



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***EFFECT OF TRANSFER IN THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH  
PREPOSITIONS BY L1 TURKMEN SPEAKERS***

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**FBMK 2015 7**



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PREPOSITIONS BY L1 TURKMEN SPEAKERS**

By

**EJEGUL SHAVIYEVA**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts**

**October 2015**



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## **DEDICATION**

**To my beloved family,  
whose love and prayers were my source of strength.**







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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of University Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

## **EFFECT OF TRANSFER IN THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS BY L1 TURKMEN SPEAKERS**

By

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**October 2015**

**Chairman: Associate Professor Wong Bee Eng, PhD**  
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This study investigated the effect of transfer in the acquisition of English prepositions by first language (L1) Turkmen and second language (L2) English learners. The study tested the Full transfer/Full access hypothesis (FTFA) proposed by Schwartz and Sprouse (1996). The hypothesis argues that L2 learners initially transfer all the parameter-settings from their mother tongue and thereafter, reset the L1 parameter to the L2 parameter. In addition, the data collected tested two more hypotheses, i.e. the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH) proposed by Prevost and White (2000) and Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH) by Hawkins and Chan (1997). The Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH) (Prevost & White, 2000) claims that underlying correct morphosyntax of L2 can be acquired by L2 learners and inconsistent errors of L2 learners are not the result of underlying syntactic deficit; instead, they are regarded as missing inflections which cause performance errors. The Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH) by Hawkins and Chan (1997) proposes that parameterized L2 functional features may not be acquired by L2 learners past a critical period.

This study was inspired by two languages with dissimilar parameter features i.e., English, an analytic language, and Turkmen, an agglutinative language. A difference between the two languages is English has prepositions and Turkmen has postpositions. Participants of this study were 78 L1 Turkmen speakers from a language center in Dashoguz, Turkmenistan. The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to place them in three different levels of proficiency (elementary, intermediate, advanced). Based on a comparative analysis of the preposition and post-position systems in the two languages, a Grammaticality Judgment Task (GJT) was formulated. This was administered to test participants' knowledge of English prepositions. The GJT consisted of 18 grammatical items (6 with locational prepositions, 6 with directional prepositions and 6 with ambiguous prepositions) and 18 ungrammatical items (6 with locational prepositions, 6 with directional prepositions and 6 with ambiguous prepositions). The data collected



with the GJT revealed (a) to what extent L1 Turkmen speakers of L2 English are able to acquire the surface structure of locational, directional and ambiguous prepositions in English, (b) types of errors in the use of prepositions that are more likely to be committed by Turkmen ESL learners, (c) the role of L2 transfer in the acquisition of English prepositions by L1 Turkmen speakers. In addition, a Gap Filling Task (GFT) was used to investigate the effect of L1 on the L2.

The findings of the study suggested that the majority of L1 Turkmen L2 English learners showed remarkable performance in recognizing and judging the surface structure of the grammatical items with English directional and ambiguous prepositions from the ungrammatical items. On the other hand, participants were less determinate in judging grammatical locational prepositions from ungrammatical ones. The results of the GJT revealed that L1 Turkmen L2 English learners were able to acquire the surface structure of English prepositions; in addition, the results of the GFT suggest that the L1 does have an effect on L2 acquisition. In addition, the results suggest that errors committed by the participants are not consistent, which is compatible with the findings of the studies that support MSIH and FTFA. The results of this study will contribute to SLA literature on L1 transfer among ESL learners, and the developing field of education in Turkmenistan.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Sarjana Sastera

