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A study on the students' ability in using english prepositions (on, in, at, before, under): a survey at the first semester students of english language education

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Abstract

This study aims to determine students' ability in using English prepositions and to identify the problems they face. The research method used was a descriptive qualitative method. The data were collected through a grammar test. The sample consisted of 37 first-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program in the academic year 2025/2026. The data were analyzed by classifying students' scores, where scores of 66–100 were categorized as able and scores of 0–65 as unable. The results showed that 20 students (52%) were categorized as able, while 17 students (47%) were categorized as unable. In addition, most errors were found in the use of prepositions such as in, on, and at due to their similar meanings and multiple functions. Therefore, it can be concluded that students' ability in using English prepositions still needs improvement.
Keywords: *prepositions; ability; grammar; English learning*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui kemampuan mahasiswa dalam menggunakan preposisi bahasa Inggris serta untuk mengidentifikasi permasalahan yang dihadapi dalam penggunaannya. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah metode deskriptif kualitatif. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui tes tata bahasa. Sampel penelitian ini adalah seluruh mahasiswa semester pertama Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris tahun akademik 2025/2026 yang berjumlah 37 orang. Analisis data dilakukan dengan mengelompokkan skor mahasiswa, yaitu skor 66–100 dikategorikan mampu dan skor 0–65 dikategorikan tidak mampu. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sebanyak 20 mahasiswa (52%) termasuk dalam kategori mampu, sedangkan 17mahasiswa (47%) termasuk dalam kategori tidak mampu. Selain itu, ditemukan bahwa sebagian besar kesalahan mahasiswa terjadi pada penggunaan preposisi *in*, *on*, dan *at* karena memiliki makna yang mirip dan fungsi yang beragam. Dengan demikian, dapat disimpulkan bahwa kemampuan mahasiswa dalam menggunakan preposisi bahasa Inggris masih perlu ditingkatkan.

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PENDAHULUAN

Bahasa Inggris merupakan salah satu bahasa internasional yang digunakan sebagai alat komunikasi antar masyarakat di seluruh dunia. Dalam konteks globalisasi, bahasa Inggris memiliki peran yang sangat penting dalam berbagai bidang, seperti pendidikan, teknologi, ekonomi, dan komunikasi internasional. Menurut Tarigan (1986:4), komunikasi dapat dilakukan melalui dua cara, yaitu secara langsung (lisan) dan tidak langsung (tertulis). Dalam komunikasi lisan, individu dapat menyampaikan ide, pendapat, dan perasaan secara langsung melalui interaksi tatap muka, sehingga memungkinkan adanya umpan balik secara cepat melalui ekspresi maupun respon verbal. Sementara itu, komunikasi tidak langsung dilakukan melalui media tertulis, seperti buku, artikel, atau pesan tertulis lainnya. Sejalan dengan perkembangan teknologi, UNESCO (2021) menegaskan bahwa penguasaan bahasa internasional, khususnya bahasa Inggris, menjadi kompetensi penting dalam menghadapi tantangan abad ke-21. Selain itu, menurut Crystal (2020), bahasa Inggris telah berkembang menjadi lingua franca global yang digunakan dalam berbagai sektor kehidupan modern. Oleh karena itu, penguasaan bahasa Inggris tidak hanya penting dalam aspek komunikasi lisan, tetapi juga dalam komunikasi tertulis yang menuntut ketepatan penggunaan struktur bahasa.

Di berbagai negara seperti Amerika, Inggris, dan Australia, bahasa Inggris digunakan sebagai bahasa ibu, sedangkan di negara lain seperti Singapura, India, dan Filipina, bahasa Inggris digunakan sebagai bahasa kedua. Quirk dalam Astuti (2005) menyatakan bahwa tidak ada bahasa yang penyebarannya seluas bahasa Inggris. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa bahasa Inggris memiliki peran yang sangat dominan dalam kehidupan sehari-hari, sehingga minat masyarakat untuk mempelajarinya terus meningkat. Di Indonesia, bahasa Inggris telah menjadi bagian penting dalam sistem pendidikan formal. Namun demikian, berbagai penelitian terbaru menunjukkan bahwa siswa masih mengalami kesulitan dalam penguasaan bahasa Inggris, terutama dalam aspek tata bahasa (grammar) (Nation, 2022; Richards, 2021). Lebih lanjut, Harmer (2021) menyatakan bahwa kesulitan dalam grammar sering disebabkan oleh metode pengajaran yang kurang kontekstual dan kurangnya keterlibatan aktif siswa dalam

