



The Acquisition of English Prepositions in Descriptive Text Written by Indonesian EFL Learners : A Case Study of X- Grade Students at SMA 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya in the Academic Year of 2025

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the extent of preposition use in descriptive texts written by English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in Indonesia. The method used is descriptive text analysis. Data were collected from 28 EFL students of grade 10 at SMA 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya in the academic year of 2025 in the descriptive texts they wrote. The results showed significant variation in the ability to use English prepositions accurately in their descriptive texts. Of the total 419 prepositions used, 369 were used correctly and 50 were used incorrectly. Individual student scores varied between 60 as the lowest score to 100 as the highest score, with ten students achieving perfect accuracy without errors. Meanwhile, several other students still experienced difficulties, indicated by a high number of errors in the use of certain prepositions. The average overall preposition mastery score was 88.52%, indicating that the majority of students had a fairly good understanding, although there were still some confusing preposition forms or certain contexts. This variation is likely influenced by first language (L1) interference, the level of English exposure in the learning environment, and each student's learning habits. These findings confirm that EFL students' mastery of prepositions is at a good level, but there is still a need to improve the quality of input and more targeted practice to achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

Keywords: *Acquisition Preposition, accuracy, descriptive text, EFL.*

INTRODUCTION

Prepositions are an important element in English grammar that serve to indicate relationships between elements in a sentence, particularly in terms of place, time, direction, and other logical relationships. According to (Lindstromberg, 2010), prepositions are not merely grammatical elements, but key components in forming accurate meaning in an utterance. The correct use of prepositions allows speakers or writers to convey information clearly and structured, while incorrect use can lead to ambiguity or even misunderstanding. For example, the difference between the phrases “at the station” and “in the station” describes two semantically different locations the former refers to a point around the station, while the latter indicates being within the station area. The crucial role of prepositions in establishing clarity of meaning is particularly

prominent in descriptive texts, which emphasize spatial details, direction, and relationships between objects. In this type of text, prepositions serve to accurately describe an object's position or its relationship to other objects, allowing readers to visualize the description in a concrete and concrete way. The use of prepositions such as "in," "on," or "under," for example, can alter the reader's perception of the situation being described, depending on the context. Inaccurate use of prepositions can lead to vague or even misleading descriptions. Therefore, understanding the function of prepositions in context is crucial for students to write clear and understandable descriptive texts.

In the communication process, both oral and written, prepositions have a strategic role in organizing ideas, showing the relationship between parts of a sentence, and conveying meaning in a logical sequence. Prepositions are commonly used in English sentence construction and help speakers or writers organize ideas cohesively (Kusumastuti, 2019). In the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), mastery of prepositions contributes significantly to students' ability to build complex and meaningful speech structures. (Ngh, 2023) states that prepositions function to express important elements such as position, movement, time, and how actions are carried out, all of which are fundamental elements in the construction of meaning in sentences. However, various previous studies have shown that prepositions are also one of the most frequently error-producing aspects of grammar, especially for EFL learners. (Yusof & Alwan, 2019) stated that difficulties in mastering prepositions are caused by the idiomatic nature of prepositions, the lack of direct equivalents in students' native languages, and the complexity of meanings often attached to certain prepositions. This is exacerbated by limited exposure to English in everyday contexts, so students rarely have the opportunity to internalize the use of prepositions naturally. Common problems that often arise include errors of omission, addition, and incorrect choice of prepositions (substitution), both in oral and written communication. Many students understand the meaning of a preposition in isolation, but do not know the appropriate context of use, which ultimately results in a lack of accuracy in writing.