## **KESAN PEMINDAHAN PEMEROLEHAN KATA PREPOSISI BAHASA INGGERIS OLEH PENUTUR L1 TURKMEN**

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Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki kesan pemindahan pemerolehan kata preposisi bahasa Inggeris dalam kalangan penutur L1 bahasa Turkmen dan pelajar L2 bahasa Inggeris. Kajian ini akan menguji Pemindahan Penuh/ Hipotesis Akses Penuh yang diutarakan oleh Schwartz dan Sprouse (1996). Hipotesis ini menegaskan bahawa pelajar bahasa kedua pada awalnya memindahkan semua seting parameter daripada bahasa ibundanya dan kemudiannya, mengeset semula parameter L1 kepada parameter L2. Di samping itu, data yang dikumpul akan menguji dua lagi hipotesis, iaitu, Hipotesis Infleksi Permukaan Terhilang (MSIH) yang diutarakan oleh Prevost dan White (2000) dan Hipotesis Ciri Fungsional Gagal (FFFH) oleh Hawkins dan Chan (1997) dalam lingkungan Program Minimalis yang dijadikan kerangka bagi kajian ini. Hipotesis Infleksi Permukaan Terhilang (MSIH) (Prevost & White, 2000) mendakwa bahawa morfosintaksis tepat implisit dapat diperolehi pelajar L2 dan kesilapan pelajar L2 bukan disebabkan oleh defisit sintaksis tersirat yang tidak konsisten, tetapi ia dianggap sebagai infleksi terhilang yang menyebabkan kesilapan dalam pembelajaran. Hipotesis Fungsional Ciri Gagal (FFFH) oleh Hawkins dan Chan (1997) mengemukakan bahawa parameter ciri fungsional L2 mungkin tidak akan diperolehi pelajar L2 yang melepasi Era Kritikal mereka.

Kajian ini dilaksanakan disebabkan oleh pemahaman bahawa kedua-dua bahasa mempunyai ciri parameter yang tidak sama, iaitu, bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa analitik dan bahasa Turkmen sebagai bahasa aglutinatif. Perbezaan antara kedua-dua bahasa tersebut ialah bahasa Inggeris mempunyai kata preposisi, manakala bahasa Turkmen mempunyai postposisi. Responden kajian ini ialah sebanyak 105 penutur bahasa Turkmen sebagai L1 dari pusat bahasa kerajaan di Turkmenistan. Ujian bahasa Inggeris Oxford telah dijalankan supaya pelajar tersebut dapat ditempatkan dalam tiga tahap kemahiran yang berbeza, (asas, pertengahan, pertengahan tinggi). Berdasarkan analisis komparatif terhadap sistem kata preposisi dan postposisi dalam kedua-dua bahasa, Ujian Pertimbangan

Ketatabahasaan (GJT) telah dijalankan. Ujian ini dilaksanakan untuk menguji pengetahuan responden tentang kata preposisi bahasa Inggeris. GJT terdiri daripada 18 item gramatikal ( 6 kata preposisi lokasi, 6 kata preposisi arah dan 6 kata preposisi ambiguous) dan 18 item bukan gramatikal (6 kata preposisi lokasi, 6 kata preposisi arah dan 6 kata preposisi ambiguous). Data yang dikumpul dengan GJT menunjukkan (a) sejauh manakah penutur L1 bahasa Turkmen yang mempelajari bahasa Inggeris sebagai L2 dapat memperoleh struktur permukaan kata preposisi lokasi, arah dan ambiguous bahasa Inggeris (b) jenis kesilapan dalam penggunaan kata preposisi yang paling kerap dilakukan oleh pelajar ESL bahasa Turkmen, (c) peranan pemindahan L2 terhadap pemerolehan kata preposisi bahasa Inggeris oleh penutur L1 bahasa Turkmen.

