

Gender Differences in ESL Learners' Mastery of Prepositions: Implications for Designing Instructional Materials

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Abstract

Learning prepositions is a challenging task for ESL learners, and previous studies have focused on assessing mastery levels and identifying difficulties. This mixed-methods research examines the correlation between gender and mastery levels in using the prepositions at, for, in, on, to, and with, as well as frequently missed questions and problems in their usage among 26 Grade 12 senior high school students. The quantitative analysis involved a t-test to compare the performance of male and female participants. The results indicate that both males and females achieved a weak mastery level in using prepositions. However, among the 11 frequently missed questions, male participants exhibited a higher error percentage than female participants. Additionally, both genders encountered similar problems related to preposition use, which were categorized into five themes: (1) unfamiliarity with the rules, (2) confusion due to sentence meaning, (3) context-based sentence construction, (4) interference, and (5) sound dependence. These findings suggest that instructional materials for preposition use need not be gender-specific but rather require a corpus-based approach and the inclusion of contextualized examples. However, the generalizability of these results is limited due to the small sample size, highlighting the need for further research with a larger and more diverse participant pool.

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English as a second language (ESL) encompasses grammar instruction as a means of facilitating learners' mastery of language rules and constructing accurate sentences (Hinkel, 2012). Despite a shift toward a learner-centered approach in education, grammar continues to be incorporated into textbooks and lessons, as observed in instructional

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materials used by teachers. Reports suggest that despite adopting a communicative approach, teachers still allocate significant time to teaching grammar rules (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2015). Furthermore, teachers recognize the importance of grammar instruction in enabling students to attain greater proficiency in the target language (Al-khresheh & Orak, 2021), a sentiment shared by both teachers and students (Jean & Simard, 2011).

Grammar learning holds relevance in various domains, including business, despite the emphasis on communication-oriented skills. Quible and Griffin (2007) argue that businesses will continue to face challenges unless employees' deficiencies in sentence-level skills are addressed. They advocate for a school-based approach to grammar and punctuation instruction to enhance communication abilities.

Within the realm of grammar, prepositions present a particularly challenging lesson for ESL and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners (Lorincs & Gordon, 2012). Prepositions are words used to express relationships between different elements or ideas, typically preceding nouns or pronouns (Brown, 2000; Wren & Martin, 2006) or indicating the connection between words or word groups (Harmer, 2004). Common prepositions include at, by, for, in, of, on, to, and with. However, this study specifically focuses on the prepositions at, for, in, on, to, and with.

While studies have been conducted on prepositions (e.g., Nurngaini, 2017), few have explored gender as a factor influencing preposition use (Saher & Saleem, 2019; Nghi et al., 2020). Considering Sidanius and Pratto's (1999) premise that gender influences language use, investigating the role of gender in preposition use is valuable. Some studies argue that males dominate language due to their greater power in politics and culture. Conversely, other studies contend that women, when given equal opportunities, demonstrate superior language skills in society (O'Barr & Atkins, 1980; Zimmerman & West, 1975; Swacker, 1975; Spencer, 1980; Hultz, 1990, as cited in Rahmi, 2015). Regarding preposition use, Nghi et al. (2020) found that females exhibit better proficiency in English prepositions than males, while Saher and Saleem (2019) reported higher error ratios among female learners. Furthermore, despite continuous exposure to prepositions in the classroom, learners tend to struggle with mastering their usage (e.g., Khampang, 1974; Saravanan, 2014; Nurngaini, 2017; Saher & Saleem, 2019; Abdalla, 2021; Nghi et al., 2020).

Given these contrasting arguments, the limited research on gender-related preposition use, and the potential correlation between gender and preposition proficiency, this study aims to identify the mastery levels of male and female learners, their error percentages for frequently missed questions, and the challenges both genders face in using the prepositions at, for, in, on, to, and with.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. The Role of Grammar in Teaching ESL Learners

Grammar plays a crucial role in language, as it encompasses the theoretical framework that describes how language functions (Gerot & Wignel, 1994). It consists of rules (Wilcox, 2004) that enable speakers to accurately structure sentences and analyze their grammatical correctness (Thornbury, 1999). Essentially, grammar serves as a representation of the structure and form of a language (Morenberg, 1999; Onalan, 2018; Lin, 2016; Ellis, 2006; Duddleston & Pullum, 2003, as cited in Al-khresheh & Orak, 2021).