This condition is closely related to the characteristics of EFL learners themselves. According to (Pariyanto & Pradipta, 2020) EFL learners are individuals who learn English in an environment where English is not the primary or everyday language. In a context like Indonesia, students generally only interact with English in the classroom and have very few opportunities to use it in real life. This limitation makes the acquisition of highly contextual prepositions more difficult. It is not surprising that in the writing process, many students experience confusion when having to choose the right preposition to describe time, place, direction, or cause and effect. Based on these problems, this study aims to analyze the extent to which EFL students, particularly X-grade students at SMA 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, master prepositions in writing descriptive texts. This study also attempts to assess the accuracy of preposition use based on semantic categories, such as spatial (space), temporal (time), direction and movement (direction), cause and purpose, manner and instrument, and possession and relationship (possession and relationship). This classification is important to determine which types of prepositions are

most frequently used and which are most frequently misused, thus providing a comprehensive picture of prepositional aspects that need more attention in the learning process in secondary schools. In other words, the results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of grammar learning strategies that are more effective, contextual, and based on students' real difficulties.

Based on the background described above, the research problems are formulated as follows:

1. To what extent do X-grade students of SMA 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya master English prepositions in their descriptive text writing?
2. Which categories of English prepositions do X-grade students at SMA 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya most frequently use and in which categories do they make the most errors in their descriptive text writing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

First, the research by (Kusumastuti, 2019) entitled "Construal of English Prepositions in, on, and at" aims to analyze the use of the prepositions "in", "on", and "at" to help Indonesian speakers distinguish and use the three correctly in sentence construction. This research is qualitative and analyzes data in the form of sentences from the Cambridge dictionary, without involving human participants directly. In its analysis, this study uses the Construal theory approach, which views language as a cognitive representation formed in the mind before being spoken, as well as the spatial scene and landmark approaches that are limited in understanding the spatial relationship between objects and landmarks. Each preposition is explained based on semantic and spatial principles: containing the concept of containment, referring to contact and support (Lindstromberg, 2010), and used to indicate a specific location point. The findings show that the use of the three prepositions is highly dependent on the speaker's perception of the spatial relationship between objects and landmarks, both physically and conceptually. This research is relevant to your research because it highlights the difficulty of Indonesian speaker in distinguishing "in", "on", and "at", which are all semantically translated as "di". In addition, this study supports the view that the use of appropriate prepositions reflects students' linguistic competence. However, there are several weaknesses, including the limited focus on only three place prepositions and not discussing other functions such as time or direction, and not involving EFL participants directly so that the observations are theoretical and do not show a picture of actual acquisition in English as a foreign language learners.

Second, the study by (Zaabalawi, 2021) in the Arab World English Journal entitled "Mastering Prepositions in English: Explicit versus Implicit Instruction" aims to investigate the effectiveness of explicit teaching through translation in helping Arab learners master English prepositions. Using a quantitative experimental design based on pretest-posttest, this study shows that students who receive explicit instruction and practice in the context of translated texts show improved performance in the use of prepositions. Although it does not explicitly mention the theory, this study is based on the

main concepts in Second Language Acquisition, especially the theory of language transfer which explains that differences in the prepositional system between Arabic and English can cause learning difficulties (negative transfer). In addition, the explicit versus implicit teaching approach is at the center of the study, showing its relevance to the debate in SLA about the most effective grammar teaching method. This study also implicitly touches on the idea of translation-based learning which emphasizes learning through meaningful tasks. The main findings confirm the effectiveness of the translation method in improving the use of prepositions in texts, showing that this method can be a promising pedagogical strategy. The relevance of this study lies in the similar focus on EFL learners' difficulties in mastering prepositions, the influence of L1, and the observation of students' writing production. However, this study has several weaknesses, such as the lack of detailed explanation of the experimental design, the lack of supporting statistical data in the abstract, and the absence of exploration of other factors such as learning intensity or language exposure outside the classroom. In addition, because the research context is limited to Arabic learners and translated texts, the generalization of the results to other contexts and text types, such as EFL students from Indonesian backgrounds in free writing, is limited.

