

Orthographical Difficulties Faced by Iraqi English Learners at the Advanced Level: A Remedial Study

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Abstract

The present research aims at shedding some light on the 4th year, English Department, College of Education students' weakness in English spelling mastery. It is based on the hypothesis that 4th year students face orthographical difficulties even with the most frequently used key words of the various courses they study. The results of the study prove this hypothesis to be valid.

الخلاصة :

يهدف البحث الحالي الى تسليط بعض الضوء على ضعف طلبة المرحلة الرابعة في أقسام اللغة الانجليزية في كليات التربية في إتقان التهجئة الانجليزية. يفترض الباحثان أن الطلبة يواجهون صعوبات كتابية حتى مع أكثر الكلمات المفتاحية تكراراً في المواضيع الدراسية المختلفة. وتوصلت الدراسة الى صحة الفرضية التي قام عليها البحث.

Preliminaries

This study intends to provide empirical data verifying the theoretical assertions that EFL learners mostly produce 'incorrect' and 'unnatural' words and word combinations . The need for studies of EFL linguistic and pragmatic errors evolve from the fact that EFL learners' lexical errors have not been given a lot of attention (Mahmoud,2005).

The analysis of spelling errors may show the problems faced by EFL learners and reasons of these problems . It may also help EFL teachers find a suitable way of considering them in their EFL course books.

The present study aims at adding one more attempt to the studies in the field of lexis in general by trying to identify,analyze,and classify the spelling errors committed by Iraqi EFL advanced learners.

Hypotheses

By taking a randomly selected 30, 4th stage students sample as one representing Iraqi EFL advanced learners , the study tries to verify the following hypotheses:

1-Iraqi EFL advanced learners do not have perfect or adequate mastery of the English spelling.

2-There are no clear or significant gender differences in this linguistic aspect concerning the superiority of either gender over the other.

3-The extensive use of the board on the part of the teacher affects learners' spelling positively by providing an additional visual input of the words to be mastered.

4-The nature of the course (linguistic &literary) does not affect spelling mastery.

5-Familiarity of the word on the part of the learners facilitates its learning ,i.e. the spelling of familiar words is easier to master ,even though they are difficult in other aspects: pronunciation and syllabification.

6-Monosyllabic or straightforward syllabificated words are relatively easy to master in terms of spelling.

7-The existence of diphthongs ,triphthongs ,or vowels represented by more than one letter in a word makes mastering its spelling a difficult task.

Orthography and Writing

As a fact , the advanced learners of EFL have a relatively large stock of vocabulary items (from their native language) motivating an interlingual transfer on the assumption that it is

very easy to find the EFL equivalents of the Arabic lexical items(Mahmoud, 2005).

Although a superficial test of spelling errors may show that they are random ,the closer study of the spelling errors of individuals reveals that they have a "pattern". Spelling errors are often idiosyncratic ,but there is a noticeable consistency in the kinds of errors produced. Most spelling errors are not only consistent , they are also systematic because they reveal the existence of an underlying logical, though incorrect, reasoning.

Habit pattern errors, skill based errors, over learned errors , habit intrusion errors , and recurrent errors or expert errors are among the most common of all error forms. Learned errors are shown in the person's writing where an automated skill ,or behavioral routines are involved e.g. in driving a car, in sport, in working with the computer, in spelling, etc. The wide prevalence of learned ,i.e. consistent or habitual errors has serious implications for corrective attempts because such errors resist correction. Of course, the failure to achieve rapid and permanent habit retaining and the unlearning of knowledge and behaviour is highly problematic in learning a language.

Spelling and Pronunciation

It is believed that modern English is chaotic, an idea which Pyles and Algeo refuse by saying that "there is more consistency [in the English spelling system] than is realized"(Pyles and Algeo,1968:72).On a previous page, they refer to the confusion some people make of speech with writing , the graphic symbolization of speech. They state that this confusion has given rise to many mistaken notions. One is that "if English spelling were to be reformed,.....the language itself would be vastly improved, and furthermore ,foreigners would have comparatively little difficulty in learning it"(Pyles and

Algeo,1968:3). Another instance of the above mentioned confusion is the notion of many educated people "who fancy that English words should be pronounced as they are written" (Pyles and Algeo,1968:3).

