

Spelling Difficulties Faced by Arab Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

The field of second language acquisition has acknowledged the importance of good spelling for second language (L2) learners. Learning to spell, in fact, is not a straightforward process rather it involves numerous mental processes. Proponents of this field argue that learning English spelling entails the correct connection of the phonemes and graphemes. The former refers to the spoken sounds and the latter refers to the written symbols. Spelling, also, reflects to a large extent the actual level of people's word knowledge and it can be used to measure the language achievements of L2 users. Nevertheless, the irregular system of English causes different kinds of problems and difficulties for roughly all learners of English including native speakers. This paper aims to highlight the difficulties that Arab learners of English encounter when spelling English words. It describes some spelling approaches such as whole word approach, phonics approach, invented spelling approach, traditional approach and morphemic approach. Then, it considers the different kinds of spelling errors often made by Arab learners of English. It concludes with some suggestions for helping Arab learners of English improve their spelling skills.

Key words: Arab learners of English, spelling, spelling mistakes

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Introduction

Learning to spell English has been considered one of the challenging tasks that face most English language learners. Various studies have been carried out to investigate the reasons that cause this problem. Many researchers (e.g. Hughes & Searle, 2000; Wright, 2000; Ediger, 2001) indicate that spelling is crucial to make the writer's message and voice comprehensible for the reader. In addition, Bolton and Snowball (1993) assert that poor spelling has a negative effect on the content and makes it unintelligible for the reader. Therefore, it should be taught in a way like other language skills i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking. "Correct spelling is a sign of education; a spelling mistake is a solecism that betrays carelessness or plebeian origins. Spelling is thus a crucial factor in the way people present themselves." (Cook, 1997, p. 474).

As English is considered the world's most prestigious language, many jobs require applicants to have high knowledge of both written and spoken forms of English. Warda (2005) argues that in recent years, the job markets place a great emphasis on the grammar and spelling rather than the overall scores of the candidates. The knowledge of spelling according to Warda (2005) is a sign for advanced education, hard-working personality and that the person has a great deal of intelligence ability. In addition, many researchers have admitted the very close relationship between spelling and reading abilities. It has been argued that incorrect spelling can affect people's lives in various ways, for instance, poor spelling is more likely to affect reading capabilities, academic performance and grades (Al-Jarf, 2005; Warda, 2005). Also, Graves (1983) demonstrates that poor spellers often focus on the mechanics of spelling rather than the ideas which makes the content poorly suffer.

Stage and Wagner (1992) accentuate that studying spelling offer insight into the actual level of the learners linguistically and cognitively. It indicates the process of the children's acquisition of the language and how they perceive its spelling system. Also, spelling can help understanding the nature of the learners. In other words, it can tell how learners assimilate orthographic, phonological, and morphological knowledge and how they translate spoken sounds into written symbols (Abu-Rabia & Taha, 2006).

Approaches to spelling

The irregular relationship of letters and sounds in English causes some approaches to emerge. These approaches are thought to help language learners learn the English spelling effectively. In the field of teaching spelling, the Whole-language Approach and the Phonics Approach are considered the most familiar ones. Also, other approaches such as the Invented Spelling, Traditional Approach, and Morphemic Approach have been identified.

The Whole Language Approach

The idea of the whole language approach has its basis in the belief that learning can occur only with frequent exposure to the language (Hughes, 1972). The learners learn the spelling of the words if they are allowed to recognize words as whole not in small chunks. This approach emphasises patterns of words through flashcards (e.g. visual materials). In addition, Hoffman (1990: 238) argues that it is integrated with the invented approach since spelling is learned through "context of communicative writing and reading interactions

between children and adults”. However, there are some drawbacks for this approach. If learners are expected to learn the language by memorizing endless lists of words, this may put language learners under pressure to learn the correct spelling and distinguish between the spellings of similar words. Since learners are not able to decode words, they will not be able to encode words to spell them accurately.

The Phonics Approach

Unlike the whole language approach, the phonics approach aims to raise learners’ phonological awareness about words and correspondingly they are expected to comprehend the relationship between phonemes and graphemes (Adams, 1990). Acquiring the phonological features of the words cannot be done in one step. Teriman (1994) identifies that the first step is to teach learners how to divide words into syllables, there are two main phonological units in the English syllable, an onset and rime. Normally, any syllable is divided into two units: the onset, which consists of the initial consonant, and the rime which consists of the vowel and any final consonants. For example, the onset in the word ‘three’ is ‘th’ while the rime is ‘ree’. Language learners will be able to acquire spelling skills if they are able to segment the words into their phonological units (Teriman, 1994). They also seem to show progress when they understand that one phoneme may represent two letters not only one letter such as /ch/ (Todd, 1982). Todd, suggests that learners’ ability to remember words can be improved by using chunks. One of its disadvantages, however, is the unnatural way of learning the target language. Language should be acquired by comprehending the whole text in a meaningful context rather than analysing the words into small language components.