Third, a study conducted by (Ding, 2003) in the journal *Frontiers in Science and Engineering* entitled "Study of the Effects of Direct Focused Versus Direct Unfocused Written Corrective Feedback on the Accuracy of Prepositions in English Writing of High School Students" examines the effectiveness of two types of written feedback direct focused and direct unfocused on the accuracy of preposition use in high school students' writing with high school students as participants, the number is not stated. This study is based on the theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), especially the Input Hypothesis theory (Krashen, 1985) which emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input, and the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985) which emphasizes the role of language production in triggering noticing and deeper linguistic processing. In addition, the concept of Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) is the main focus, with an emphasis on the effectiveness of direct feedback on certain types of errors (focused) compared to feedback on all types of errors (unfocused). The addition of metalinguistic elements in feedback is also analyzed as a supporting variable. The results of the study, although not described in detail in the abstract, suggest that certain types of feedback can improve the accuracy of preposition use, depending on the students' proficiency level. Similarities with this study lie in the focus on the accuracy of preposition use in EFL students' writing and the influence of learning strategies on preposition mastery. However, weaknesses of this study include the lack of quantitative information in the abstract, incomplete description of participant characteristics, and minimal exploration of other factors such as language exposure, motivation, or independent learning strategies. This study also focuses on intervention through feedback, without delving deeply into the causes of errors from the perspective of language transfer or the development of students' interlanguage systems.

Finally, a study conducted by (Nghi et al., 2020) aimed to investigate the factors influencing the use of English prepositions by Vietnamese learners as EFL speakers, involving 400 participants consisting of 200 females and 200 males. This study used a quantitative method in the form of a survey with a 100 item weighted questionnaire, and was rooted in the theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Language Transfer, especially negative transfer from L1. Although the name of the theorist is not explicitly mentioned, the findings of this study are in line with concepts in SLA that structural differences between L1 and L2 can cause difficulties in the acquisition of grammatical elements such as prepositions. The main findings indicate that mother tongue interference (most likely interlingual) greatly affects the expression of prepositional meaning in English, and other factors such as grammatical ability, rich vocabulary, and reading habits also play an important role in the successful use of prepositions. This study is relevant to your research because it addresses EFL learners' prepositional difficulties and explores factors that support successful acquisition, which can enrich this research. However, it has several weaknesses, such as data collection that only measures perception and declarative knowledge rather than actual production in written contexts, the lack of a classification of frequently misused prepositions, and the ambiguity in the use of the term "intralingual interference" that seems to refer to L1 influence. Furthermore, the study does not include pedagogical solutions or interventions based on outcomes, and it does not delve deeper into the intensity and sources of learning that affect learners' abilities a gap that could be further focused on.

METHOD

This study used a quantitative approach with the main objective of obtaining objective, accurate, and measurable data on student achievement in the use of English prepositions in descriptive writing. Each preposition that appeared in the students' writing was analysed through a process of identification and calculation, then classified based on its accuracy level, namely the total number of uses, correct uses, and incorrect uses. This numerical data was then processed to produce average scores, highest scores, and lowest scores, and presented systematically in tabular form for easier analysis. In line with (Creswell & David Creswell, 2018), the quantitative approach aims to test theories by measuring research variables and systematically analysing numerical data so that the results can be generalised and presented in a structured manner. In this context, the quantitative approach provides a clear and easy to understand picture of the extent to which students are able to use prepositions correctly in their writing.