English is basically a mixture of two languages :German and French. The mixing process started in 1066 (Fennelly, 2004:1).This mixture of the two languages was so beneficial in terms of the number of vocabulary items the new language obtained. Yet , it has been a major cause of the extreme complexity ,not to say confusion, of English spelling. English spelling is so irregular and so unpredictable that native learners are obliged to learn almost every word individually. As a result, spelling can constitute an actual barrier to learning (Fennelly , 2004:1).

Unfortunately, there are far more sounds in English than can be covered with the 26 letters of the Alphabet .As a result, many of the letters have to do a duty of more than one sound. Brown(2006:1) notes that non-native speakers have greater difficulties than native speakers in spelling English. He draws a distinction between occasionally made misspellings and consistently committed ones. The former, he adds, may occur as a result of inattention, fatigue, pressure of time, etc., while the latter may occur due to: 1- lack of knowledge of the correct spelling of a word; 2- being unsure between alternative possibilities or 3- being convinced that the word is spelt in some way other than its correct form. Occasionally made misspellings are called 'slips of the pen'(Hotopf,1980 in Brown,2006:1).

Avoiding Spelling Errors

The foreign learner's language is characterized , in most cases, by linguistically incorrect and inappropriate forms and expressions (Mahmoud, 2005). Of course ,the error is labelled when it results from a lack of competence in the language. In addition to linguistic and pragmatic deviations, an interlanguage may exhibit certain forms that are linguistically and

pragmatically correct but still sound 'unnatural' or 'strange' (see Bridges, 1990; Emery,1987; and Swan,1995).Lennon(1991:182) defines **error** as "a linguistic form.....which, in the same context, would in all likelihood not be produced by the learner's native speaker counterpart".

Spelling is a challenge .We all make mistakes when attempting to learn spelling. The process of skill development ,i.e., learning something new, involves making errors. Some of spelling errors are random and a result of the memory lapses or other reasons such as carelessness, fatigue, etc. Such errors seem to occur occasionally and are usually self-detected and self-corrected. Many spelling errors, however, are not random or careless but under error analysis appear to follow a pattern. They are consistent and systematic errors that, through repetition , have become learned, habitual, and extremely resistant to extinction. Learned spelling errors ,like all habit patterns, are produced automatically without conscious control and are for the most part no longer self-detected or self- corrected by the individual. In some cases, consistency of spelling errors in human writing seems to be the rule rather than the exception.

Some learners learn to do things wrongly and such a learned error develops to be an autonomous stage of performance, and thereby it will be no longer under the control of the learner. When a change overtakes the learner, then he will suddenly find himself doing things incorrectly. As a fact, the learner ,in most cases, repeats the wrong spelling of a word. Thereby, he is used to learn doing it wrong before knowing it. It is very hard for the learner to get rid of his learned error, because s/he is instinctively the prisoner of habit. Learned spelling errors are considered as the most common of all error forms and the most difficult to eradicate. The universal and extreme practical difficulty in eliminating learned ,automated errors has led to the belief that eradication attempts should be abandoned in favour of controlling or minimizing their consequences".

Vocabulary Learning and Teaching

Before the 1980s, linguistic theory had paid little attention to vocabulary learning; it was taken to be a simple associative process between word form and word meaning. And that was a view which language teachers and applied language researchers generally agreed to (see Nation, 2001 as cited in Kaur, 2005:12; and Wilkins, 1972:100-133). However, with the emergence of the notional and communicative approaches of the late 1970s and early 1980s, this attitude began to change. In an answer to the following question: "Should vocabulary be taught?", specialists began to give a positive 'yes' (see Nation 1990 as cited in Kaur, 2005:13). Nation adds that vocabulary teaching should be based on "good understanding of the way of dealing with vocabulary", this is first, and 'the principles behind it,' this is second, and 'the theoretical and experimental justification' for teaching it, this is last.

With this realization of the role of vocabulary in language learning, the new questions that attracted the attention of specialists were first: how to go about teaching vocabulary?, and second: what it includes to teach vocabulary?. Researchers on the first question proved that generally words need to be taught in contexts because it is in context, rather than in isolation, that words work (Waring, 2001). Yet, 'rote' learning of words (memorization of lists of words) may be quite rewarding in the early stages of second or foreign learning since it provides the language learners with a 'start up' repertoire necessary to facilitate the language learning in general (see Allen, 1983; Nation, 1990, 2001; and Waring, 2001). By context is meant the various relationships, including collocation and families, in which words are involved.