The invented spelling

Invented spelling is based on the learners’ phonemic knowledge and on the belief of natural learning. It mainly refers to young learners’ attempts to use whatever knowledge they have in order to spell words, they simply invent words by arranging some letters (Lutz, 1986). Proponents of this approach argue that learners can develop their spelling skills if they explore the relationship between the letters and the sounds. For instance, if the word has the same number of letters and sounds (e.g. bat), learners will easily spell the word. However, other words which have silent letters, double consonants, or different sounds can be difficult to manage. Despite all the promises of the invented spelling, this approach has no long term outcomes since it, sometimes, leads to poor communication skills. More clearly, children who learn spelling by this approach are more likely to feel frustrated at the later years of schooling. They will be unable to spell or even recognize the correct spelling (Ripple, 2008).

Traditional Approach

Mainly, this approach focuses on memorizing the unit of the written form where learners are given a number of words every week and they have to practice and spell them correctly. It is followed in some English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts in which learners are required to spell a number of words, sometimes short sentences, in each class. The teacher’s role is to correct their writings and in case of any mistakes, learners have to write the correct spelling of the faulty word more than once. Although, this method helps learners to

recognize the correct spelling, it has a very short-term effect. That is to say, the words which are not frequently used will be forgotten depending on the learners' memories since there is no rule to memorize them (Gill, 1997). Furthermore, Turbill (2000) asserts that barely memorisation is not considered a sufficient technique to learn spelling even for native speakers.

Morphemic approach

Many English words can be generated by following a set of rules for mixing morphographs (Simonsen et al, 2001). These morphographs refer to the affixes that are added to the words (i.e. prefixes, suffixes, infixes, and the root). For example, the word 'recovered' has the prefix 're', the suffix 'ed' and the root 'cover'. Teachers following this approach usually write new or important words on the board and each morpheme in a different colour. For example, the word 'teacher' is written as *teach*er where *teach* is a verb, and by adding 'er', it becomes a subject. The same with adding 'es' to pluralize words that end with 'x, ch, sh' like in 'box', and deleting the final 'e' when adding the suffix 'ing'. Simonsen et al. (2001) provide some advantages for this approach which include:

First, morphographs are generally spelled the same across different words. Second, when the spelling of a morphograph changes across words, it does so in predictable ways. Third, the number of morphographs is far fewer than the number of words in the written English language, and the number of principles for combining morphographs is relatively small. (p. 6)

Spelling difficulties encountered by Arab learners

A number of studies have been conducted to investigate the causes of the spelling problems encountered by foreign language learners (e.g. Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989; Ringbom, 1992). Fender (2008) carried out a study to examine the spelling comprehension of a group of Arab and non-Arab learners of English and found out that Arab learners scored considerably lower than other populations.

Bowen (2011) analysed data obtained from Emirati students' writing and found that students have a tendency to add an extra vowel sound to certain words such as '*partaner*', Bowen (2011) asserts that such epenthesis might have resulted as an attempt to make pronunciation of words easier. She further reported that there was a frequent omission of vowels which might be due to the students' tendency to omit weak or silent vowels or "the transfer of Arabic nonvowelisation patterns" (p. 92). The absence of written vowels in Arabic text might have led students to guess words in English inaccurately and hence affected their spelling skills. Saigh and Schmitt (2012) go in line with this study suggesting that Arabic learners of English tend to treat English short and long vowels in the same way as Arabic.

In a recent study, Al-Busaidi and Al-Saqqaf (2015) investigated the possible difficulties that Arabic-speaking students encounter when learning English spelling and reported that Arab students had great difficulties in spelling rhyming words such as *rule-role*, and *full-fill*. These students also had difficulty distinguishing between short and long

vowels. Almost all the students in their study spelled the word *hit* as *heat*. The authors further reported that students confused short vowels with diphthongs. Al-Busaidi and Al-Saqqaf (2015) provide a possible interpretation of such findings arguing that students were not trained to be sensitive to the length and quality of the vowel sounds, as some of them are allophonic in their mother tongue. According to the authors, students should be taught the rules of using allographic variations of each grapheme to enable them to use capital and small letters in the appropriate contexts.

