Error Analysis on the Usage of Prepositions by the ESL Learners in Writing Tasks

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This study examines the patterns of three types of errors: omission errors, substitution errors and addition errors in the usage of prepositions by ESL (English as a Second Language) leaners in writing tasks. The study investigates the following: whether the school children in lower grades tend to omit prepositions more often than in higher grades whereas in higher grades, they substitute prepositions more often than in lower grades; whether omission errors are more in [+Functional] prepositions than in [+Lexical] prepositions; and whether the category criterion will be preserved in substitutions. Sinhala speaking ESL learners make errors in prepositions mainly due to cross-linguistic differences between their first and second languages, and as a result, many difficulties occur in ESL teaching. A pool of 260 Sinhala students from four grades (Grade 4, Grade 6, Grade 8 and Grade 10) of two government schools in Sri Lanka participated in this study, and the Survey Method was followed to collect data. A picture story writing task where prepositions needed to be abundantly used was administered to these students and they were instructed to identify the story depicted in the pictures and to present it in writing. The errors in each prepositional category: Adverbial prepositions, Semi-lexical prepositions, Particles and Functional prepositions were counted. Each error was further categorized as omission, substitution and addition. Percentage of each error type in each grade was calculated to find out which error types were most frequent and for which category. Substitution errors were further analyzed to see whether substitutions respected categorical distinctions. Quantitative analysis was carried out using SPSS 2012, and interaction effects and category-wise analysis were computed. Findings concluded that there were more omission errors in the lower grades and more substitution errors in higher grades, and the learners generally respected the category rule in their substitutions. These findings can be used in the ESL classroom to facilitate teaching English prepositions.

Keywords: ESL, Omission errors, Substitution errors, Addition errors

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