

Exploring the Influence of Gender and L1 Conceptual Transfer on English Prepositional Usage

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Abstract—This study explores how gender and first language (L1) conceptual transfer influence the use of English prepositions among 50 Vietnamese university students aged 18 to 25, enrolled in an English language program. The participants' comprehension of English prepositions in terms of usage, meaning, and context was assessed using pre- and post-tests consisting of 20 multiple-choice questions. The data analysis employed descriptive and inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and independent samples t-tests. Both the pre- and post-test results revealed a moderate level of English prepositional usage, with all participants displaying improvement. Female participants performed slightly better than males on the post-test, while there were no notable gender differences in pre-test scores. In both tests, participants with high levels of L1 conceptual transfer performed significantly poorer compared to those with low levels. These findings highlight the significant role of L1 conceptual transfer in the English prepositional usage of Vietnamese language learners, while suggesting a minor impact of gender. Further research is needed to delve deeper into this relationship. The results emphasize the importance of addressing L1 conceptual transfer in English language instruction, specifically regarding prepositions, within the context of Vietnam.

Index Terms—conceptual transfer, negative transfer, gender, crosslinguistic influence, cognitive linguistics

I. INTRODUCTION

For learners whose first language (L1) does not share a system of prepositions, using prepositions in English can be a difficult component of learning a second language. L1 conceptual transfer has been linked to second language acquisition in earlier studies (Cook, 1993; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). We, therefore, decided to investigate whether learners' usage of English prepositions, for instance, may be influenced by Vietnamese, a language with a constrained system of prepositions. Additionally, it has been suggested that gender influences language use and learning (Eckert, 2012; Holmes, 2006). Therefore, we propose that Vietnamese learners' use of English prepositions may be influenced by both gender and L1 conceptual transfer.

Learning prepositions in English can pose a challenge for individuals whose first language (L1) lacks a comparable system of prepositions. Previous studies (Cook, 1993; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008) have associated L1 conceptual transfer with second language acquisition. In light of this, we aimed to explore whether the usage of English prepositions by learners could be influenced by Vietnamese, a language with a limited range of prepositions. Moreover, there is evidence suggesting that gender can impact language use and learning (Eckert, 2012; Holmes, 2006). Thus, we hypothesize that Vietnamese learners' utilization of English prepositions may be influenced by both gender and L1 conceptual transfer.

In this study, we employed a pre-test and a post-test to assess participants' comprehension of English prepositions, encompassing their usage, meanings, and contextual application. Our analysis took into account factors such as participants' gender, language background, as well as the frequency and accuracy of their prepositional usage. Additionally, we conducted interviews with select participants to delve deeper into their linguistic practices and experiences with learning other languages. By focusing on prepositional usage in English, this study contributes to our understanding of the intricate factors that shape the development of second language skills. Through examining the specific influences of gender and L1 conceptual transfer on prepositional usage, we aim to gain insights into the challenges faced by Vietnamese English language learners and develop more effective language learning strategies.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prepositions play a crucial role in the English language and are used to communicate a variety of meanings and complexity. However, non-native English speakers may find it difficult to use prepositions correctly because of gender disparities and prepositional usage patterns in their mother tongues. This section presents how gender and L1 conceptual transfer affect the use of English prepositions in the previous studies and draws a gap that needs occupying.

A. *The Influence of Gender on Prepositional Usage*

Gender has been identified as a significant factor in SLA, including prepositional usage (Almuhaysh, 2022; Alqahtani & Abdelhalim, 2020; Pica et al., 1991). Recent studies have shed light on the influence of gender on language use, revealing that females generally exhibit a propensity for more descriptive language and a tendency towards lower assertiveness compared to males. This disparity in linguistic behavior based on gender has been a subject of investigation in various research endeavors. Not all languages and cultures are influenced by gender in prepositional usage, as Thonus (1996) and Wodak (1997) discovered in their respective studies on English language differences between men and women. These findings indicate that women tend to use more prepositions than men.

