namely the use of the preposition as part of a verb, i.e., a prepositional verb and the use of the preposition as part of an idiomatic expression or saying. Similarly is the case with the preposition 'under' which is, as the analysis revealed, the third most difficult preposition. Examining the subjects' responses to the items containing this preposition, we found that 28 out of the 50 responses to the item representing 'under' as part of an idiom or saying were incorrect. The situation is even worse with this preposition when being part of a verb, as in (4) below.

4. The charity will go \_\_\_\_\_ unless a generous donor can be found within the next few months.  
 a. under b. in c. above

Out of the subjects' 50 responses to this sentence, only 18 were correct.

In fact, using a preposition as part of an idiom/saying or as part of a prepositional verb was found to be the most challenging functions for the subjects not only with the prepositions 'at' and 'under', but with virtually all the prepositions. Table (4), below, summarizes the results of the analysis in terms of the four major functions: time, place, prepositional verb use, and idioms or sayings.

Table 4: Recognition: Percentages of the correct answers according to function, rank ordered from the most to the least difficult

No	Function of Prep	No. Of Correct Answers	%
1	Idioms/Sayings	249	49.8
2	Prep V	294	58.8
3	Time	382	76.4
4	Place	387	77.4
	<b>Average</b>	<b>328</b>	<b>65.6</b>

As can be seen from table (4), prepositions that are part of idioms and multi-word verbs tend to be the most difficult for learners. For instance, less than 50% of the total number of tokens representing prepositions that are part of idioms or sayings received correct answers. Similarly is the case with prepositions that are part of multi-word verbs. Out of the 500 responses to this group, only 294 were correct answers. Thus, one of the major difficulties that the subjects encountered when attempting to recognize the appropriate choice of prepositions was these two categories, i.e. prepositions as parts of verbs and prepositions as parts of idiomatic expressions. This difficulty is even more noticeable in the production part of the questionnaire as we will show below.

#### 4.2. Production

The results of the analysis show that the subjects' performance in the production component of the questionnaire is worse than their performance in the recognition part. Table (5) below summarizes the subjects' overall performance in this part. In this section, the subjects were asked to fill in the blanks with the correct preposition from a list given to them. The table displays the students' performance rank-ordered from the most to the least difficult with the preposition *under* being on top of the difficulty scale and the preposition *in* on



the bottom of the scale. The overall percentage of correct answers in the production part of the questionnaire was 43.25. This means that 56.75 of the students got the answers wrong; a matter that reveals that the subjects have a noticeable difficulty in using prepositions properly. The percentages of correct responses for seven prepositions ('under', 'within', 'below', 'over', 'behind', 'at', and 'between') were below 50% with one preposition, i.e. 'on' in the low 50s and only two, i.e. 'above' and 'in' in the low 60s. These percentages are rather low taking into account the level of the subjects who are junior and senior English majors and who had obtained a score of 500 and above on the TOEFL before they were allowed to join the Department of English.

Table 5: Production: Percentages of correct answers rank ordered from the most to the least difficult

No.	Preposition	No. of Correct answers	%
1	under	40	20
2	within	44	22
3	below	69	34.5
4	over	78	39
5	behind	80	40
6	at	89	44.5
7	between	98	49
8	on	105	52.5
9	above	130	65
10	in	132	66
	<b>Average</b>		<b>43.25</b>

Data analysis revealed that the majority of the subjects were unable to produce sentences with correct prepositions. The difficulties that the learners encountered in producing sentences with appropriate prepositions can be summed up as follows:

1. The most difficult preposition to use was 'under' with a percentage as low as 20%. The difficulty rank that this preposition occupies in the recognition part of the questionnaire is also high; it is the third most difficult preposition. This remarkably low performance can be attributed to the learners' tendency to replace this preposition with its nearest semantic equivalent, i.e., 'below'. Many subjects erroneously used 'below' instead of 'under' in sentences such as the following:

5. \*He was hiding a snake *below* his arm.

6. \*To use the swimming pool, children aged 12 or *below* must be accompanied by and adult.

This is probably why the students' performance in producing 'below' was much higher, i.e. 34.5%. Another possible cause of this low performance may be ascribed to the learners' tendency to leave the blank space unfilled whenever they were uncertain of the correct answer. Furthermore, the idiomatic use of the preposition 'under' as well as its use as part of a prepositional verb were often left unanswered or erroneously replaced by other prepositions as was the case in the following sentences:

7. The government has come *under* fire for its decision to close the mines.
8. The charity will go *under* unless a generous donor can be found.