As far as the second question is concerned, Nation (1990) maintains that vocabulary learning embraces "a list of different kinds of knowledge". This list includes: (i) the meaning(s) of the word; (ii) the written form of the word; (iii) the spoken form of the word; (iv) the grammatical behaviour of the word; (v) the collocations of the word; (vi) the register of the word; (vii) the associations of the word; and (viii) the frequency of the word (as cited in Kaur, 2005:22). Waring (2001) states that word learning takes two stages: the first is when learners make connection

between meaning and form and 'form' involves spelling and pronunciation ; the second is when learners realize when and when not to use the word and its relationships, shades of meaning, and so on(as cited in Kaur,2005:19). It is the first stage with which the present research is concerned.

The Test

The following pages are devoted to the practical part of the research. It is based on a test a description of which is given below, followed by the results and their discussion.

Description and Administration

To check for the spelling difficulties faced by Iraqi advanced learners of English as a foreign language ,a sample of thirty commonly used key words in six courses was chosen out of a bigger sample of 60 keywords which were referred to by the lecturers of these six courses. The teachers were asked to write down a list of ten words they think are the most important and most frequently used in their courses. Beside the criteria of importance and frequency ,two other factors were taken into consideration. The first is that of the difference of literary from linguistic courses; three of the courses are literary: **poetry, novel, and drama** .And the other three are linguistic courses :**grammar, linguistics, and testing**. The other factor is the use of the board within the class. Three of the teachers of the courses, included in the test, asserted their extensive use of the board during their teaching ; while the other three referred to a lesser dependence on writing on the board i.e., their emphasis is on oral explanation and discussion. The first group includes poetry, drama, and grammar; while the other group includes novel, testing, and linguistics.

The test was given to a sample of 20 fourth year students of English in the college of Education in the 2nd semester of the academic year 2007-2008. The sample of the testees is a representative sample that is chosen at random; no specific characteristics such as level or intelligence were depended on in

the selection of the testees. The only factor that mattered was only their being fourth year students of English.

The spelling test was given to the students in about thirty minutes. They were asked to write down the words read to them by the examiner . The sequence of the words was that a word of course 1 is followed by a word of course 2 ,followed by a word of course 3 up to course 6. This was repeated five times to get a list of thirty words. All of the students completed the required task, i.e., all of them gave the examiner a list of thirty words.

Results and Discussion

The dictation test of the thirty key-word items used in this study proves that fourth year English students' performance was anything but good. Out of the overall 900 items, only 463 were correct and this makes a percentage of 51.44% which is quite disappointing ,not to forget that we are talking about fourth year EFL learners. This is first-and the words of the test are key-word items- this is second. Table.1 below shows the overall performance of the fourth year students in the test.

Table.1 shows that there is no clear gender difference in spelling mastery; the difference in the number of correct male and female correct items is only (5) out of 450 items which is very far from being significant.

Tables .2 and.3 below are made to find out the difference between much-write and little-write courses: Grammar, Poetry, and Drama's teachers report their extensive use of the blackboard during teaching. This supposedly gives students a considerable chance to deal with vocabulary items(among which ,of course, are key- word items under study) visually in addition to hearing them spoken orally by the teachers. That is to say, the chance to learn key-word items in much – write courses is greater than the other courses.

The other group of courses included in the study is: Linguistics, Novel, and Testing. The teachers of these three courses refer to their little use of the board during teaching. This situation means lesser opportunity on the part of learners to learn the spelling of new words in general and key- word items in particular.

In response to the write-much courses, learners scored 219 correct answers out of 450. And this gives a percentage of 48.66%, whereas the correct responses in the write - little courses were 244 out of 450 and this gives a percentage of 54.22%. This result is, of course , surprising; while one would expect more exposure to any linguistic aspect would lead to better mastery, we find that the case is the opposite here! However, the 5.56%(54.22%-48.66%) is barely a significant difference , this is not quite difficult to justify. Learning the vocabulary whose spelling and meaning is readily given on the board by the teacher would require less effort and thus shallow processing in the minds of the learners. On the other hand, learners would pay greater effort and hence deeper processing when they are left to learn the new word on their own, and this is especially the case when learners fear their teachers' accuracy when correcting their assignments and test answer sheets.