There are various ways to acquire grammar proficiency. Krashen (1981) proposed the importance of exposure to comprehensible input in second language acquisition. Additionally, Bloom (1979) and Thornbury (1999) highlighted that students' prior knowledge and self-motivation can influence their mastery of grammar. Scholars have suggested that these external and internal factors significantly impact learners' grammar development. Consequently, teaching English grammar can facilitate the sustainable and structured development of learners' language skills (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). Constant exposure to grammar has been found to enhance English learners' ability to use it effectively (Pagcaliwagan, 2016). Therefore, grammar holds paramount importance in language instruction (Celce-Murcia, 1985) and should be taught in a student-centered manner.

In the context of prepositions, the use of techniques such as preposition collocation (e.g., rely on, wait on, walk on, work on, pick on, on time, on schedule, on screen) and the illustration method (e.g., using pictures as visual aids) can greatly assist learners in comprehending the basic uses of prepositions (Tyler et al., 2011). These techniques provide learners with practical examples and visual aids, facilitating their understanding and application of prepositions.

2.2.Learners' Mastery

Achieving mastery involves a comprehensive understanding of the material taught by teachers (Block & Burns, 1976). It represents the possession of extensive knowledge and skills in a specific subject or activity (Taslim et al., 2019). Attaining mastery requires diligent study and engagement with the concepts. Various factors influence the level of mastery exhibited by learners. According to Bloom (1979), learners' cognitive introduction behaviors, which encompass their prior knowledge of a particular topic, coupled with their level of motivation (emotional introduction features), play a significant role.

The role of teacher input in learners' mastery is crucial (Levine, 1985). Sever (1997) suggests that when teaching activities align with students' introduction features, there is a higher likelihood of achieving a high level of learning output, which in turn enhances motivation. Wong's model (Figure 1) also demonstrates that the quality of teaching, encompassing both cognitive and affective entry behaviors, has an impact on students' learning and output (Wong, 2002).

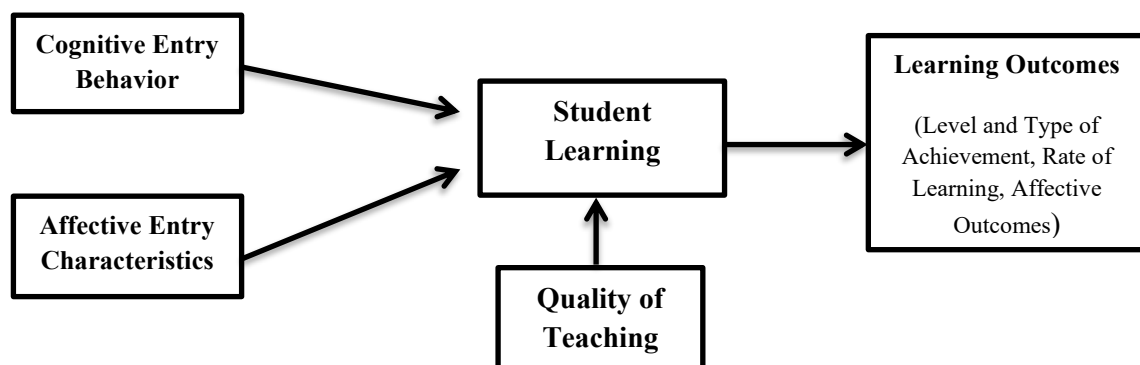


FIGURE 1. Variables of Mastery Learning (Wong, 2002)

However, Wong's (2002) model, in which learners are expected to master a specific objective or goal before moving on to another topic, has been modified, emphasizing the

teacher's instructional approach as a key factor influencing students' mastery. Therefore, if students are well-taught, they would be able to achieve mastery.

2.3.Preposition, Gender, and Cognition

Prepositions are words that express the relationship between two or more things or thoughts. They are commonly used before nouns or pronouns (Brown, 2004). They are known as the “*big little words of language*” (Mus, 2012) because, while they appear simple on the surface, they cause a great deal of confusion in the context of grammar for both learners and professionals. For Lan (2008), prepositions' ability to collocate with nouns, verbs, and adjectives makes learning difficult. According to Sari (2019), of all prepositions, time prepositions are the most commonly used by students.

Aside from prescriptive rules for using prepositions, various studies, such as Lan (2008), have helped to understand and describe their function in a sentence. According to Nurngaini (2017), the first stage of learning prepositions requires a learner to identify their use in spoken and written discourses.