It's not often noted that the usage of prepositions in first language (L1) and second language (L2) contexts can be influenced by gender. Some studies have discovered that in the L1 context, women use more prepositions of place than men (Arjan et al., 2013; Jha, 1970; Mahmoodzadeh, 2012a; Saravanan, 2015; Sudhakaran, 2015), while in L2 contexts, women tend to use more prepositions of time than men (Al-Harthy, 2017; Fujita, 2016). However, the results aren't always definitive, since some studies have found no noteworthy differences in prepositional usage between genders (Fujita, 2016; Sanjaya & Bram, 2021).

Examination of prepositional usage and its relationship with gender reveals a complex and context-dependent impact that varies among different languages and cultures. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of how gender affects prepositional usage requires examining these factors within specific linguistic and cultural settings.

B. *The Influence of L1 Conceptual Transfer on Prepositional Usage*

In SLA, a significant element is the transfer of cognitive structures from the mother tongue to the target language - this is known as L1 conceptual transfer. English prepositional usage by Vietnamese learners is a context where this becomes particularly important, as errors in the learners' English prepositional usage may arise due to L1 conceptual transfer. The acquisition of English prepositions can be impacted by L1 conceptual transfer, leading to errors such as overgeneralization and underuse (Nghì et al., 2021). Prepositional usage in L2 learning has also been shown to be influenced by the L1 conceptual system in several other studies (Kim et al., 2020; Sumonsriworakun & Pongpairoj, 2017; Yildiz, 2016). Sumonsriworakun and Pongpairoj (2017) have reported on the influence of the first language (L1) conceptual system on the understanding and expression of prepositions in a second language (L2). They have discovered that errors in the usage of L2 prepositions can arise as a consequence of discrepancies observed in the translation of English prepositions of location across various languages. This phenomenon has been investigated by Castro et al. (2017) and Mahmoodzadeh (2012b).

Several researchers have investigated the effect of L1 conceptual transfer on prepositional usage and have discovered that learners' comprehension and production of prepositions in their L2 can be influenced by their L1 conceptual system. Errors in L2 prepositional usage may also occur due to variations in the translation of English prepositions of location across different languages. These findings highlight the need to acknowledge the impact of L1 conceptual transfer in SLA and to design effective teaching techniques that consider learners' individual L1 conceptual frameworks.

C. *Studies on Vietnamese Learners of English and Prepositional Usage*

By studying the impact of L1 prepositional usage patterns on the English language skills of Vietnamese students, researchers found significant effects on their abilities (Đặng, 2016; Hang & Anh, 2010; Hăng, 2021; Hung, 2017). L1 conceptual transfer resulted in errors in their prepositional usage. According to findings by Hăng (2021) and Hung (2017), factors such as gender and L1 conceptual transfer can influence the acquisition of English prepositions amongst Vietnamese learners. When teaching and evaluating the way non-native English speakers use prepositions, language teachers and researchers need to consider these factors (Nghì et al., 2021).

Due to the idiosyncratic nuances regarding prepositional meanings and their uses, snagging prepositions in English is no easy feat for second language learners (Adejare, 2021; Almuoseb, 2016; Hang & Anh, 2010; Wairimu & Ngugi, 2021; Zapata-Leal & Ávila-Portuanto, 2021). Vietnamese learners in particular have difficulty grasping English prepositions because the prepositional systems differ between the two languages (Nghì & Phuc, 2022). As opposed to Vietnamese, which utilizes classifiers and word order to establish relationships between objects, English relies heavily on prepositions. Considering this contrast, Vietnamese learners face the challenge of absorbing a foreign linguistic concept. It's been exhibited in prior research that Vietnamese learners of English meet difficulty with prepositional usage, especially regarding prepositions of location and time (Cao & Badger, 2021; Hung et al., 2018).

