

Spelling Errors in English Writing Committed by English-Major Students at BAU

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Abstract

Error Analysis is an essential part of linguistic analysis that sheds light on errors committed by second language learners. This study aims at investigating spelling errors committed by English-Major students at BAU. The participants in the present study were 65 students. The participants' essays in "technical writing" course were used to be the data of the study. Next, data were analyzed based on Cook's classification of spelling errors. The results of the study show four types of spelling errors, substitution errors, insertion errors, omission errors and transposition errors. In addition, results indicate that the difference between English and Arabic writing system is one of the major causes for students' errors. Results are hopefully useful information in Error Analysis studies and other related areas.

Keywords: Writing, Omission errors, Substitution errors, Insertion errors, Transposition errors

1. Introduction

Nowadays, it is a recognized fact that English is the most widely used language in the world, including Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (HKJ) where English is the official foreign language in the country. The majority of Jordanian Arabic speakers suffer while learning English language because the public school system, house, and street lack the opportunity of practicing and extensively using this foreign language until the learners have become undergraduate students (reference is needed). In general, when learning a new language there are mainly four skills that the learners have to master in parallel during the learning process. These basic skills are listening, writing, reading, and speaking. For example, poor dictation skills will be clearly tangible while answering an essay-type question because of being unable to express thoughts without too many spelling errors. Hence, the first step in learning a new language is to be familiar with the alphabet where the learner should be able to write and spell the characters flawlessly. Once learners have successfully fulfilled this prerequisite, the journey of mastering why the letter 'k' in "knee" is silent begins (reference is needed). "Among the grammatical errors made by writers, spelling error occupies the most prominent position, no matter in the writers of native speakers or language learners" (Leacock et al., 2002, p.15-17). Therefore, error analysis is considered as an essential part of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors committed by students. Consequently, this study aims to analyze the spelling errors that are committed by English-major students at Al Balqa Applied University (henceforth, BAU).

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new language is to be familiar with the alphabet where the learner should be able to write and spell the characters flawlessly. Once learners have successfully fulfilled this prerequisite, the journey of mastering why the letter 'k' in "know" is silent starts. Leacock and Claudia (2002, p.15-17) stated, "Among the grammatical errors made by writers, spelling error occupies the most prominent position, no matter in the writers of native speakers or language learners." Therefore, error analysis is an essential part of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors committed by students. Consequently, this study aims to analyze the spelling errors that are committed by English-major students at Al-Balqa Applied University (henceforth, BAU).

2. Literature Review

A review of literature showed that the four primary English skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) have many studies, where the spelling errors that Arab university students have when learning English as a foreign language, reveal a lack of research. In the present study, the researcher has chosen a variety of literature to serve as a benchmark for this study.

Cook (1992), examined the extent to which L2 users' knowledge of sound/letter rules and of individual visual items reflects their different L1 systems of spelling and pronunciation. Hence, the researcher compared adult L2 learners and adult and children native speakers. Results revealed that, on average, a fifteen-year-old native speaker's spelling errors are similar in number to those of an adult L2 learner. The researcher concluded that spelling is so important due to its "social overtones".

In Canadian context, Figueredo and Varnhagen (2004) compared the difference in spelling errors and correction among Canadian students. The participants of the study included 16 males and 37 females. The researchers used two essays written by the university students and participants were given to read those essays to identify spelling errors. Next, the researchers classified the spelling errors into three types: phonological, orthographic, and morphological. Results revealed that the participants made more phonological errors compared to orthographic and morphological errors.

In another study, He and Wang (2009) to investigate spelling errors among two Chinese EFL beginner young learners for 14 months. Results showed that spelling errors occurred as a result of using 10 name-based letters and 20 sound-based letters. Additionally, errors occur with EFL writers who cannot grasp the complexity of vowels and consonants in the English spelling system.

In Singapore context, Dixon, Zhao, and Joshi (2010) examined the first language (L1) influence on 285 bilingual children's spelling performance in their second language (L2). In general, results showed a statistically significant effect of L1 on conventional spelling but not on phonological spelling, controlling for reading proficiency. That is, the Chinese (morphosyllabic) group not only scored higher than the Malay (alphabetic) and Tamil (syllabic) groups overall, but also made more real-word substitution and transposition errors.

In Arabic context, Al-Jabri (2006) investigated the spelling errors of 114 Omani fifth-grade students in two rural schools in Oman. Data were collected from spelling tests on 10 words. Results revealed that the most frequent errors committed were errors of omission and substitution, while the errors of transposition and insertion were less frequent.

Recently, Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, and Gaudel (2015) examined the types of spelling errors in English composition on 122 EFL undergraduate students at the University of Ha'il in Saudi Arabia. Data were collected through writing tasks of 53 males and 69 females in the preparatory year. The findings indicated that omission errors are considered the highest among students. And the majority of spelling errors are centralized around wrong use of vowels and pronunciation. The findings indicated that spelling errors occur as a result of anomalies existing in L2 as well as L1 interference.

To sum up, it is clear that many studies have been conducted on spelling errors in different contexts such as Canadian, Chinese, Singapore, and Arabs. It also can be seen from the literature that spelling errors has not been studied sufficiently in Arabic context. Specifically, to the researcher's best knowledge, there has been no investigation of spelling errors conducted on Jordanian EFL learners. Therefore, it would be useful to examine spelling errors committed by English-major students at BAU that would contribute in the field of error analysis.

3. Research questions

This study aims at investigating the spelling errors committed by English-major students at BAU. Hence, the study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. What are the spelling errors committed by the English major students at BAU?
2. Why do English major students commit spelling errors?