Whison and Burks (1980) categorize prepositions in relation to their object and other parts of the sentence as position, place, direction, time, manner, agent, possession, and condition. Since this paper focused only on prepositions denoting time, place, and direction, such as *at, for, in, on, to, and with*, Table 1 below illustrates only these prepositions:

TABLE 1. Prepositions of time, place, and direction

Preposition	Function
At	Used to point out a specific time; to indicate a place; to indicate an email address; to indicate an activity.
For	Used to indicate the reason or because of; to indicate the duration or time; to specify the use of something.
In	Used for unspecific times during a day, month, season, year; to indicate a location or place; to indicate a shape, color, or size; to express while doing something; to indicate a belief, opinion, interest, or feeling.
On	Used to express a surface of something; to specify days and dates; to indicate a device or machine, such as a phone or computer; to indicate a part of the body; to indicate the state of something.
To	Used to indicate direction and place; to indicate relationship; to indicate a limit or ending point; to refer to a period of time.
With	Used to indicate being together or being involved; to indicate “having”; to indicate “using”; to indicate feeling; to indicate agreement or understanding.

Previous studies by Nurngaini (2017) and Puspita Sari (2019) have identified common problems among ESL students regarding prepositions. These difficulties arise from a lack of understanding of their usage and an inability to discern their meaning within a sentence. In particular, learners tend to overlook the correct usage of prepositions such as “in,” “on,” and “at,” especially in spoken language, as they perceive them to be less noticeable. Consequently, learners often resort to overgeneralization, disregarding actual contextual grammar rules in favor of their own constructed rules in the target language. However, with regard to gender differences in preposition mastery, different studies yield inconsistent results. Some studies

indicate that males exhibit more effective usage of prepositions (Niraula, 2010; Saeed et al., 2015; Saher & Saleem, 2019) than females (Nghie et al., 2020), while others report no significant differences at all (Mehregan, 2013; Almegren, 2021). Although variations in test results are normal, these findings suggest that the disparity in preposition mastery between male and female students is minimal.

The prevalence of studies favoring males could be attributed to differences in learning styles and strategies. According to Sunderland (1992), males tend to be more active in responding to and asking questions in the classroom, providing them with more opportunities to practice speaking and receive feedback. While both genders engage in positive interactions, males often dominate classroom conversations (Possi & Milinga, 2017), which could explain their higher level of expertise in certain aspects of language. Despite both genders expressing positive attitudes toward English, females consistently exhibit a more favorable attitude (Sunderland, 1992). Similarly, females display a more positive attitude toward gender-inclusive language use (Remigio & Talosa, 2021), highlighting the importance of incorporating gender-based pedagogy into language classrooms. This significant trend in education cannot be overlooked, necessitating teachers' adoption and integration of gender-inclusive approaches in their instruction (Vizcarra-Garcia, 2021).

The theoretical framework of this study is rooted in Krashen's second language acquisition (SLA) theory (1981), which posits that learners' language and grammar skills are dependent on environmental stimuli. Krashen (1981) asserts that learning the grammatical rules of a target language does not necessitate formal instruction or training; rather, language competence is acquired through exposure to comprehensible inputs. Therefore, gender differences in language and grammar acquisition may depend on the amount of input received by individuals. These inputs encompass both internal and external factors, including biological, cognitive, social, and environmental influences, as discussed by Alahmadi (2019). These factors are intertwined with cognitive variations and second-culture learning (Brown, 2000).

2.4.Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is rooted in Krashen's second language acquisition (SLA) theory (1981), which posits that learners' language and grammar skills depend on environmental stimuli. Krashen (1981) asserts that learning the grammatical rules of a target language does not necessitate formal instruction or training; rather, language competence is acquired through exposure to comprehensible inputs. Therefore, gender differences in language and grammar acquisition may depend on the amount of input received by individuals. These inputs encompass both internal and external factors, including biological, cognitive, social, and environmental influences, as discussed by Alahmadi (2019). These factors are intertwined with cognitive variations and second-culture learning (Brown, 2000).

Moreover, Young (1988) identifies "interaction" as a form of input that aligns with Krashen's SLA theory. Negotiating meaning through interaction enhances comprehension (Pica et al., 1987) and facilitates acquisition (Krashen's Input Hypothesis). In this context, gender is considered a variable influencing interaction, as evidenced by Gas and Varonis' (1986) findings that males tend to use conversation as an opportunity for producing "comprehensible outputs," whereas females utilize conversation to generate "comprehensible inputs." Sunderland (1992) and Possi and Milinga (2017) also confirm positive interactions between both genders, with males being more interactive. However, females exhibit a more positive attitude toward learning English (Sunderland, 1988; Remigio & Talosa, 2021).