Hasil dapatan kajian ini dijangka akan dapat memberikan sumbangan dari segi memenuhi jurang yang ketara dalam sorotan kajian tentang SLA demi memajukan bidang pendidikan di Turkmenistan. Tambahan pula, data yang dikumpul akan dapat menambah maklumat bagi keseluruhan ilmu pengetahuan tentang pemindahan dan ESL. Tambahan lagi, Gap Filling Task (GFT) telah digunakan untuk mengkaji kesan L1 terhadap L2. Hasil kajian mencadangkan bahawa kebanyakan pelajar Turkmen L1 Bahasa Inggeris L2 menunjukkan prestasi yang sangat memberangsangkan dalam menilai dan mengenalpasti struktur asas komponen tatabahasa berbanding dengan komponen tatabahasa yang tidak tepat. Dalam pada itu, pelajar-pelajar tersebut lebih cenderung untuk mengabaikan kesalahan tatabahasa yang melibatkan kata arah tempat berbanding penggunaan tatabahasa yang betul. Keputusan GFT mendedahkan bahawa Turkmen L1 Bahasa Inggeris L2 dapat memahami struktur asas kata arah Bahasa Inggeris; tambahan itu, keputusan GFT memberi gambaran bahawa L1 memberi kesan kepada pemerolehan L2. Hasil kajian tersebut juga menunjukkan bahawa kesalahan yang dilakukan oleh para pelajar adalah tidak konsisten selaras dengan hasil kajian yang menyokong MSIH dan FTFA.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Associate Professor Dr Wong Bee Eng. I am very lucky to have such a qualified, patient, and most importantly supportive supervisor. Her professional guidance and valuable comments pushed me forward and enlightened my way on this tough journey. I have learnt so many things from Dr Wong that she became one of the ideal people in my life. My priceless experience with her including her encouraging words, comments and teaching methods will always guide me in my academic life. Above all, I would like to thank Dr Wong for being available throughout despite her busy schedule, and I do apologize for any trouble that I caused.

Seizing the opportunity, I would also like to convey my gratitude to Associate Professor Dr. Mardziah Hayati Binti Abdullah for her guidance when I first came to UPM without any experience. Her valuable supervision was helpful to clarify my ideas and find the actual way to the field I am interested in.

My beloved family and friends were inseparable part of my master's life. Their encouraging and benevolent attitude was something that I could not get through without. I felt their support and sympathy in every step. My friends were there when I needed help most. The knowledgeable lecturers and students of UPM helped me to accustom to this challenging journey. I will always remember people of Malaysia as one of the most supportive and understanding people I have ever seen.



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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Art. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SLA	Second Language Acquisition
CAH	Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis
UG	Universal Grammar
ESL	English as a Second Language
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
MP	Minimalist Program
IL	Interlanguage
FFFA	Failed Functional Features Hypothesis
FTFA	Full Transfer Full Access
MSIH	Missing Surface Inflections Theory
DIR	Directional
LOC	Locational
IV	Independent Variable
DV	Dependent Variable
OPT	Oxford Placement Test
GFT	Gap Filling Task
GJT	Grammaticality Judgment Task



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background to the Study

'Transfer' is a general cover term for a number of different kinds of influence from languages other than the L2. The study of transfer involves the study of errors (negative transfer), facilitation (positive transfer), avoidance of target language forms, and their over-use (Ellis, 1994, p. 341). Transfer studies emerged during the 1940 and 1950s even before the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research originated. Despite decades having passed since the notion of the transfer emerged, it has endured as an area that still inspires many research studies in SLA.

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) as proposed by Lado in his 'Linguistics across Cultures' (1957) had played the role of stimulus for the notion of transfer. The CAH was associated with behaviourist views of language learning and structural linguistics of that time. Noticeable L1 effect on the target language, particularly in pronunciation, inspired linguists of the 1960's to develop the notion of CAH. It was built on two determined ideas i.e. strong influence of L1 on the second language (L2) and consideration of that influence as a negative transfer. The CAH asserts L2es that belong to different families will cause interference during the acquisition process, which results in errors, whereas L2es that are similar to the L1 will lead to positive transfer by facilitation. After a decade, the CAH became theoretically and practically indefensible because of its various inadequacies regarding positive and negative transfer and lost its place in linguistic studies (see Towell & Hawkins, 1994, p. 17-18).

This radical shift was the fruit of American linguist Noam Chomsky's claims on the nature of learning which did not recognise the significance of L1 influence in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). His greatest contribution to linguistics, which was adopted by some researchers in the study of SLA was the theory of Universal Grammar (UG) that aimed to describe the language produced by L2 learners, i.e. the interlanguage and the differences between the L1 and L2, and it also attempts to explain the reasons for the interlanguage produced (Mitchell & Myles, 2012).

This shift of perspective resulted in two different considerations for the place of L1 effect in SLA. The first consideration of researchers approached the transfer of languages as other processes concerning SLA which focused on the process of L1 influence rather than the product. This approach was taken on by Selinker (1972), Nemser (1971) and James (1971) who acknowledged the major role of L1 on L2. As a result, this approach was the inspiration for later studies being conducted in the field of language transfer in SLA.

