An Analysis of EFL Learners' Performance on "in, on, at" in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT
The study investigated 120 EFL (English as a foreign language) university students' performance on three frequently used function words, in, on and at as spatial and temporal prepositions in PPs (prepositional phrases) and as particles in PVs (phrasal verbs). The main purpose of this study was to access (1) the relationship between the EFL learners' performance on prepositions and particles; (2) the relationship between the EFL learners' performance on spatial and temporal prepositions; and (3) to what extent the participants experienced difficulty in PVs and in PPs. The researchers administrated a 55 questions English test with multiple-choices to the participants. The answers were analyzed through error analysis and the data were computed by paired-samples t-test, Pearson correctional coefficient, and simple regression of variance on overall error rates. The result showed that the participants performed differently between prepositions and particles, and between spatial and temporal prepositions. Moreover, the results from the Pearson correlation analysis show that there was a moderate positive correlation between the EFL learners' performance on spatial prepositions and temporal prepositions. The result from the simple regression of variance showed that the EFL learners' performance on spatial prepositions had significant influence on temporal prepositions. Two categories of error patterns in PVs were identified. The researcher speculated that first language interference, diversity of in, on and at, spatial concepts and backward judgment maybe the factors causing EFL learners' errors. Besides, the incapability to recognize phrasal verbs, transformation of verbs, and the effect of prepositions may be the factors causing errors in phrasal verbs. There are two contributions of the study. First, with a mean of error analysis, the possible factors influencing the learning of in, on and at functioning as prepositions and particles are found. The educators can employ the findings to decrease the occurrence of errors and increase the effectiveness of learning the three function words. Secondly, there was a moderate and positive correlation between the performance on spatial and temporal prepositions and predictability found.

Keywords : function words ; in, on, at ; prepositions ; spatial prepositions ; temporal prepositions ; particles ; error analysis ; error patterns in phrasal verbs ; EFL learners