A quantitative approach with text analysis methods was used in this study to evaluate the accuracy of English preposition use in descriptive writing for X-grade students at SMA 17 Agus 1945 Surabaya. Data were obtained from 28 students selected based on recommendations from their English teachers, who were deemed to have good abilities and learning styles. Each student was asked to write a descriptive text of a maximum of 200 words based on the image discussed previously. Writing took place in the language laboratory on April 10, 2025, without internet access and with the use of mobile phones

prohibited to ensure the authenticity of the writing. All collected texts were analyzed to identify all prepositions that appeared, then classified and calculated based on the total number of prepositions used (TPU), the number of correct uses (TCP), and the number of errors (TIP). The results were calculated in the form of individual scores and presented in a table, then analyzed statistically using Microsoft Excel to determine the highest, lowest, and average scores for the accuracy of preposition use across all participants. Furthermore, all prepositions found were grouped into six semantic categories: spatial, temporal, direction and motion, cause and purpose, manner and tool, and possession and relationship. The accuracy level of each category was calculated based on the comparison between the number of correct uses and the total number of prepositions in that category. This analysis provides a measurable quantitative picture of EFL students' mastery of prepositions in the context of descriptive texts.

DISCUSSION

Descriptive Writing

According to (Syahputri & Masita, 2018) who refers to the idea of Descriptive Writing (Oshima and Hongue, 2007), descriptive writing appeals to the sense, so it tells how something looks, feels, smells, tastes, and/or sounds. A good description is a word picture, the reader can imagine the object, place, or person in his or her mind. A description usually follows a pattern of organization that we call spatial order. Spatial order is the arrangement of things in space. the supporting sentences not only provide details that prove the truth of your topic sentences, but they also make your writing rich and interesting.

English Preposition

English Prepositions are a type of word in a language that functions to link two elements in a sentence, usually between a noun or noun phrase with another element. The relationships formed can include location (spatial), time (temporal), direction, cause and effect relationships, or more abstract relationships. In a cognitive perspective as explained (Lindstromberg, 2010), prepositions are not just grammatical elements, but reflect how speakers interpret and organize their experiences of the physical world and abstract ideas. Although often considered complicated because of their short form and varied meanings, prepositions in English actually have a consistent meaning structure and can be understood logically when viewed through semantic and cognitive approaches. Most prepositions have a basic or prototype meaning that is spatial in nature for example, “on” describes a position on a surface which then develops into other uses such as stating time “on Monday” or a topic “on a topic” through a process of expanding meaning based on association or metaphor. Based on the book *English Prepositions Explained*, Lindstromberg (2010) does not classify prepositions rigidly into categories such as place prepositions or time prepositions. Instead, he uses a conceptual and semantic approach that emphasizes the mapping of meaning and the use of prepositions in various contexts, both concrete and abstract. One of the main concepts in this approach is that each preposition has a core meaning that is generally spatial and concrete. For example, “in”

means ‘being within the boundary’, while “on” means ‘above and touching’. From this core meaning, prepositions experience an expansion of meaning (polysemy) to more abstract contexts, such as time “in the morning”, condition “in trouble”, or topic “on a topic”. This expansion of meaning is systematic and logical, not random, because it follows semantic and metaphorical association.

Although Lindstromberg (2010) did not specifically group prepositions, to facilitate data analysis in this study, prepositions will be grouped based on common semantic functions that are often identified. These categories help identify student usage and errors in prepositions. Here is a brief definition of each category:

a. Directional and Movement

This category includes prepositions that indicate the direction or trajectory of a movement, namely moving from one point to another. According to Lindstromberg (2010), prepositions in this category have a spatial core meaning because they involve elements of movement or changes in position. He also emphasizes the subtle differences between prepositions such as *to* and *towards*, where *to* indicates the final destination of a movement, while *towards* indicates orientation or direction without clarity as to whether the destination is actually achieved. In the student writing data, several examples of the use of directional and movement prepositions were found, such as “*to*” in “from the garden to their house”, “*towards*” in “looking towards the girl”, “*onto*” in “The girl is sitting onto the bench.”, “*away*” in “They are not too far away from the garden”, “*off*” in “The boy jumped off the swing and ran towards the tree.”, “*around*” in “butterfly flying around”, and “*through*” in “The birds are flying through the sky”.