The use of prepositions by second language learners is no strange to the influence of gender differences (Adolphs & Schmitt, 2003; Andersen, 1991). While male performers fall short, female learners have been shown to outclass their learning counterparts in the use of prepositions in a foreign language (Andersen, 1991). According to Derakhshan and Karimi (2015), females' language functions are unique and are linked to gender-related distinctions in cognition. As a

result, such disparities in brain function may explain language performance differences between male and female language learners. However, the contentious issue of gender's impact on second language acquisition cannot be disregarded (Alqahtani & Abdelhalim, 2020; Brown, 2020; Firdani et al., 2019).

Hãng (2021) noted that Vietnamese, with its limited system of prepositions, may affect Vietnamese learners' acquisition of English prepositions. The difficulty arises due to the fact that prepositions in Vietnamese are often expressed through postpositions or other grammatical structures instead of separate words. As a result, Vietnamese learners of English may struggle with acquiring the range of prepositions used in English, which have multiple meanings and uses. Several sociolinguistic studies have explored the usage of prepositions in English among non-native speakers, including Vietnamese learners (Nghị, 2020; Nghị et al., 2021; Nguyen Thuy Minh & Nguyen Mai Hoa, 2006; Phuc et al., 2019).

Overall, there has been a gradual development of SLA research related to gender and L2 learning. This study aims to investigate gender differences in language performance in the use of English prepositions, examining how well each gender impacts and how L1 transfer is accounted for by each gender.

III. METHODS

A. Participants

This linguistic investigation involved a sample of fifty Vietnamese English students, with an equal distribution of male and female participants. All participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an English language course at a Vietnamese institution. The age range of the sample varied from 18 to 25 years old.

B. Materials

The participants' pre- and post-study prepositional competence in English was measured. Twenty multiple-choice questions tested students' prior knowledge of prepositions in the English language. To assess the learners' retention of English prepositions, a second set of 20 multiple-choice questions was incorporated into the post-test. These questions are designed to test students' knowledge of the grammar, syntax, and semantics of English prepositions.

C. Procedure

The pre-test was administered within a classroom setting, allowing participants a designated timeframe of 20 minutes to complete the assessment. Following two weeks of English language instruction, the post-test was conducted under identical classroom conditions, affording participants the same allocated time to finish the test. The two-week training period focused on L2-related English preposition knowledge, aiming to minimize the impact of L1 conceptual transfer on the learners' performance during the post-test.

D. Data Analysis

The data collected from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the participants' performance on English prepositions. The data were also analyzed using inferential statistics to evaluate the influence of gender and L1 conceptual transfer on English prepositional usage. A chi-square test was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in the pre-test and post-test scores between male and female participants. Additionally, an independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in the pre-test and post-test scores between participants who had high and low levels of L1 conceptual transfer.

E. Ethical Considerations

The university's research ethics committee granted ethical approval for the study before it was conducted. All participants were provided with a consent form and informed about the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the confidentiality of their data. Participants were permitted to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. The study ensured the participants' anonymity by assigning them identification codes in lieu of their names.

IV. RESULTS

A. Qualitative Results

Proficiency in a language requires both accuracy and fluency in both written and spoken communication. In our study, we considered participants' perceptions regarding the impact of gender on prepositional accuracy, which were gathered through pre- and post-tests. Among the study participants, six individuals were randomly selected from the larger group, and they identified the theme of negative interference from their L1 as a frequent cause of improper prepositional usage.

Some respondents expressed that men were superior to women in areas of spatial and mechanical reasoning because of differences in cognitive semantics. As one participant remarked, "*Females are often confused about directions, and they struggle to define cardinal directions, both in navigation and speech.*" Another participant added, "*Males often perform better than females, particularly in spatial reasoning ability.*"

These results suggest that male students may have an advantage when it comes to using prepositions of place like "at". Another contributor argued that male students' mechanical reasoning was superior when using prepositions: "*Males are more proficient in identifying spatial relationships and mechanical concepts when constructing sentences*".

However, this perspective contradicts the views of other participants (Students 4, 5, and 6), who claimed that *gender had no bearing on cognitive semantics*. They posited that prepositional fluency was influenced by early exposure to English and the surrounding environment. One participant stated, "*[Transfer] challenges are not determined or mediated by one's gender but by their exposure to English and their surroundings*." This sentiment was echoed by another participant: "*The influence of one's gender does not affect their use of English prepositions*".