On the other hand, there is a longstanding biological belief that sex differences in hemispheric asymmetry impact cognitive processing. Levy (1972, 1978) hypothesized that males tend to have a more "asymmetric brain," with the left hemisphere dedicated to verbal processing and the right hemisphere dedicated to spatial processing. In contrast, females have a more "bilateral" brain structure, with both hemispheres involved in verbal processing. This suggests that females possess superior verbal and language skills. However, Hirnstein et al. (2018) conducted a comprehensive review of 40 years of research and found inconsistent findings, questioning the aforementioned statements. Numerous studies indicate greater hemispheric asymmetry in males (Chance et al., 2006; Hausmann et al., 1998; Proverbio et al., 2010), while others report stronger asymmetry in females (Kaiser et al., 2007; Ladavas et al., 1980), and some studies show no significant differences (Boles, 2005; Frost et al., 1999; Knecht et al., 2000). Hirnstein et al. (2018) concluded that hemispheric asymmetry is not the primary driving force behind sex differences in cognitive functioning. This aligns with the findings of Hyde et al. (1990), Hyde and Linn (1988), and Hyde (2005, 2014), who discovered minimal differences in cognitive abilities between genders. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that there is no gender difference in general intelligence (Halpern, 2012). These findings suggest that there is no significant disparity in language mastery between genders. Ultimately, researchers concur that cognitive sex differences arise from the complex interplay of nature and nurture factors (Miller & Halpern, 2014).

2.5. Conceptual Framework

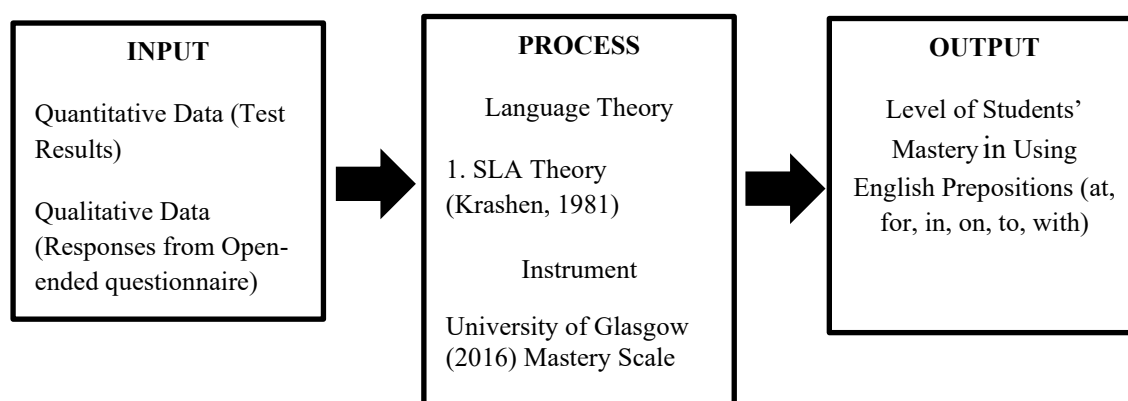


FIGURE 2. Conceptual framework of the study using the IPO model

Figure 2 shows the conceptual framework of the study using an IPO model. Krashen's (1981) SLA was used to support the understanding and description of the participants' cognitive processing regarding language. Meanwhile, the scale of Glasgow (2016) was used to determine participants' level of mastery of preposition usage based on their test results.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The study used a mixed-methods design. A qualitative research design was used to interpret the data from the participants' responses to the open-ended question. This design, as Zikmund (2003) points out, is best for analyzing the data in an in-depth manner. On the other hand, a quantitative design was used to interpret the test results of the participants in determining their level of mastery and the error percentage of frequently missed questions.

3.2. Participants

The data were collected through a convenience sampling method from Grade 12 students of three academic strands – HUMSS (2 sections), ABM (1 section), and STEM (1 section) – during the second semester of the 2021-2022 school year. However, only 26 students who were willing to participate and had internet access were included as participants. In terms of gender distribution, both males and females had an equal number of 13 to ensure a more reliable result. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 19 years old.

3.3. Instruments

Three types of instruments were used in the study: a test adopted from Fujii (2016), an open-ended questionnaire, and a scale provided by the University of Glasgow (2016).

The test used was a 30-item questions with 5 questions for each preposition (*at, for, in, on, to, with*). It was a fill-in-the-blank test in which participants selected answers from the provided prepositions. According to Fujii (2016, p. 125), the items were “chosen from the simple ones among frequently used phrases or sentences on the TOEIC test based on Kawakami (2003).” This test was administered to identify the level of students’ mastery in using prepositions and the error percentage of their frequently missed questions. In addition, a researcher-designed open-ended question was administered to identify the problems students face in using prepositions.