b. Spatial

This category includes prepositions that express place, static position or location of an object in relation to another object. According to Lindstromberg (2010), prepositions of place have a spatial core meaning that describes a fixed position relationship, such as in indicating “*inside*” (containment) and *on* indicating “above the surface” (contact and support). Understanding the subtle differences between prepositions such as *in*, *on*, and *at* is key to using them correctly. In the student writing data, various examples of the use of prepositions of place were found, including “*in*” in “In the garden there are many flowers.”, “*in front of*” in “In front of the bench, a brown dog is running.”, “*between*” in “The brown dog is between the girl and the boy.”, “*on*” in “On the table, there is a glass of juice and a sandwich.”, “*at*” in “The children are playing at the park.”, “*under*” in “The swing is hung under a large tree.”, “*beside*” in “Beside the tree there is a bicycle.”, “*behind*” in “Behind the fence of the house there are many fertile trees.”, “*near*” in “The bicycle is resting near the trunk of the tree.”, “*against*” in “Leans against the trunk.”, “*next to*” in “...playing next to the woman...”, “*over*” in “House peeking over the bushes.”, “*above*” in “Birds flying above the trees.”, and “*below*” in “The valley is below the mountain”.

c. Temporal

This category shows time relationships, either in the form of a point in time, duration, or period. Many prepositions in this category come from spatial meanings that have

expanded their meaning into the temporal realm (Lindstromberg, 2010). Prepositions such as after, since, and until are used to indicate a sequence of time or a range of duration, while in, on, and at more often indicate a specific point in time. In the student writing data, various examples of the use of time prepositions were found, such as “after” in “Very happy after cycling in the morning.”, “since” in “My hobby since childhood.”, “until” in “Childhood until now.”, “in” in “In the afternoon I played on the swing.”, “on” in “On Sunday, my sister and I went on vacation.”, and “at” in “In the morning at 7 AM”.

d. Cause and Purpose

This category includes prepositions that state the reason, cause, or purpose of an action or event. Prepositions in this group function to explain cause and effect relationships, either explicitly or implicitly, in a sentence. Examples of the use of prepositions of cause or purpose in student data such as “for” in the sentence “Some bread for their breakfast,”, “because of” in the sentence “Because of the big tree, the bench stays cool and shady,” and “due to” in the sentence “Due to the sunny weather, the children are playing happily in the garden”.

e. Manner and Instrument

Prepositions in this category are used to explain how an action is done (manner) or the tools/means used to do it. The use of this preposition is important because it provides additional information related to the process or implementation of an activity. Examples of the use of prepositions of manner and tool in student data include “by” in the sentence “Played together by riding a bicycle”, “with” in the sentence “Playing with the dog”, and “without” in the sentence “The sun without umbrella”.

f. Possession and Relationship

This category includes prepositions that express ownership, relationships between objects, or affiliations between entities. Prepositions in this group help explain who owns, comes from, or is related to something. Examples of the use of prepositions in this category in student data include “with” in the sentence “A girl with her brother and his dog,”, “from” in the sentence “Not too far away from the garden,”, “of” in the sentence “A glass of juice and a sandwich,”, and “about” in the sentence “All about the garden”. The main function of each preposition is the basis for organising data systematically using this grouping as a functional analysis approach. Indicating place, time, direction, cause and effect, manner, tool, ownership, and so on are some of the ways in which this is done. The aim is to facilitate the identification of learning habits, the measurement of accuracy, and the analysis of errors in the use of prepositions by students. However, it is important to note that, in reality, the boundaries between preposition functions are not always clear. Depending on the context, one preposition can have more than one meaning, and these meanings often overlap. This aligns with Lindstromberg (2010) view that prepositions form a complex, interconnected network of meanings rather than fixed, separate categories. Therefore, this grouping is not intended to oversimplify, but rather to provide a structured way of understanding the diversity of preposition functions in the context of learning and research.