Many facts have been acknowledged to impact Arab learners' spellings. For example, Arabic language has a different direction from English and other orthographies i.e. it reads from right to left. In fact, many Arab learners transfer their schemata knowledge from their mother tongue into English (Cook, 2004; Fender, 2008). Another central reason that causes different problems for Arab learners of English is that Arabic is a consonant-based alphabetic system (Cook, 2004). In Arabic, all the pronounced letters have written equivalents. Therefore, English words with silent letters often cause troubles for the learners. The question that arises in almost every English class and faces nearly most English language teachers is: why does English have these unpronounced letters.

These problems can be classified into phonological and orthographic difficulties. Phonological knowledge stands as a barrier to spell correctly in English. More specifically, learners sometimes write words that do not correspond to the target word for different reasons. For example, these words were not heard at all, students' inability to distinguish some or all the phonemes in the words, the word sequence, minimal pairs, single vowels and consonant phonemes, or it might be because of failing to recognize flaps and elision (Al-Jarf, 2008). Apparently, this can be illustrated by looking at some Arabic letters and their English correspondences. For instance, Arabic language has thirty-two consonants and eight vowels (including diphthongs) whereas English has twenty-four consonants and twenty-two vowels. Some of these English consonants such as /p/, /v/ and /t/ do not exist in Arabic. Besides, Arabic short vowels are not stressed, rather they are represented by small signs above the words (Swan & Smith, 1987). Additionally, letters such as /K/, /Q/, and /C/ almost sound the same for Arab learners and these letters correspond to only one letter in Arabic i.e. /ك/. Other examples like the sounds /S/ and /C/ correspond with one letter /س/. Also, the letter /P/ causes a serious difficulty for most Arab learners because Arabic has only one letter corresponds to the letter /B/ which is /ب/.

Orthographic problems have, also, been admitted to cause many problems for most learners of English. As most spelling problems can be categorized as orthographic, it seems imperative to define its meaning. According to Al-Jarf (2008), orthographic errors usually refer to that misspell words which sound like the target word but the written form or the grapheme does not correspond with the intended word or the intended grapheme. Al-Jarf (2008) identifies many cases which can be called orthographic problems. Learners may confuse vowel or consonant graphemes that have the same sound, they may confuse vowel and consonant digraphs, delete silent vowels and consonants, represent consonants with hidden sounds phonetically, or substitute the words by other homophones.

In addition, doubling consonants has been considered one of the prevalent errors made by learners of English. Cook (1999) asserts that doubling consonants is one of the most frequent mistakes in English spelling. He believes that consonant addition or omission causes 43.3% whereas only 14.4% of the mistakes are caused by other types. Apparently, since Arabic language is a consonant-based system and there is no doubling for the consonants, this percentage is likely to be higher with Arab learners. In fact, one of the features of Arabic is gemination, called 'Alshadda', and refers to "a sequence of identical adjacent segments of a sound in a single morpheme without being separated by epenthetic vowels" (Crystal, 2003, p. 196). The sign for Alshadda - ʿ/- is usually placed above the stressed letters. However, some problems arise with these signs when it comes to writing in English. Many students are confused whether or not to double the letters; the problem that I often faced when I was a teacher of Saudi young learners. During my teaching, I used to dictate some words at the beginning of each class, and the students frequently deleted the doubled consonants as they only heard one sound (e.g. cary, bok) and sometimes they added a final letter for the words when it is not required (e.g. beautifull). I still remember one of my students when he wrote the word 'can' with Al-Shadda above it like this: َcan.

Another rigorous problem that faces most learners in general and Arabs in particular is the vowels. English vowels are introduced at the early stages of learning English in all Saudi public and private schools. Yet, these vowels continue to be the main cause for many students' mistakes. In Arabic, there are three long vowels (i.e. Alef, Waw and Ya') and four short vowels which are known as marks (in Arabic called, *Harakat* or *Tashkeel*). These *Harakat* contain four different signs and each one has a different function, they are: Fatha, Dhamma, Kasra, Sukoon and mean respectively 'an opening', 'a closing', 'a breaking' and 'Static' (Fadi, 2009). Apparently, even though Arabic language has some vowels, students mostly confuse the English vowels 'a', 'o', and 'e' at the endings of the words.