Table (1) Students' Performance on the Spelling Test

TEST ITEM		Males		Females		Total	
		Co.	Inc.	Co.	Inc.	Co.	Inc.
1	Practicality	7	8	12	3	19	11
2	Conflict	8	7	9	6	17	13
3	Clause	8	7	9	6	17	13
4	Portray	8	7	4	11	12	18
5	Linguistics	12	3	11	4	23	7
6	Modernism	4	11	4	11	8	22
7	Proficiency	2	13	1	14	3	27
8	Married Life	11	4	13	2	24	6
9	Inadequate	11	4	12	3	23	7
10	Absurd	7	8	3	12	10	20
11	Language	13	2	15	0	28	2
12	Contemplation	7	8	6	9	13	17
13	Multiple- Choice	5	10	6	9	11	19
14	Psychological	6	9	8	7	14	16
15	Complement	15	0	15	0	30	0
16	Signify	9	6	11	4	20	10

17	Acquisition	30	12	6	9	9	21
18	Revolution	4	11	5	10	9	21
19	Assessment	10	5	9	6	19	11
20	Experience	5	10	6	9	11	19
21	Agentive	7	8	8	7	15	15
22	Arouse	12	3	5	10	17	13
23	Pragmatics	10	5	10	5	20	10
24	Heroism	5	10	6	9	11	19
25	Reliability	2	13	2	13	4	26
26	Influence	7	8	7	8	14	16
27	Interrogative	4	11	4	11	8	22
28	Character	8	7	11	4	19	11
29	Morphology	14	1	14	1	28	2
30	Vorticism	5	10	2	13	7	23
Total		229	221	234	216	463	437

Table (2) Students' Performance on Write-Much Courses (Grammar, Poetry, and Drama)

Course	Item	Males		Females		Total	
		Co.	Inc.	Co.	Inc.	Co.	Inc.
Grammar	Clause	8	7	9	6	17	13
	Independent	11	4	13	2	24	6
	Complement	15	0	15	0	30	0
	Agentive	7	8	8	7	15	15
	Interrogative	4	11	4	11	8	22
Poetry	Modernism	4	11	4	11	8	22
	Contemplation	7	8	6	9	13	17
	Revolution	4	11	5	10	9	21
	Heroism	5	10	6	9	11	19
	Vorticism	5	10	2	13	7	23
Drama	Poetry	8	7	4	11	12	18
	Absurd	7	8	2	13	9	21
	Signify	9	6	11	4	20	10
	Arouse	12	3	5	10	17	13
	Character	8	7	11	4	19	11
Total		114	111	105	120	219	231

**3) Students' Performance on Write- Little Courses Table
(Linguistics, Novel, and Testing)**

Course	Item	Males		Females		Total	
		Co.	Inc.	Co.	Inc.	Co.	Inc.
Linguistics	Linguistics	12	3	11	4	23	7
	Language	13	2	15	0	28	2
	Acquisition	3	12	6	9	9	21
	Pragmatics	10	5	10	5	20	10
	Morphology	14	1	14	1	28	2
Novel	Conflict	8	7	9	6	17	13
	Married Life	11	4	13	2	24	6
	Psychological	6	9	8	7	14	16
	Experience	5	10	6	9	11	19
	Influence	7	8	7	8	14	16
Testing	Practicality	7	8	12	3	19	11
	Proficiency	2	13	1	14	3	27
	Multiple-Choice	5	10	6	9	11	19
	Assessment	10	5	9	6	19	11
	Reliability	2	13	2	13	4	26
Total		115	110	129	96	244	206

A glance at tables(4) and(5) below gives an indication of a considerable effect for course type on vocabulary-spelling mastery. The total number of correct responses in linguistic courses is (258)in comparison with (192) incorrect ones, whereas it is on(205)in comparison with (245)incorrect ones in the case of literary courses. A difference of(53)(i.e.,258-205)makes a percentage of 9%which is far from being neglectable. This spelling mastery difference to the benefit of linguistic courses was expected since teachers of such courses need to concentrate on the metalinguistic terms which are often necessary in the explanation of such course materials. Besides , the familiarity on the part of the language learners with these terms would certainly facilitate the mastery of the spelling of the key words used below.