Another factor to be considered regarding these two prepositions is the fact that they share some semantic features, a matter that makes it difficult for non-native speakers of English to grasp the subtle differences between these two prepositions. Both 'below' and 'under' share the feature of being in a lower place or position. Moreover, some widely used dictionaries such as *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* and *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* cite them as synonyms. What makes the situation even thornier is the fact that these two prepositions have the same equivalent in Arabic, i.e. *tahta*. The prepositions 'under' and 'below' in most of the target sentences can be best translated into Arabic *tahta*. Thus, this confusion between these two prepositions may be partly attributed to negative transfer from the learners' mother tongue.

2. The second most problematic preposition was 'within'. The percentage of correct answers was 22, a little bit higher than that of 'under'. The subjects often replaced it with 'in' with which it shares some semantic similarity, as was the case in the sentence:

9. We recommend that this food be consumed \*in (within) five months.

In other cases, it was erroneously replaced with 'below' as was the case in the sentence:

10. If things are to change, the company must be reformed from \*below (within).

The use of 'below' here might be ascribed to the concept that this sentence represents in Arabic. It is often said that reform or change in companies or institutions must start from the bottom, which is semantically similar to the meaning of 'below'. That is probably why many subjects used 'below' in place of 'within'.

The apparent inability of the subjects to comprehend the overall meaning of some of the items (sentences) in the questionnaire could be the cause behind committing errors as was the case in the sentence:

11. This is a brochure. It says "Saturday staff needed- inquire within. Let's open it and see what kind of staff they are looking for."

In many cases 'within' was either replaced with 'in' or left blank. The frequent replacement of 'within' with 'in' may lead us to attribute this erroneous use to the effect of negative transfer from Arabic in which both have the same equivalent, namely *fi*. Another factor might be the fact that 'in' is more frequent in English than 'within'. That is perhaps why the percentage of correct answers in the production of 'in' was much higher than that of 'within', i.e. 66%.

3. The third most difficult preposition was 'over'. This preposition occupies the fourth level of difficulty in the recognition part of the questionnaire. The overall percentage of correct answers in the production component of the questionnaire was 39. This preposition was often replaced with either 'on' or 'above' because of the common semantic features that they all share. In addition, the three prepositions have the same equivalent in Arabic, i.e. *fawq*. This probably accounts for the high percentage of correct answers in producing 'on' and 'above'. Examples of erroneous responses include sentences such as the following:

12. The cup is \*above (over) there.
13. Many of these businesses have grown remarkably \*within (over) the past few years.

4. The next most problematic preposition was 'behind'. It was replaced by a variety of other prepositions including 'under', 'on', 'within', 'over', etc. Representative examples of erroneous productions include:

14. She suspected that a certain cynicism lay \*within/on/in his exterior.
15. Two more weeks and the semester is \*within/over us.

These errors do not constitute a fixed pattern among the subjects. They can be primarily attributed to incomplete learning, inadequate teaching, or improper treatment of such grammatical points in textbooks.

5. The preposition 'at' occupied the sixth position on the hierarchy of difficulty. Interestingly enough this preposition occupies the second place of difficulty in the recognition part of the questionnaire with a percentage of correct answers as low as 48% compared with 44.5 in the production part. Such low performance in the recognition component may be attributed to the fact that idiomatic uses as well as prepositional verb uses constituted a tangible difficulty for the subjects. This same difficulty manifested itself in producing this preposition as the following examples show

16. I am afraid I don't have the amount that you asked for. Why don't you ask  
Tom? He has a large sum of money \*in/under his disposal.

This unacceptable substitution may be easily attributed to negative transfer from Arabic. The expression 'at his disposal' is equivalent to an Arabic expression that starts with the word *tahta* (under) as an equivalent to 'at' in English. The Arabic expression is *tahta tasarrufihi* (at his disposal).

6. The seventh preposition on the difficulty scale was 'between' as shown in Table (5) above. The percentage of correct answers is 49. In most of the wrong cases, 'between' was replaced with '\*at, on, in' as can be seen in the following examples:

17. It is not advisable to call \*at 12 and 1:00 on Fridays.

18. The news of his success hit him \*on/in the eyes.

The fact that 'between' was substituted with 'at' in the first example may be due to the use of the time expression, i.e. "12:00 O'clock" for which students are usually taught to use the preposition 'at'. The use of 'in' and 'on' in the second example may be attributed to negative transfer from Arabic in which both 'at' and 'in' have the same equivalent, namely *fii* or *'ala*. The subjects may have understood the second sentence as it is literally said in Arabic:

19. *dharabahu 'ala 'aynihi*

He hit him on/in his eye.