Furthermore, to determine students’ level of mastery in using prepositions, the scale provided by the University of Glasgow (2016) was used. This instrument has five levels: *excellent, good, sufficient, weak, and poor*.

Range of Scores	Level of English Preposition Mastery
91-100	Excellent
81-90	Good
71-80	Sufficient
61-70	Weak
≤60	Poor

This assessment scheme “defines the assessment methods,” such as tests that measure “each student’s attainment of the intended learning outcome” (University of Glasgow, 2022, p. 2). The scale provided by the University of Glasgow is adapted solely because of its English origin, prestige, and academic contribution in providing renowned scales such as the Glasgow Coma Scale (1974) and Glasgow Anxiety Scale (1999).

3.4. Data Gathering

The data were collected through a test and open-ended questionnaires that were administered via Google Forms. Thus, link for the instruments along with the consent form, was sent via their respective Group Chats for convenience. As stipulated in the consent, no personal information was included in the study. Participants were informed about the goal of the study via Zoom. The 26 participants were required to respond to a 30-item prepositional test and a free-response question with no time constraints. Data collection ended for a week.

3.5. Data Analysis

The study employed a mixed-methods strategy, with both quantitative and qualitative approaches for data analysis. The data from the test and questionnaire were analyzed in three separate areas. First, in determining the level of students’ mastery in using prepositions, scores

were computed and subjected to the scale of Glasgow (2016). The following was the formula used to make the scaling data possible:

$$\text{Score} = \frac{\text{No. of correct items}}{30}$$

(Note: 30 is the total number of test items.)

Then, the average scores of male and female participants were grouped and analyzed. Second, the error percentages of the frequently missed questions for both genders were rendered through Google Forms. Hence, the following formula was used:

$$\text{Error \%} = \frac{\text{No. of error/s}}{26}$$

(Note: 26 is the total number of participants.)

Finally, to determine the problems faced by male and female learners in using prepositions *at*, *for*, *in*, *on*, *to*, and *with*, their responses in the open-ended questions were thematically analyzed by the researchers. The resulting themes were presented to a seasoned qualitative researcher and applied linguist for validation. Thematic analysis is best used to “associate an analysis of the frequency of a theme with the whole content” (Alhojailan, 2012, p. 40). Thus, it provides “an opportunity to understand the potential of any issue more widely” (Alhojailan, 2012, p. 40).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Male and Female Learners' Mastery Levels in Using The Prepositions At, For, In, On, To, and With

TABLE 2. Level of male and female students' mastery of prepositions

Students	Mean Score	Level of students' mastery in using preposition
Male	63.6	Weak
Female	67.5	Weak

As shown in Table 2, the male participants received a mean score of 63.6, which is classified as a weak mastery level. Meanwhile, the 13 female participants received a total mean score of 67.5 or weak mastery level category. This implies that both genders have difficulty mastering the use of preposition regardless of gender.

To determine whether there was a significant difference in mean scores between the female and male categories of gender, a two-tailed independent samples t-test was conducted. First, the normality assumption was evaluated using Shapiro–Wilk tests. The Shapiro–Wilk test for SCORE was not significant for either the male ($p = .936$) or female ($p = .273$) categories, indicating that a normal distribution cannot be ruled out as the underlying distribution for scores in each of the two. Thus, the normality assumption was met for both categories of gender. Second, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was assessed using Levene's test, which resulted in a statistic deemed not significant ($p = .225$), indicating that it is possible that the variance of SCORE is equal for each category of gender. Therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met, and it was established that the use of a t-test for independent means was appropriate.

The results of the two-tailed independent samples t-test did not yield a significant outcome at the alpha level of .05 ($t(24) = 0.57$, $p = .572$), indicating that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. This suggests that there is no significant difference in the mean SCORE between the male and female categories of gender. The specific values and statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Two-Tailed Independent Samples t Test for Mean Score by Gender

Variable	Male			Female			<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>			
SCORE	19.08	3.62	13	20.23	6.29	13	0.57	.572	0.22

Note. N = 26. Degrees of Freedom for the *t*-statistic = 24. *d* represents Cohen's *d*.

The mean score for the male category was 19.08, with a standard deviation of 3.62 while the mean score for the female category was 20.23, with a standard deviation of 6.29. The *t* value of 0.57 and the *p* value of 0.572 indicate that the observed difference in means was not statistically significant at the chosen alpha level of 0.05. The effect size, represented by Cohen's *d*, is 0.22, which is considered a small effect size.