These assertions imply that all children have an equal opportunity to develop their cognitive abilities. According to another participant, "*We have cases of both females and males who struggle cognitively, resulting in noticeable L1 transfer in their English usage*." Furthermore, another participant acknowledged that although females might be slightly better at mastering the use of English prepositions, the differences between the genders were not significant: "*In reality, females slightly outperform males, but there is no significant difference*".

Although females may perform better than males overall, some participants believe that males recognize spatial prepositions more quickly and accurately. Males might be better at understanding two-way prepositions such as "*across*," "*next to*," "*in front of*," "*among*," "*upon*," "*to*," "*at*," and "*behind*," while females may require more time to decode the logic. Participants viewed biological gender as a potential factor in language transfer, and their cognition was focused on males' superior performance in visual-spatial working memory.

Other fields of research also support this point of views (Hyde & Mertz, 2009; Pincivero et al., 2004). Historically, linguists have emphasized the grammatical gender form of a language without considering the role of biological gender in spoken and written language. This approach focused more on language forms than language identity as a living entity. Since languages live and change through their users (Moore, 2004), gender plays a role as language users are born, grow, and perceive themselves in terms of their gender identity. Consequently, excluding biological genders from linguistic research, especially in the study of language transfer, would be a significant oversight.

B. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the pre-test and post-test scores of all participants, including the mean, standard deviation, and range of scores.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST SCORES

Test	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-test	10.56	2.12	6	15
Post-test	14.24	2.09	10	19

The mean score of the participants on the pre-test was 10.56, with a standard deviation of 2.12. The scores ranged from 6 to 15. On the post-test, the mean score increased to 14.24, with a standard deviation of 2.09. The scores ranged from 10 to 19. These results indicate that all participants demonstrated improvement in their prepositional usage in English after the two-week English language instruction.

C. Inferential Statistics

(a). Chi-Square Test

The Chi-square test was conducted to determine whether there were meaningful differences in the pre-test and post-test scores between male and female participants. Table 2 shows the results of the Chi-square test.

TABLE 2
CHI-SQUARE TEST RESULTS FOR PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST SCORES BY GENDER

Gender	Pre-test	Post-test	Chi-Square	p-value
Male	10.48	14	2.63	0.105
Female	10.64	14.48	3.87	0.049*

*p < 0.05

The results of the Chi-square test indicate that there were no significant gender differences in the pre-test scores ($\chi^2 = 2.63$, $p = 0.105$). However, female participants performed marginally better than male participants on the post-test, with a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 3.87$, $p = 0.049$). This suggests that gender has a minor effect on English prepositional usage.

(b). Independent Samples T-Test

An independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in the pre-test and post-test scores between participants who had high and low levels of L1 conceptual transfer. Table 3 presents the results of the independent samples t-test.

TABLE 3
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST RESULTS FOR PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST SCORES BY L1 CONCEPTUAL TRANSFER LEVELS

L1 Conceptual Transfer	Pre-test	Post-test	t-value	p-value
High	9.2	12.76	-5.17	0.001*
Low	11.92	15.72	-4.63	0.001*

*p < 0.001

The results show that participants with high L1 conceptual transfer levels performed significantly worse on both the pre-test ($t = -5.17$, $p < 0.001$) and post-test ($t = -4.63$, $p < 0.001$) compared to those with low levels of L1 conceptual transfer. This finding indicates that L1 conceptual transfer plays a significant role in the English prepositional usage of Vietnamese language learners. Overall, the results of this study suggest that English prepositional usage can be improved through targeted English language instruction. Additionally, the study found that L1 conceptual transfer has a significant influence on English prepositional usage, while gender does not have a significant influence.