7. The preposition that occupies the eighth place of difficulty was 'on' which received 52.5% of the correct answers. It was erroneously replaced with '\*in, at, above' as in the following examples:

20. Tom is arriving \*in Mach 20.

21. He said Russian planes were not carrying 'air-to-surface' missiles or bombs, which could allow them to attack targets \_\_\_\_\_ the ground.

22. Witnesses have cast doubt \*at the suspects' innocence.

The wrong use of 'in' in example 19 above may be ascribed to non-careful teaching practices in which students are taught to use the preposition 'in' with months of the year. The blank space in the example was followed directly by a month's name 'March'. That is probably why most of the subjects opted for 'in' in both parts of the questionnaire.

8. The ninth problematic preposition was 'above'. The percentage of correct answers was 65. Most of the items that received wrong answers contained 'on' and 'over' as explained earlier. This is due to the semantic similarity between these three prepositions and possibly to the incomplete knowledge on the part of the learners of the fine semantic differences among them.

9. The preposition 'in' was the easiest one. In both versions of the questionnaire, this preposition occupies the tenth position, i.e., the lowest place in terms of difficulty. This might be due to its high frequency in English. Wrong responses included the use of 'within, between, at' as explained above.

Before we conclude this section, it might be expedient to cast a glance at the difficulties that students encountered in using the target prepositions in terms of function. Table (6) below summarizes the subjects' performance in using prepositions according to function. The table clearly shows that using prepositions in idiomatic phrases was the most difficult, followed by the use of prepositions in prepositional verbs or multi-word verbs. The subjects' use of

propositions to express time and place was also low. This shows that the overall performance was unacceptable taking into account the education level of the subjects.

Table 6: Percentages of correct answers according to function

No.	Function of Prep.	No. of correct answers	%
1	Idiom	124	24.8
2	Prep. V	236	47.2
3	Time	238	47.6
4	Place	267	53.4
	<b>Average</b>		<b>43.25</b>

## 5. Conclusion and recommendations

The analysis clearly revealed that the overall performance of the subjects in recognizing and using prepositions properly was very low, which indicates that the subjects encounter a considerable difficulty recognizing and using prepositions. The average percentage of correct responses in recognition was 65.6 against 43.25 in production. This low performance raises questions vis-à-vis what and how the subjects were taught English during their secondary and tertiary education stages. It also stimulates researchers and educators to look into the causes of such underachievement. This study shed some light on the difficulties that Arab EFL learners encounter in using prepositions and highlighted some of the possible causes of such problems. It was found that the difficulties could be summed up as follows:

1. Difficulty in recognizing the differences among semantically related prepositions such as: *on*, *above* and *over*.
2. Difficulty in using the proper preposition in idiomatic expressions such as: *at one's disposal*, *below the belt*, *come under fire*.
3. Difficulty in using the proper preposition in prepositional verbs such as: *aim at*, *rely on* and *come over*.
4. Difficulty in using prepositions that are not very frequently used in daily communication such as *within*.
5. Difficulty which results from negative transfer from Arabic (see examples above).

As far as causes are concerned, it was noticed that the semantic complexity of the prepositions and the multi-uses each preposition has are major causes of difficulty. Furthermore, negative transfer from Arabic was also detected in many of the erroneous responses of the subjects. Another cause which can be readily concluded is the unfamiliarity of the subjects of many common uses of the target

prepositions, a matter which casts doubts on and poses questions regarding the teaching practices through which these learners were taught English and the textbooks which they used.

In light of these difficulties and their causes, the following recommendations might be in place:

1. The semantic differences between seemingly similar prepositions such as 'under and below', and 'above, on and over' need to be explicitly highlighted to foreign language learners through illustrative examples.
2. Students need to be well informed of the fact that although two or more words or prepositions may have the same equivalent in the learners' mother tongue, they may not necessarily have the same syntactic and semantic features in the source language.
3. EFL learners need to be taught these prepositions with as many of their collocations as possible since it might be difficult to find strict rules governing the use of prepositions. Moreover, prepositions are better taught in bundles or phrases so as to help learners remember them and use them properly.
4. Curricula designers and textbook writers should introduce prepositions and their various uses systematically and gradually based on the targeted level of learners.