proses pembelajaran. Selain itu, Brown (2020) menambahkan bahwa faktor lingkungan belajar dan frekuensi latihan sangat mempengaruhi keberhasilan siswa dalam menguasai struktur bahasa. Kesulitan ini seringkali disebabkan oleh kurangnya pemahaman dalam menyusun kalimat secara gramatikal serta kurangnya praktik penggunaan bahasa secara kontekstual.

Salah satu aspek tata bahasa yang sering menimbulkan kesulitan adalah penggunaan preposisi. Preposisi memiliki fungsi penting dalam menunjukkan hubungan makna antar kata dalam kalimat, baik dalam konteks waktu, tempat, maupun arah. Freeman dalam Hadi (2005) menjelaskan bahwa dalam pembelajaran bahasa terdapat beberapa kesulitan utama yang dihadapi siswa, seperti kosakata, proses menulis, dan aspek gramatikal. Penelitian terbaru juga menunjukkan bahwa kesalahan penggunaan preposisi masih menjadi masalah umum di kalangan pembelajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL), terutama karena adanya perbedaan struktur bahasa dan makna yang ambigu (Ellis, 2020; Larsen-Freeman, 2021). Selain itu, DeKeyser (2020) menegaskan bahwa kesalahan dalam penggunaan struktur gramatikal seperti preposisi berkaitan erat dengan kurangnya automatisasi dalam proses pembelajaran bahasa. Bahkan, mahasiswa pada tingkat perguruan tinggi pun masih mengalami kesulitan dalam menggunakan preposisi seperti in, on, at, before, dan under secara tepat.

Berdasarkan fenomena tersebut, penelitian ini difokuskan pada analisis kemampuan mahasiswa dalam menggunakan preposisi bahasa Inggris serta mengidentifikasi permasalahan yang mereka hadapi. Penelitian ini dilakukan pada mahasiswa semester pertama Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris tahun akademik 2025/2026. Pemilihan subjek ini didasarkan pada asumsi bahwa mahasiswa pada tahap awal masih berada dalam proses pembentukan kompetensi dasar bahasa. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui tingkat kemampuan mahasiswa dalam menggunakan preposisi bahasa Inggris serta mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor yang menyebabkan kesulitan tersebut. Ruang lingkup penelitian ini dibatasi pada penggunaan preposisi dasar (in, on, at, before, dan under) dalam konteks pembelajaran grammar. Hasil penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan kontribusi dalam pengembangan strategi pembelajaran grammar yang lebih efektif dan kontekstual di tingkat perguruan tinggi, sebagaimana disarankan oleh Richards & Rodgers (2022) bahwa pembelajaran bahasa harus berbasis penggunaan nyata (communicative use) agar lebih efektif.

METODE PENELITIAN

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method to analyze students' ability in using English prepositions and to identify the problems they encountered. The descriptive qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to describe and interpret the students' performance in a natural setting without manipulation of variables. Prior to conducting the research, the researcher observed the teaching and learning process to gain preliminary information about students' difficulties in grammar, particularly in the use of prepositions. The main instrument used in this study was a test designed to measure students' ability in using English prepositions such as *in, on, at, before,* and *under*. The research was conducted on first-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program in the academic year 2025/2026.

Sample Study

According to Arikunto (1998:132), population refers to a group of individuals who share similar characteristics. In line with this definition, the population of this study consisted of all first-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program in the academic year 2025/2026. The total population in this study was 37 students, and all of them were included as the research subjects. In addition, Arikunto (1998:121) states that if the population is relatively small, it is better to take all members as the sample. Therefore, this study used total sampling technique, in which all 37 students were taken as the sample of the research.