Second Language Acquisition

a. Input Hypothesis Theory

Language acquisition occurs when learners comprehend linguistic input that is slightly more complex than their current level of proficiency, referred to as “i+1” by (Krashen, 1982). In this case, “i” represents the language competence that the learner already has, while “+1” refers to a new linguistic element that is slightly above that level, but can still be understood through the context provided. This kind of input must be comprehensible so that it can be absorbed unconsciously, rather than through conscious analysis of grammatical rules. In the context of preposition learning, the existence of meaningful and repetitive input is crucial because prepositions cannot be effectively mastered simply through memorization or isolated practice, but rather through exposure to real sentences that can be understood.

b. Output Hypothesis Theory

According to (Sun, 2020). Referring to Output Hypothesis opens up space for learners to evaluate the interlanguage system they are building, and accelerates linguistic development through reflective thinking processes. The Output Hypothesis developed by Swain (1985) emphasizes that language production, such as speaking and writing, plays an important role in second language acquisition. Rather than simply being considered the end result of acquisition, output becomes a means for learners to realize deficiencies in their language skills (noticing the gap), test their understanding of the target language form through real production (hypothesis testing), and deepen language processing that contributes to increased accuracy and fluency (metalinguistic reflection). In the context of this study, which examines prepositional errors in EFL students' descriptive writing, the Output Hypothesis becomes very relevant. The prepositional errors found not only indicate limited linguistic competence but also reflect student's exploratory stages in producing language. For example, when students write "He came at the house" instead of "He came to the house", they are trying to activate the rules that they believe are correct in their interlanguage. Such writing activities help learners identify weaknesses and, with appropriate feedback, open up opportunities for improvement and further acquisition. Thus, written output is not only a reflection of current abilities, but also an important tool in the ongoing learning process.

Second Language Writing

Second Language Writing is a complex process undertaken by individuals who write using a language other than their first language. This activity not only requires the ability to construct sentences in a foreign language, but also involves mastery of important aspects such as sentence structure, vocabulary choice, and logical and appropriate arrangement of ideas in the cultural context of the target language. (Hyland, 2003) emphasized that writing in a second language requires an understanding not only of linguistic rules, but also of the academic or professional expectations of the target language environment. L2 writers are required to be able to construct arguments in an orderly manner, adjust their language style, and apply strategies such as hedging, use of citations, and cohesive devices so that their writing can be conveyed effectively. The challenges in L2 writing are even greater when writers have to deal with language

limitations, cross cultural rhetorical differences, and psychological factors such as anxiety or lack of self confidence.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study indicate that X-grade EFL students at SMA 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya have a fairly good mastery of English prepositions in writing descriptive texts, with an average accuracy of 88.06%. However, student abilities vary, with individual scores ranging from 60% to 100%. The most frequently used preposition categories are spatial prepositions, especially “on” and “in,” which, although familiar, remain a significant source of errors due to their complex meanings. On the other hand, prepositions in the categories of Cause and Purpose, Possession and Relationship, and Manner and Instrument show the highest levels of accuracy, reflecting students' ease in mastering more common prepositional forms such as “for,” “with,” and “by.” Meanwhile, prepositions in the Directional and Movement category pose the greatest challenge with the lowest success rate (76.92%), particularly for forms such as “onto,” “off,” and “through,” which require a more abstract spatial understanding. These findings support the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), which posits that prepositional forms frequently encountered in clear contexts are easier to acquire, while less common or more complex forms require a more targeted learning approach. Furthermore, consistent with the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985) and the Second Language Writing perspective (Hyland, 2003), students appear to prefer forms they have mastered and avoid new forms in their writing, as a strategy to maintain clarity and structure, indicating limitations in exploring a wider range of language forms. Therefore, successful preposition use is determined not only by the amount of input received, but also by the quality of learning, a deeper understanding of meaning, and the courage to use more varied forms. A more meaningful, contextual, and exploratory teaching approach is needed so that students can expand their language skills and develop a more better understanding of interlanguage.

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