The results of the two-tailed independent samples t-test indicate that there was no significant difference in the mean scores on the 30-item preposition test between the male and female categories of gender. This finding suggests that gender does not have a significant impact on the performance of individuals on this prepositional test.

4.2.Error Percentage of the Frequently Missed Questions of Male and Female Learners in Using Prepositions At, For, In, On, To, and With

TABLE 3. Error percentage of frequently missed questions of male and female students rendered through Google forms

Items	Male		Female	
	%	f	%	f
7. I have been working ____ a research project in Egypt for five years. (on)	35%	9	31%	8
8. I look forward _____ your reply. (to)	23%	6	31%	8
12. He'll be back _____ time for the party. (in)	38%	10	31%	8
15. Have you handed _____ the budget request for next year? (in)	35%	9	38%	10
16. He took off his old tie and put _____ a new one. (on)	35%	9	23%	6
17. I'll leave _____ the airport by 3:30 p.m. (for)	42%	11	38%	10
20. I prefer planning tasks _____ doing tasks. (to)	42%	11	38%	10
23. I think I can depend _____ Mr. Taylor. (on)	31%	8	23%	6

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26. The food and service was, _____ a word, excellent. (in)	31%	8	23%	6
27. This is the key _____ the door. (to)	31%	8	23%	6
30. The game player will go _____ sale in Japan on August 20. (on)	42%	11	19%	5
Average	35%	9	29%	8

**Note: % - error percentage; f- frequency*

Out of 30 questions, 11 items were recorded as frequently missed questions, with the prepositions *on* (4 items), *to* (3 items), *in* (3 items), and *for* (1 item) being the most commonly missed.

The results show that males had a higher overall error percentage than females for these 11 frequently missed questions rendered through Google Form, at 35% and 29%, respectively. The average population of male and female students who acquired the errors, however, differed slightly, with 9 males and 8 females.

4.3.Problems Faced by Male and Female Learners in Using Prepositions At, For, In, On, To, and With

Based on the question with regard to learners' faced problems in using prepositions *at*, *for*, *in*, *on*, *to*, and *with*, their responses rendered five themes as follows:

(1) unfamiliarity with the rules –

- Participant 1: *What are their differences?*
- Participant 4: *Quite confused on how to use prepositions properly*
- Participant 6: *You will be confused, especially if you are not aware of its rules.*
- Participant 9: *I cannot identify what or which is the answer*
- Participant 12: *They all seem fitted to use*
- Participant 13: *I'm getting confused when trying to determine prepositional meanings and when trying to use them appropriately.*
- Participant 25: *I'm not fluent in speaking English. Sometimes I misuse prepositions and end up getting grammatically wrong on my essays. I have not experienced talking with English speakers, but I'm trying my best to speak like one by reading and watching English movies*

(2) confusion due to sentence meaning –

- Participant 2: *Some prepositions are good to use, but some are still confusing due to sentence meaning.*
- Participant 7: *I am confused*
- Participant 11: *It is quite confusing.*
- Participant 14: *The problems I have encountered in terms of using prepositions made me disconcerted in which of those prepositions I would use to complete the sentences correctly.*
- Participant 15: *Some prepositions are confusing me.*
- Participant 16: *I can't point out the right and exact preposition to use because I cannot identify where when, or who the subject of the sentence is*

- Participant 18: *There are some sentences that are challenging to identify which preposition to use or which one is correct.*
- Participant 19: *I don't know it is good to use*
- Participant 20: *All of the options seemed to be correct*
- Participant 21: *I'm not sure which one to use in the sentence because there are times when there are two appropriate answers but you have to choose which one is the best*
- Participant 24: *Slightly confusing. It appears that all of them have the same meanings, especially the prepositions in, on, and at*
- Participant 26: *The problems I had in deciding which preposition to use were that other sentences were difficult to understand, so I had to carefully analyze each sentence before selecting a preposition that fit*

(3) context-based sentence construction –

- Participant 10: *It is kinda confusing because it has a different situation and expression.*

(4) interference –

- Participant 3: *Hesitation. I am not that confident with all my answers*
- Participant 22: *Interference.*

(5) sound dependence –

- Participant 5: *They all appear to be harmonized (compatible) in the sentence*
- Participant 17: *It's a challenge in regard to choosing the right preposition due to the sheer number of prepositions that sound fitted even if it's truly not.*
- Participant 23: *I'm perplexed by the options, but I chose the one that sounds more appropriate.*

Among the 26 respondents, only Participant 8 mentioned that “there is no difficulty in deciding which preposition to use.”