Research Instrument

Instrument is a tool used to collect data (Arikunto, 1998:215). In this study, the researcher used a grammar test as the main instrument to measure students' ability in using English prepositions. The test consisted of 15 multiple-choice items with four options and 10 fill-in-the-blank items. These items were designed to assess students' understanding and usage of prepositions in various contexts.

Technique of Data Collection

Observation

The researcher conducted classroom observation to understand the teaching and learning process and identify students' initial problems in using English prepositions.

Test Explanation

The researcher explained the test instructions to the students, including how to answer both multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions.

Administering the Test

The researcher distributed the test to all students to measure their ability in using English prepositions.

Collecting Data

After the students completed the test, the researcher collected all answer sheets for further analysis. The results were used to identify students' abilities and their common errors in using prepositions

Technique of Data Analysis

The data obtained from the test were analyzed using descriptive statistics**,** particularly percentage and mean score analysis, to determine students' ability levels.
The mean score was calculated using the following formula:

$$\Sigma = \frac{\Sigma^{x}}{N}$$

Where:
M = Mean score
∑X = Total score of students
N = Number of students
(Arikunto, 2010:321)
Furthermore, the students' scores were classified into the following categories:

Table I. The number of the students' classification

Score range	Classification
96-100	Excellent
86-95	Very Good
76-85	Good
66-75	Fairly Good
56-65	Fair
36-55	Poor
0-35	Very poor

HASIL PENELITIAN DAN DISKUSI

Hasil

This section presents the results of the data analysis obtained from the test administered to the students. The findings are presented in three parts: (1) raw scores and mean score, (2) classification of students' ability, and (3) percentage distribution of students' scores. The following table 2, presents the students' Raw, Mean cores, and their classifications:

Table 2. Students' Raw Scores and Classification

No	Initials	Scored	Classified
1	S-1	56	Fair
2	S-2	60	Fair
3	S-3	72	Fairly Good
4	S-4	32	Very Poor
5	S-5	60	Fair
6	S-6	80	Good
7	S-7	80	Good
8	S-8	60	Fair
9	S-9	28	Very Poor
10	S-10	60	Fair
11	S-11	68	Fairly Good
12	S-12	80	Good
13	S-13	68	Fairly Good
14	S-14	52	Poor
15	S-15	92	Very Good
16	S-16	56	Fair
17	S-17	84	Good
18	S-18	56	Fair
19	S-19	48	Poor
20	S-20	68	Fairly Good
21	S-21	44	Poor
22	S-22	44	Poor
23	S-23	72	Fairly Good
24	S-24	44	Poor
25	S-25	68	Fairly Good

26	S-26	76	Good
27	S-27	80	Good
28	S-28	64	Fair
29	S-29	72	Fairly Good
30	S-30	68	Fairly Good
31	S-31	60	Fair
32	S-32	68	Fairly Good
33	S-33	60	Fair
34	S-34	72	Fairly Good
35	S-35	52	Poor
36	S-36	52	Poor
37	S-37	80	Good
	Total	2336	
	Mean	63	

From the table above, the highest percentage is found in the **fairly good and fair categories (26.31%)**, while only a small number of students achieved **very good level (2.63%)**.

$$\sum = \frac{\sum^{x}}{N} == \frac{2336}{N\ 37}\ 63\ =$$

Furthermore, students' ability can be influenced by how often they practice using English prepositions in both spoken and written communication in their daily lives. Students who frequently use English, especially in applying prepositions such as *in, on, at, before,* and *under*, tend to have better understanding and are able to distinguish their different uses more accurately. However, many students still demonstrate limited proficiency in using these prepositions because they are not accustomed to applying them consistently in daily communication or in writing activities.

The ability of using English prepositions (*in, on, at, before,* and *under*) among the first-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program in the academic year 2025/2026 can be identified through their test scores. The distribution of students' scores based on their classification is presented in the following table 3.