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## Appendix

### A. Production

Please fill in the blanks with suitable prepositions from the box.

<i>above</i>	<i>at</i>	<i>behind</i>	<i>below</i>	<i>between</i>
<i>in</i>	<i>on</i>	<i>over</i>	<i>under</i>	<i>within</i>

1. He said Russian planes were not carrying 'air-to-surface' missiles or bombs, which could allow them to attack targets \_\_\_\_\_ the ground.
2. I am not interested \_\_\_\_\_ listening to your false stories.
3. If things are to change, the company must be reformed from \_\_\_\_\_.
4. This chapter aims \_\_\_\_\_ familiarizing you with the different techniques that are used in retaining existing customers.
5. Tom is arriving \_\_\_\_\_ March 20.
6. He will be laughing at the client \_\_\_\_\_ his back.
7. I can't see the cat because it is hiding \_\_\_\_\_ the wall.
8. He is a person you can rely \_\_\_\_\_.

9. Witnesses have cast doubts \_\_\_\_\_ the suspects' innocence.
10. "Two more weeks and the semester is \_\_\_\_\_ us" said the little child to his father.
11. I am afraid I don't have the amount that you need. Why don't you ask Tom. He has a large sum of money \_\_\_\_\_ his disposal.
12. The charity will go \_\_\_\_\_ unless a generous donor can be found within the next few months.
13. Just wait for me – I will be back \_\_\_\_\_ a minute.
14. I have an apartment \_\_\_\_\_ a tall building in Dubai.
15. He is simple minded. He always sees things \_\_\_\_\_ black and white.
16. That remark was really hurtful. It was \_\_\_\_\_ the belt.
17. Sales figures for January were well \_\_\_\_\_ target.
18. We will meet you \_\_\_\_\_ the entrance of the theater.
19. That famous singer died \_\_\_\_\_ the age of 84.
20. Dubai is \_\_\_\_\_ Sharjah and Abu Dhabi
21. The news of his success hit his enemies \_\_\_\_\_ the eyes.
22. From the top of the skyscraper the cars \_\_\_\_\_ us looked like insects.
23. He is always eating something. When it comes to food, nothing comes \_\_\_\_\_ him and his favorite dishes.
24. Many of these businesses have grown remarkably \_\_\_\_\_ the past few years.
25. She suspected that a certain cynicism lay \_\_\_\_\_ his cheerful exterior.
26. Citizens who are at the age of 70 or \_\_\_\_\_ should be helped by the local government.



27. To live in Yemen, I need 2000 dollars a month just to keep my head \_\_\_\_\_ water.
28. It is not advisable to call \_\_\_\_\_ 12 and 1 on Fridays.
29. To use the swimming pool, children aged 12 or \_\_\_\_\_ must be accompanied by an adult.
30. Her name comes \_\_\_\_\_ mine on the list because her last name starts with an A while mine starts with a B.
31. Apparently he's turned \_\_\_\_\_ a new leaf and he's not smoking any more.
32. The cup is \_\_\_\_\_ there.
33. I have two kids in KG1. Both are \_\_\_\_\_ the age of 6.
34. We recommend that this food be consumed \_\_\_\_\_ five months.
35. The government has come \_\_\_\_\_ fire for its decision to close the mines
36. He was hiding a snake \_\_\_\_\_ his arm.
37. The temperature has fallen \_\_\_\_\_ zero. It is minus 15 now.
38. This is a brochure. It says "Saturday staff needed – inquire \_\_\_\_\_." Let's open it and see what kind of staff they are looking for.
39. His family is coming \_\_\_\_\_ from the US for the wedding.
40. In our kitchen, there is a big picture on the wall \_\_\_\_\_ the sink.