The varying levels of L1 conceptual transfer among male and female participants may be associated with the gender differences seen in post-test scores. However, further analysis is required to fully examine the correlation between gender and L1 conceptual transfer and gain greater insights in this area.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The instructional method utilized in the study was shown to be effective in enhancing participants' usage of prepositions in English after two weeks of language instruction. It was demonstrated that all participants displayed signs of improvement. Such findings showcase the success of the teaching approach employed.

Among Vietnamese learners, the post-test showed a slight advantage for female participation over their male counterparts in their grasp of English prepositions. Although, it's worth noting that pre-test scores didn't reflect a noticeable difference in performance based on gender. The study raises questions about the contributing factors that may underlie this variance in the post-test outcome. To ensure overall accuracy, additional studies are needed.

The study indicates that individuals with greater L1 conceptual transfer had poorer performances on both the pre and post-tests than people with less L1 conceptual transfer. This outcome confirms previous research suggesting that L1 conceptual transfer greatly influences the English prepositional language ability of learners (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). These findings expand on previous research by adding further support that L1 conceptual transfer notably influences the English prepositional language skill of Vietnamese learners.

Among the various insights provided by the study is a potential link between L1 conceptual transfer and one's gender, meriting additional scrutiny. As such, subsequent research ought to determine if the contrasting performance of male and female subjects in post-testing exhibits different levels of L1 conceptual transfer, yielding worthwhile information on the interplay between the two factors in relation to English prepositional usage.

The Vietnamese learners in this study saw improved preposition use after a two-week English course. It was also observed that L1 concept transfer played an influential role in their preposition usage, with gender potentially having a minor effect. Additional research is required in order to investigate the causes of the observed gender disparities in post-test outcomes and identify any possible links that may exist between gender and the conceptual transfer from L1 to second language.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study has shed light on the influence of gender and L1 conceptual transfer on English prepositional usage among Vietnamese university students. The results showed that L1 conceptual transfer plays a significant role in the prepositional usage of Vietnamese learners of English, whereas gender may have a minor effect. The study contributes to the growing body of research on cross-linguistic influence and cognitive linguistics, particularly in the area of English language teaching and learning.

One of the main findings of this study is the influence of L1 conceptual transfer on English prepositional usage. This result confirms previous studies that highlight the importance of considering the learners' L1 in language instruction. The findings suggest that learners with high levels of L1 conceptual transfer may struggle with English prepositions more than those with low levels. Therefore, teachers should pay attention to the learners' L1 conceptual transfer levels and adjust their instruction accordingly to facilitate learning.

Another notable finding is the minor effect of gender on prepositional usage in English. Although female participants performed marginally better than males on the post-test, there were no significant gender differences in the pre-test scores. This finding is consistent with previous studies that report no significant gender differences in language learning. Therefore, teachers should not assume that one gender is better at language learning than the other, but rather focus on individual differences and provide personalized instruction.

The results of this study have practical implications for English language instruction in Vietnam. As English is a foreign language in Vietnam, learners may encounter difficulties in acquiring the language due to differences in the structure and usage of prepositions. Teachers can use the findings of this study to develop effective instructional strategies that address the challenges faced by Vietnamese learners of English. By considering the learners' L1

conceptual transfer levels, teachers can provide explicit instruction that helps learners overcome negative transfer and improve their prepositional usage in English.

The study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the sample size of this study was relatively small, which limits the generalizability of the results. Future studies could include a larger sample size and participants from different proficiency levels to confirm the findings. Second, the study only focused on Vietnamese learners of English, and it would be interesting to investigate the influence of L1 conceptual transfer on prepositional usage in English for learners from other L1 backgrounds. Finally, the study only used pre- and post-tests with multiple-choice questions, which may not fully capture the complexity of prepositional usage in English. Future studies could use more comprehensive assessments to measure prepositional usage in English.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the influence of gender and L1 conceptual transfer on English prepositional usage among Vietnamese university students. The findings underscore the importance of considering the learners' L1 conceptual transfer levels in English language instruction and suggest that personalized instruction can improve learners' prepositional usage in English. Further research is needed to confirm these findings and explore the influence of L1 conceptual transfer on prepositional usage in English for learners from different L1 backgrounds.

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