The second account for the role of L1 in SLA was adopted by Ellis (1994) and was called the 'Minimalist approach' which minimized the importance of L1 effect in SLA by highlighting the impact of universal processing of language learning. Ellis

(1994) emphasized the role of universal processing of language learning by hypothesis testing and focusing on the similarities between L1 and L2. Unlike the first approach to the role of transfer, Ellis (1994) called attention to the similarities between L1 and L2 assuming that not only the differences result in interference between the languages. In addition, he approached the hypothesis testing to explain the errors committed by language learners rather than to predict.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Prepositions in English are well-known as one of the most difficult aspects of the language to acquire by ESL learners. One of the main reasons for that is language learners usually strive to relate English prepositions to their equivalents in L1. However, dissimilarities in the number of prepositions and the lack of a one-to-one mapping between English and the L1 equivalent is a source of the difficulty.

For L1 Turkmen L2 English learners, acquisition of English prepositions is considered to be one of the most challenging aspects of the acquisition process because of cross-linguistic differences between the Turkmen and English prepositional system (see Chapter 3 for these differences). Turkmen is a Turkic language, part of the South-Western or *Oguz* sub-group which includes Turkish, Azerbaijani, and Gagauz. It is an agglutinative language, i.e. it has a highly developed system of noun and verb suffixes that can produce some very long words, for example, from the word *okuw* which means ‘study’, the following word/sentence can be derived: *Okuçylaryňkymyka?* ‘I wonder if it belongs to the school children?’ (Clark, 1998).

Sentence: *Okuçylaryňkymyka?*

<i>Okuw</i>	+	<i>çy</i>	+	<i>lar</i>	+	<i>yňky</i>	+	<i>myka</i>	?
study	+	DER <sup>1</sup>	+	PL	+	GEN <sup>2</sup>	+	Qs <sup>3</sup>	

‘I wonder if it belongs to the school children?’

Such diversity in the English and Turkmen languages makes learning and teaching of ESL more complicated and challenging for both learners and instructors. This could be a reason for many common errors committed by L1 Turkmen L2 English learners. However, there is a lack of studies that investigate the reasons for those common errors among these learners in the L2 literature. Therefore, there is need for such a study to fill in this gap.

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<sup>1</sup> DER - Derivational suffix

<sup>2</sup> GEN - Genitive case suffix

<sup>3</sup> Qs - Question suffix

### **1.3 Theoretical Framework**

The Full Transfer Full Access Hypothesis claimed by Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) was adopted as a theoretical framework of the present study. The hypothesis regards L1 grammar as the initial state in L2 acquisition. When learners encounter different features in SLA, they use the new UG options to make more appropriate analysis of the L2. UG options include new parameter settings, functional categories and feature values that are not initiated in the L1. The analysis of L2 input of L2 learner may differ from native speakers'. As a result, learners' interlanguage grammars comprise UG, which is about gradual grammar restructuring during the process of SLA.

UG argues that all languages have common features i.e. a universal set of principles and parameters. Principles, are those put forward by Chomsky, are similar features of all human languages, whereas parameters are accessible merits that represent differences between languages (Mitchell & Myles, 2012). For instance, the knowledge that all languages are structure dependent is one of the universal principles. However, all languages are uniquely structured i.e. the structure of sentences vary from language to language which is known as one of the parameter settings. As an example, according to the head parameter of UG languages are distinguished as head-first and head-last. English is known as a head-first language whereas Turkmen as head-last.

According to the FFFH, (Hawkins & Chan, 1997) those parameter values cannot be fixed after the end of the critical period for the language acquisition process. According to Johnson and Newport (1989), the critical period ends at the age of seven. On the other hand, the hypothesis of FTFA (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1994) argues that when L1 and L2 parameters differ, they have to be revised and reset.

The FTFA, FFFH and MSIH and some important studies based on these hypotheses will be discussed in more detail in the Literature Review (Chapter 2) of the thesis.