### **B. Recognition**

**Choose the most appropriate option (a, b, or c) to complete each of the following sentences.**

23. He said Russian planes were not carrying 'air-to-surface' missiles or bombs, which could allow them to attack targets \_\_\_\_\_ the ground  
a. on                      b. in                      c. at

24. I am not interested \_\_\_\_\_ listening to your false stories.  
a. in                      b. at                      c. for
25. If things are to change, the company must be reformed from \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. on                      b. within                      c. in
26. This chapter aims \_\_\_\_\_ familiarizing you with the different techniques that are used in retaining existing customers.  
a. on                      b. in                      c. at
27. Tom is arriving \_\_\_\_\_ March 20.  
a. at                      b. in                      c. on
28. He will be laughing at the client \_\_\_\_\_ his back.  
a. below                      b. to                      c. behind
29. I can't see the cat because it is hiding \_\_\_\_\_ the wall.  
a. at                      b. in                      c. behind
30. He is a person you can rely \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. at                      b. over                      c. on
31. Witnesses have cast doubts \_\_\_\_\_ the suspects' innocence.  
a. at                      b. on                      c. to
32. "Two more weeks and the semester is \_\_\_\_\_ us" said the little child to his father.  
a. besides                      b. behind                      c. at
33. I am afraid I don't have the amount that you need. Why don't you ask Tom. He has a large sum of money \_\_\_\_\_ his disposal.  
a. on                      b. at                      c. in
34. The charity will go \_\_\_\_\_ unless a generous donor can be found within the next few months.  
a. under b. in                      c. above
35. Just wait for me – I will be back \_\_\_\_\_ a minute.  
a. on                      b. in                      c. at
36. I have an apartment \_\_\_\_\_ a tall building in Dubai.  
a. on                      b. at                      c. in

37. He is simple minded. He always sees things \_\_\_\_\_ black and white.  
a. at                      b. with                      c. in
38. That remark was really hurtful. It was \_\_\_\_\_ the belt.  
a. below                      b. within                      c. at
39. Sales figures for January were well \_\_\_\_\_ target.  
a. at      b. in      c. within
40. We will meet you \_\_\_\_\_ the entrance of the theater.  
a. on                      b. at                      c. in
41. That famous singer died \_\_\_\_\_ the age of 84.  
a. at                      b. on                      c. in
42. Dubai is \_\_\_\_\_ Sharjah and Abu Dhabi  
a. between                      b. within                      c. in
43. The news of his success hit his enemies \_\_\_\_\_ the eyes.  
a. at                      b. in                      c. between
44. From the top of the skyscraper the cars \_\_\_\_\_ us looked like insects.  
a. behind                      b. below                      c. on
45. He is always eating something. When it comes to food, nothing comes \_\_\_\_\_ him and his favorite dishes.  
a. at                      b. between                      c. with
46. Many of these businesses have grown remarkably \_\_\_\_\_ the past few years.  
a. in                      b. within                      c. over
47. She suspected that a certain cynicism lay \_\_\_\_\_ his cheerful exterior.  
a. at                      b. behind                      c. on
48. Citizens who are at the age of 70 or \_\_\_\_\_ should be helped by the local government.  
a. above                      b. in                      c. on
49. To live in Yemen, I need 2000 dollars a month just to keep my head \_\_\_\_\_ water.  
a. on                      b. off                      c. above

50. It is not advisable to call \_\_\_\_\_ 12 and 1 on Fridays.  
a. at    b. from    c. between
51. To use the swimming pool, children aged 12 or \_\_\_\_\_ must be accompanied by an adult.  
a. at    b. within    c. under
52. Her name comes \_\_\_\_\_ mine on the list because her last name starts with an A while mine starts with a B.  
a. above    b. on    c. in
53. Apparently he's turned \_\_\_\_\_ a new leaf and he's not smoking any more.  
a. in    b. at    c. over
54. The cup is \_\_\_\_\_ there.  
a. within    b. over    c. on
55. I have two kids in KG1. Both are \_\_\_\_\_ the age of 6.  
a. below    b. in    c. on
56. We recommend that this food be consumed \_\_\_\_\_ five months.  
a. on    b. within    c. at
57. The government has come \_\_\_\_\_ fire for its decision to close the mines  
a. at    b. with    c. under
58. He was hiding a snake \_\_\_\_\_ his arm.  
a. at    b. in    c. under
59. The temperature has fallen \_\_\_\_\_ zero. It is minus 15 now.  
a. within    b. below    c. in
60. This is a brochure. It says "Saturday staff needed – inquire \_\_\_\_\_." Let's open it and see what kind of staff they are looking for.  
a. in    b. within    c. on
61. His family is coming \_\_\_\_\_ from the US for the wedding.  
a. off    b. at    c. over
62. In our kitchen, there is a big picture on the wall \_\_\_\_\_ the sink.  
a. at    b. in    c. above