Thus, aside from the similarity of the problems presented, these responses imply that learning prepositions necessitates the attention of the academe, particularly language teachers.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Level Of Male And Female Learners' Mastery In Using Prepositions At, For, In, On, To, and With

Female participants had, numerically, a higher level of expertise than male participants, as shown in Table 2. However, both of their levels are weak, implying that students only have a low level of comprehension of prepositions.

Furthermore, females had greater mastery than males, which can be explained by Krashen's inputs, especially in biological aspects, where Levy (1972, 1978) states that females, having a more bilateral brain structure, are more verbal and language-oriented. This finding supports Nghi et al. (2020) and Al Yaari and Almaflehi (2013) but contradicts Saher and Saleem (2019) and Niraula (2010), who both reported that males used English prepositions more effectively. However, females may be more prone to prepositional errors in narratives than males due to women's inclination for verbal fluency, which may inadvertently lead to carelessness in sentence construction (Chua et al., 2015). This is supported by the findings of

Saeed et al. (2015), who discovered that females have a higher error ratio of prepositions in writing. Nonetheless, Nghi et al. (2020) confirmed that gender influences prepositional choice.

However, various studies have produced inconsistent results on gender factor. In this regard, Huu et al. (2019) and Almegren (2021) recently reported that gender, among other social factors, has no positive relationship with preposition usage. This is consistent with the results of the two-tailed independent samples t-test that did not yield a significant outcome, suggesting that there is no significant difference in the prepositional test mean scores between the female and male categories of gender.

The poor mastery level of students could be attributed to the students' first language, Filipino, which has a simpler set of prepositions. For instance, prepositions *on*, *in*, *at*, and *toward* had only one Filipino syntactic repertoire generically known as *sa*, which is equivalent to various English prepositions (Bautista et al, 1999). In fact, the same preposition may be used to indicate possession, place, and direction, whereas to indicate time, a time element is used instead. This finding is consistent with Shakir and Yaseen (2015), who stated that EFL learners struggle with prepositions due to first language interference.

5.2. Error Percentage Of The Frequently Missed Questions Of Male And Female Learners In Using Prepositions At, For, In, On, To, and With

As shown in Table 2, males had a higher error percentage (35%) than females (29%). This may partly explain why females have higher linguistic inputs than males. However, it contradicts Chua et al.'s (2015) findings in the Philippine setting, who found that females had a higher error percentage in preposition use than males.

Meanwhile, prepositions *for*, *in*, *on*, and *to* appear to be the most difficult to use among the 11 frequently missed questions. For example, the question '*I will leave __ the airport by 3:30 p.m.*' had the most errors, with 10 males selecting *at* and one selecting *in* and seven females choosing *at* and three choosing *in*. This item received 21 errors from a total of 26 participants. In this case, students primarily used the preposition *at* as opposed to the correct answer, *for*. The same results were revealed in Abualzain's (2017) study, which confirmed that using the preposition *at* is the most difficult for students. In general, as Chua et al. (2015) affirm, nonnative English speakers struggle with preposition usage and mastery.

This is a great example of a highly contextualized choice of word, especially in the Philippines. Bautista (2000) explained the Filipinisms *result to* and *based from* which supposedly *result in* and *based on* (Standard American English) may not be a serious breach of grammar as it deemed acceptable in Philippine English (PE). According to the Corpus of Contemporary American English, the preposition *for* is frequently used in the context of 'airport departure,' with data indicating that nonnative English countries, such as the Philippines, used the preposition *at*. The same is true for the prepositional phrases *bound to* and *bound for*, with Native Englishes preferring *bound for* and Filipinos often use *bound to* (e.g., This parcel is bound to [for] Cagayan.).

In this case, English teachers in the Philippines should still correct preposition use and take advantage of the opportunity to explain why PE usage is considered deviant in those situations.

Item 12 (*He will be back in __ time for the party.* [in]) is also challenging for both genders. Despite the fact that the correct answer was *in*, 16 students (10 males, 6 females)

responded, which likely due to the common phrasal collocation 'on time,' which is commonly used in reference to the point of arrival on various occasions. Given the same nature of an event, students tend to overgeneralize its application. Overgeneralization of information is one of the most common causes of prepositional errors (Nuri, 2014; Anjayani & Suprato, 2016). Furthermore, Islami (2015) demonstrated that even the most commonly used time prepositions, such as *in*, *on*, and *at*, rendered repeated errors.