### **1.4 Objectives and Research Questions**

The purpose of the present study is to conduct a cross linguistic analysis of English prepositions and Turkmen postpositions and the related suffix system and to examine the effect of transfer in the acquisition of English prepositions by L1 Turkmen L2 English learners. This exercise is important in itself as English is a head first language and Turkmen is a head last language. This difference in the head parameter settings between the two languages is obvious in the preposition system in English and the postposition system in Turkmen. Specifically, the study will address the following research questions:

1. To what extent are L1 Turkmen speakers of L2 English able to acquire the surface structure of locational, directional and ambiguous prepositions in English?

2. What types of errors in the use of prepositions are more likely to be committed by Turkmen ESL learners?
3. What is the role of L1 transfer in the acquisition of English prepositions by L1 Turkmen speakers?

### 1.5 Scope of the Study

This study aims to observe the effect of transfer in the acquisition of English prepositions by Turkmen learners who are senior students at a local language centre in Turkmenistan. An English placement test, the Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 2004) was administered to group participants into three levels of proficiency i.e. beginner, intermediate and advanced to compare the data collected from these mentioned groups. The main instrument of the study was a Grammaticality Judgement Task (GJT) that tested participants' knowledge of English prepositions. The next instrument was a Gap Filling Task, which was used to examine the effect of transfer in L2 learners' mind. The data collected through the research instruments would test the Full Transfer Full Access Hypothesis as proposed by Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) through examining how participants transfer L1 parameters to the L2 and access UG to set new parameters that do not exist in their L1. In addition, the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH) proposed by Prevost and White (2000) and the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH) by Hawkins and Chan (1997) was considered on examination of the data.

### 1.6 Significance of the Study

As discussed in the previous sections, the Turkmen language differs in many aspects compared to English and a lack of literature which studies the differences and similarities in these languages and which analyse difficulties encountered by L1 Turkmen L2 English learners, as well as errors committed by these learners in the acquisition of prepositions accord significance to this study.

Further, findings of the study will have implications for L2 teaching policy in general and the ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom in Turkmenistan in particular. ESL instructors and teachers can design lessons, activities and materials based on the implications drawn from the findings of the study.

**Table 1. 1. Framework of the Study**

	<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>Research Instrument</b>	<b>Theory</b>
1.	To what extent are L1 Turkmen speakers of L2 English able to acquire the surface structure of locational, directional and	Participants' L2 proficiency Participants' performance on the GJT	GJT	FTFA MSIH

	ambiguous prepositions in English?			
2.	What types of errors in the use of prepositions are more likely to be committed by Turkmen ESL learners?	Participants' L2 proficiency Participants' performance on the GJT and GFT	GJT GFT	MSIH
3.	What is the role of L1 transfer in the acquisition of English prepositions by L1 Turkmen speakers?	Participants' L2 proficiency Participants' performance on the GJT and GFT	GJT GFT	FTFA

### 1.7 Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

The data for the study was collected from the participants who were senior students in a local language centre in the town of Dashoguz. Therefore, findings of this research was able to explain and compare the effect of transfer in initial and developing stages of adolescent L2 learners. In this study, the participants were categorized into three groups according to their English proficiency level to compare the research data for the purpose of examining the effect of transfer in each level. The researcher aims to extend the research on the effect of transfer in the acquisition of English prepositions including child and adult L1 Turkmen L2 English learners for future studies.

### 1.8 Outline of the Thesis

The thesis comprises six chapters. In Chapter 1, the Introduction, the background to the study, the framework and research questions of the study including the research gap and the significance of the study are introduced. In chapter 2, the Literature Review, the studies conducted in the field of transfer, SLA and UG along with their results and implications are reviewed. Linguistic information regarding English prepositions and Turkmen postpositions and suffix system, and a cross-linguistic analysis of these are presented in Chapter 3, i.e. the Linguistic Assumptions. The chapter on Methodology (Chapter 4) describes the research framework, research participants and instruments along with the research procedure, data collection and data analysis. Statistical information on the data analysis and interpretation of data are discussed in Chapter 5 that is Results and Discussion. The last chapter discussed the conclusions and implications in which the research data are interpreted and implications were drawn.

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