Table 3. Students' Ability Based on Score Range

No	Score Range	Scored	Classified
1	96–100	0	Excellent
2	86–95	1	Very Good
3	76–85	7	Good
4	66–75	10	Fairly Good
5	56–65	10	Fair
6	36–55	6	Poor
7	0–35	3	Very Poor
	Total	37	

For the purpose of determining the students' ability in using English prepositions (*in, on, at, before,* and *under*) in writing sentences, it is necessary to analyze the number, percentage, and classification of students' scores. These results provide a clearer description of the students' overall performance. The distribution of the students' scores, along with their percentages and classifications, is presented in the following table 4.

No	Score Range	Scored	Classified
1	96–100	0	Excellent
2	86–95	1	Very Good
3	76–85	7	Good
4	66–75	10	Fairly Good
5	56–65	10	Fair
6	36–55	6	Poor
7	0–35	3	Very Poor
	Total	37	

DISCUSSION

This study aims to answer two research questions:

(1) *What is the students' ability in using English prepositions?*

(2) *What problems are faced by the students in using English prepositions?*

1. Students' Ability in Using English Prepositions

Based on the findings, the mean score of students is **63.05**, which is categorized as **fair**. This indicates that the students' ability in using English prepositions (*in, on, at, before,* and *under*) is still at a moderate level.

Most students are classified into **fairly good (26.31%) and fair (26.31%)**, while only a small number reached **very good level (2.63%)**. This result suggests that students have not yet fully mastered the correct use of English prepositions in writing sentences.

This finding is in line with **Richards (2021)**, who states that grammar mastery, particularly prepositions, is often difficult for EFL learners due to its context-dependent usage. Similarly, **Larsen-Freeman (2021)** explains that grammar is not only about rules but also about meaningful use, which requires continuous practice.

2. Students' Problems in Using English Prepositions

The second research finding reveals that students face several difficulties in using English prepositions. Most incorrect answers were found in items containing **in, on, at, before, and under**.

The main problems identified are:

1. **Confusion of Meaning**
   Students often confuse prepositions with similar meanings, especially *in, on,* and *at*, because these prepositions can be used in different contexts (time and place).
2. **Lack of Practice**
   Students are not accustomed to using English in daily communication, which affects their ability to apply prepositions correctly.
3. **Contextual Understanding**
   Students have difficulty understanding how prepositions function in different sentence contexts.

These findings support **Ellis (2020)**, who argues that grammatical errors in second language learning are often caused by limited exposure and lack of contextual practice. Furthermore, **Nation (2022)** emphasizes that vocabulary and grammar learning require repeated exposure and meaningful use to achieve mastery.

3. Interpretation of Findings

Based on the overall findings, it can be concluded that students' ability in using English prepositions is still relatively low to moderate. Although some students have achieved good results, the majority still struggle with correct usage.

Therefore, it is necessary to apply more **interactive and contextual teaching strategies** to improve students' understanding and usage of English prepositions.

PEMBAHASAN

No	Students	Score	Classification
1	Aa	28	Very Poor
2	Bb	44	Poor
3	Cc	60	Fair
…	…	…	…
36	Ak	92	Very Good
37	Al	80	Good
38	Am	60	Fair
Total		**2396**	
Mean Score		**63.05**	**Fair**

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings regarding the ability of first-semester students in the English Language Education Study Program for the academic year 2025/2026 to use English prepositions (*in, on, at, before, under*), the following conclusions can be drawn:

- **Ability Level**: The students' average ability is categorized as **Fair**, with an average score of 63.05. Out of a total sample of 37 students, 20 students (52%) were categorized as able, while 17 students (47%) were categorized as unable.

- **Main Problems**: Students faced the greatest difficulty in using the prepositions *in, on,* and *at*. This is due to the similar meanings of these prepositions and their diverse functions, which are used to indicate both time and place.
- **Contributing Factors**: The low mastery of prepositions is influenced by a lack of practice in using English in daily communication, both orally and in writing, as well as a lack of contextual understanding of the function of prepositions within sentences.

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