Given the above information, both prepositions of place and time pose a significant challenge to ESL/EFL students, as supported by studies by Ibrahim (2017) and Abualzain (2017), who investigated students' difficulties with prepositions of place and time and found that both studies yielded failing results among respondents.

5.3.Problems Faced By Male And Female Learners In Using Prepositions At, For, In, On, To, and With

Based on the students' responses, five themes emerged as their problems in using prepositions: (1) unfamiliarity with the rules, (2) confusion due to sentence meaning, (3) context-based sentence construction, (4) interference, and (5) sound dependence.

Both groups of participants experienced problems or difficulties in preposition use. These errors are caused by a variety of factors. However, the major source of confusion could be attributed to L1 interference. For instance, Guzman and Arcellana (2004 as cited in Castro, 2013) stated that the Filipino prepositional system consists of only three prepositions: *sa*, *ng*, and *kay*. This limited number of Filipino prepositions affects learners' sentence construction when translated into the English language (L2). As a result, first language interference, combined with the internal structure of English, contributed to learners' difficulties (Castro, 2013). Similarly, Chua et al. (2015) stated that the constant exposure of Filipino bilingual learners to English may result in learners losing a firm grasp of their native syntactic rules, resulting in interference. In this manner, most ESL learners use the translation method to apply a specific grammar rule without realizing that it may differ when applied to the target language (Brown, 1987). Brown defined this as interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer. Interlingual errors occur when a foreign language learner's mistake in the target language is influenced by his or her mother tongue (Richards, 1974), whereas intralingual errors occur when errors occur based on his or her generalization acquired from partial exposure in the target language. Anjayani and Suprato (2016) confirmed this, reporting that interlingual transfer was the root cause of preposition errors in general.

Although prepositions are thought to have indefinite rules (Jafarpour & Koosa, 1985; Hendricks, 2010 as cited in Mohammed, 2011), and even native English speakers struggle with them (South, 1996), this gives an extra challenge among nonnative English speakers to master English prepositions. In this regard, the main source of confusion is not the lack of rules but rather first language interference (Mohammed, 2011). He also mentioned that problems arise as a result of the English preposition system, in which one preposition can have multiple meanings and one meaning can be indicated by more than one preposition. In addition, the complexity of learning prepositions was imposed by the difficulty in learning new L2 patterns, particularly when it does not have an equivalent in the learners' L1 (Alotaibi et al., 2018). Similarly, learners try to pattern the use of prepositions to their L1, which ultimately leads them toward errors (Akhtar et al., 2017). These findings supported the notion that L1 is the primary source of difficulties in mastering prepositions.

In addition, according to Nurngaini (2017), generalized rules for using prepositions do not exist, which adds to students' confusion and may influence their mastery level. After all,

prepositions are the most difficult to master in English language learning (Loke et al., 2013) due to their polysemous nature and diverse semantics and syntactical structures (Hu et al., 2019).

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Learning English prepositions is a challenge among nonnative English students regardless of gender. Although females have a higher level of mastery than males, both mean scores still fall under the lower bracket of the weak mastery category. Furthermore, it appeared that problems were significantly caused by learners' unfamiliarity with preposition rules, which led to confusion when applied to sentences in general. This only explains that both learners are having difficulties in this aspect of grammar and that gender does not highly influence the mastery of the learners as regards preposition use.

Through these findings, teachers may strategize teaching prepositions to learners by providing more exposure to their native rules and usage through formal lessons and linguistic corpora. Additionally, exposing students to different corpora will help them understand the existence of different Englishes. This will also give learners the opportunity to critically observe and analyze different forms and syntactic structures of prepositions when applied to several contexts in comparison to their L1 and target language.

Since the gap between the male and female errors is insignificant and commonality in problems in preposition use are observed, instruction need not be designed using a gender-based approach in teaching prepositions. However, enriched context and variation of linguistic sounds should be considered to be more gender inclusive. As a result, becoming acquainted with its lexical patterns via preposition collocations may aid in faster learning. Additionally, when rich prepositional data are made available through corpus-based teaching, instruction can be improved even further.

The findings from this study contribute to the understanding of gender differences in language-related abilities. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of the study. First, the sample size in the quantitative analysis was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the results to the broader population. Additionally, this study focused solely on a specific test measuring preposition, and it is possible that gender differences could emerge in other language-related tasks or domains.

Further research with larger and more diverse samples is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender differences in language abilities. Additionally, exploring other factors, such as educational background or exposure to different linguistic environments, could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the variables that impact performance on language tests.

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