Table(4) Students' Performance On Linguistic Courses

Course	Item	Males		Females		Total	
		Co.	Inc.	Co.	Inc.	Co.	Inc.
Grammar	Clause	8	7	9	6	17	13
	Independent	11	4	13	2	24	6
	Complement	15	0	15	0	30	0
	Agentive	7	8	8	7	15	15
	Interrogative	4	11	4	11	8	22
Linguistics	Linguistics	12	3	11	4	23	7
	Language	13	2	15	0	28	2
	Acquisition	3	12	6	9	9	21
	Pragmatics	10	5	10	5	20	10
	Morphology	14	1	14	1	28	2
Testing	Practicality	7	8	12	3	19	11
	Proficiency	2	13	1	14	3	27
	Multiple-choice	5	10	6	9	11	19
	Assessment	10	5	9	6	19	11
	Reliability	2	13	2	13	4	26
Total		123	102	135	90	258	192

On the other hand, a scrutinizing investigation of all the key word items in hand would lead to some points concerning the easiness or difficulty with which students learn such vocabulary items. The following are some of the observations we have:

1- Familiarity of the word on the part of the learners facilitates its learning ; familiar words such as 'Language','Linguistics',and 'Morphology' were some of the easiest words for the learners, whereas some words which learners came across only in the fourth stage such as 'Modernism',' Proficiency', and 'Vorticism' were difficult to learn.

2- Words of straightforward pronunciation and syllabification such as 'Independent', 'Complement' and 'Pragmatics' were relatively easy to learn , whereas words with two letter vowels or

consonant clusters such as 'Proficiency', 'Experience', and 'Multiple-choice' were difficult to learn.

3- Words that contain diphthongs and triphthongs , though quite familiar ,were difficult to learn, check for example 'Reliability' and 'Heroism'.

Table(5) Students' Performance On Literary Courses

Course	Item	Males		Females		Total	
		Co.	Inc.	Co.	Inc.	Co.	Inc.
Novel	conflict	8	7	9	6	17	13
	Married life	11	4	13	2	24	6
	Psychological	6	9	8	7	14	16
	experience	5	10	6	9	11	19
	influence	7	8	7	8	14	16
Drama	portray	8	7	4	11	12	18
	absurd	7	8	2	13	9	21
	signify	9	6	11	4	20	10
	arouse	12	3	5	10	17	13
	character	8	7	11	4	19	11
Poetry	modernism	4	11	4	11	8	22
	contemplation	7	8	6	9	13	17
	revolution	4	11	5	10	9	21
	heroism	5	10	6	9	11	19
	vorticism	5	10	2	13	7	23
Total		106	119	99	126	205	245

Conclusions and Suggestions

The present research has added some new insights in the area of vocabulary learning. It supplies empirical data in an area of difficulty in learning English as a foreign language. The hypotheses adopted in the present study are all proved except for that concerning the use of the board ; the hypothesis of the positive effect of extensive use of the board is refuted (see the previous section).

As previously mentioned, it is a generally on view that non-native learners of any language commit much more spelling mistakes than native learners .In addition, the complex nature of the English language adds another source of difficulty (see section **Spelling and Pronunciation**).This of course will urge specialists in language teaching to look for solutions. However, no one can speak of a magical solution to this or, in fact, any other linguistic difficulty. Yet , we may think of the following suggestions in addition to greater exposure to the target language through reading and listening :

1-Teachers try a direct spelling teaching and dictation drilling once a week at least. When the teacher estimates that his/her students' mastery has reached an acceptable level, he/she may stop this activity.

2-Teachers need, from time to time, to attempt simplified explanation to the causes of spelling difficulties and try to bring the learners' attention to as many strategies for learning vocabulary as possible.

3-Teachers of any language course can prepare glossaries of the words they expect to be used often in their courses. Such glossaries may be the outcome of specialized studies that may be carried out for each course separately.

4-Finally, we would like to draw the attention ,of those who are in charge of the syllabi of the English language departments, to the lack of a course in the area of spelling .Such a course cannot ,practically speaking, be part of any of the available courses;i.e., a new course needs to be added to cover this important area of language learning.

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