The previous points represent some of the major problems that the majority of Arab learners face in spelling English. Although many studies have been conducted to investigate these problems, little has been said about the solutions or ways to overcome these difficulties.

Therefore, in order to better understand the extent to which these sources of spelling mistakes can influence Saudi young learners' writings, a small experiment was carried out in a Saudi school at Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK. Twenty students participated in the experiment; they were randomly selected from different classes and their ages between 5 and 10 years. All the participants lived in the UK for at least one year. They were dictated five words (i.e. sun, school, cat, pig, and horse). It was noticed that the word 'school' was written "skol", by younger participants and "scool" by the older ones but three participants spelled it right. Also, all the participants except two omitted the final 'e' in the word 'horse' as well as the letter 'r', so, the word 'horse' was written as 'hos'. The word 'pig' spelled in four faulty ways such as (big, beg, dig, bi6) or it left out. Regarding the word 'sun' it was written in two ways (sun, son), and the word 'cat' as (kat). Surprisingly, none of the participants spelled all the words correctly and none spelled the word 'pig' perfectly. Yet, two skilled participants spelled four correct words. All participants have problems in

recognising the letter 'P' which does not exist in Arabic; they substituted it with 'b' or 'd'. In addition, the hidden consonant 'h' in 'school' was not recognized by the majority of the participants. According to this brief analysis and based on my experience as a learner and teacher of English, it can be said that most Saudi students seem to be poor in phonology knowledge in addition to their lack of the orthographic awareness.

Suggestions to improve the spelling skill for Arab learners

Learners need to understand a variety of strategies in order to internalize them and use them in producing correct spelling. Many young learners consider their teachers the predominant persons who have all the knowledge and ability. Therefore, teachers hold the main responsibility and they need to be trained enough to teach the English spelling rules and conventions quite successfully.

Topping (1995) recommends the *Ten Steps for Cued Spelling* technique. This technique is based on the idea that the learner chooses a word and the teacher checks the correct spelling. Then, the teacher reads the chosen word aloud and the student reads it afterward. The student, after that, chooses cues and says cues with the teacher loudly. The student alone says cues and the teacher writes it. After that, both of them repeat the previous step and the student says cues aloud, writes the word and reads it as a final step. The teacher's role in this technique, according to Topping (1995), is to encourage and praise the students to produce the correct word; yet, to stop them if there is a mistake.

Topping (1995) suggests another technique which is the mnemonic strategy, a memory aid that helps people remember things. Some ways are to remember the logical rules of spelling e.g. 'I' before 'e' except after 'c', visualize the words by making pictures in mind, fronts and backs as English contains many words that has the same start and finish. Additionally, shrink and grow technique helps remembering short difficult bit, e.g. the word 'ghost', can be remembered by the sentence 'ghosts hate orange, sausages, tea' (Topping, 1995, p. 169). However, this technique may make the job even harder, so it should be used just with the most difficult words.

Further suggestions have been proposed for teachers to help them improve their learners' spellings. Kourke (1985, p. 3) mentions that teachers can pinpoint and alleviate their learners' spelling problems by "...focussing on particular graphemes or patterns that cause problems". He stresses the necessity of drawing the learners' attentions to the most plausible source of misspellings and providing them with examples for the most common misspelled words. Jones (1998), also, posits a number of suggestions and guidelines to help learners improve their spelling abilities. She claims that practicing is a powerful tool that helps to spell correctly; yet, not to practice more than three or four new words at a time. Then, reviewing and using the practiced words by saying them into short phrases or recording them on a tape.

Conclusion

Learning spelling is a complex process that has been considered an appendage stage in the writing development. Spelling is a crucial area of language which has further implications on learners and their level of knowledge. However, it has been widely admitted that

spelling causes serious difficulties for all learners including native speakers. This problem exaggerates with Arab learners of English especially the younger ones.

Therefore, this paper has aimed to illustrate this important aspect. It briefly described why spelling matters and provided some approaches to spelling. Then, some problems that often influence most Arab learners' writing and that cause most of their spelling errors were provided. It was presented that many spelling errors stem from a lack of phonological and orthographic knowledge. Therefore, a number of suggestions have been stated to improve learners' spelling. The main responsibility is placed on the teachers; they need to be aware of the importance of spelling in developing the learners' writings. So, they have to adopt different strategies and techniques in order to examine the most effective one. In addition, students have to focus on this aspect of language and try to develop their spelling skills by practicing and revising the acquired words; they, also, need to know the different systems of the two languages in order to cope with their difficulties.

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