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

The participants to the present study included 65 English-Major Students at BAU's main campus located in As-

Salt, Jordan. The participants' age range from 18-22 years old. They were all enrolled in 'Technical Writing' course of the academic year 2016/2017.

4.2. Instruments

The instruments of the present study include written samples. In other words, 65 essays were used to be the data of the study. These essays were the students' writing homeworks for the academic course "technical writing". The topics in these writings are diverse and the students do not know their essays will be samples of a research. Therefore, they are all free productions that provide the best research materials.

4.3. Data Analysis

Data were mainly analyzed based on the type of spelling errors and were categorized by three coders based on Cook's (1999) classification of spelling errors. Cook proposed four types of spelling errors as the following: (1) Insertion: to add one letter as in 'phictures' for 'pictures', (2) Omission: to delete one letter, as in 'pleas' for 'please', (3) Substitution: to replace one letter, as in 'accident' for 'accident', and (4) Transposition: two adjacent letters transposed, as in 'firend' for 'friend'. (Omission, Substitution, Insertion, and Transposition).

Three trained coders coded the data to make sure that the spelling errors match the data in light of the classification established by Cook (1999). The coders were graduate students majoring in Applied Linguistics and are well-trained in the analysis of spelling errors. When all data were coded according to the type of spelling errors at a high level of reliability was achieved, a descriptive statistic were used to analyze the data. In other words, frequencies and percentage of spelling errors committed by the participants were calculated.

5. Results and Discussion

This section offers the results of the study and an analysis of spelling errors most frequently committed by 65 English major students at BAU main campus. The researcher then examines each error type (omission, substitution, insertion, and transposition) individually in addition to the main sources of errors. The study is mainly analyzed based on the classification of cook (1999), who studied spelling errors committed by L2 students. Spelling errors were categorized according to OSIT (Omission, Substitution, Insertion, and Transposition).

Table 1: Frequency of errors based on OSIT/English major students – BAU

Type of error	Frequency	Percentages
Substitution	31	33.70%
Insertion	30	32.61%
Omission	23	25.00%
Transposition	8	8.70%
Total	92	100%

Table 1 clearly depicts that out of 92 errors found in total, the errors of substitution present the highest figure with a percentage of 33.70% (31 errors), followed by errors of insertion with a percentage of 32.61% (30 errors). In this study, errors of omission and transportation, however, occurred less frequently than the first two types of errors, with percentage of 25.00% (23) and 8.70% (8), respectively. The frequency of transposition errors found in this study is nearly twice as with Cook (1999), who investigated errors made by L2 students, where writing samples from 375 students with diverse first languages were reviewed, including Arabic.

5.1. Substitution Errors

As depicted in table 1, the errors of substitution were the most frequent errors in the samples produced by the participants. The researcher found that consonants were clearly a major source of difficulty because silent letters lack sound letter correspondence relationship, and they were mainly related to pronunciation. This is in accordance with Cook (1999) who found that a high percentage of vowel substitution errors and pronunciation errors, with the majority of errors corresponding to Arab students' pronunciation.

For example, In writing 'dear', the participant's choice of [ee] instead of [ea], a bound morpheme, seems closely related to the audible pronunciation of the word. The same applies for substituting [c] with [s] in 'sheaper' for 'cheaper' and 'nesassry' for 'necessary' reflects the errors that occur as a result of the lack of systematic rule to represent the /s/ consonant with the [s] or [c] phonemes. This is clearly an indication of failure in recognizing English words that have multiple correspondences between sounds and letters that represent those sounds underlines these errors.

Similarly, /tʃ/ silent letter is mostly represented by the [tu] or [ch]. The participant's decision to substitute [u] with [ch] in 'advenchar' for 'adventure' seems a substitution error; but it might also be a product of pronunciation reflection of 'adventure' which can be represented by taking [u] out. Furthermore, representing 'tried' with 'tryed' (both substitution and omission errors) and 'cilebrat' for 'celebrate' seems to be the result of wrong pronunciation. Sterling (1983) underlines such errors as 'not incorrect spellings of the correct sounds but

rather correct spelling of incorrect sounds' (p. 359).

Regarding omission errors, the problem of invented spelling appeared back in the substitution errors as well. Such examples are 'disstroy' for 'destroy', 'bizy' for 'busy', 'prosisis' for 'processes', 'fortin' for 'fourteen'. These results in accordance with those reported by He and Wang (2009) who studied four Taiwan Mandarin children that were taught by native English speakers to find that the children repeatedly invented spellings. In addition, other substitution errors included 'thing' for 'think', 'issuas' for 'issues', and 'because' for 'becaue'.

5.2. Insertion Errors

This type of errors mainly appeared because of the addition of extra letters in a word. These errors would be a result of the lack of knowledge as English is not a phonetic language. For instance, students tend to write words the way they say it, such as: 'whay' for 'why', 'earley' for 'early' and 'pictures' for 'picturs' so they ended up with words that are misspelled phonetically.

Another source of errors could be attributed to the students' misuse of some grammatical rules. For example, some students write 'using' instead of 'useing', 'takeing' instead of 'takeing', and 'leaveing' instead of 'leaveing' when adding -ing for these words (use, take, leave). To form grammatically correct words, students have to remove the final phoneme 'e' then adding -ing. In addition, Students tended to use regular patterns to form plurals or past tenses on words that would have irregular formation. For example, students used to write the past form of 'hear' as 'heared' instead of 'heard', 'drived' instead of 'drove' and 'meeted' for 'met'. Regarding the plural forms, they used to write the plural form of 'city' as 'citys' instead of 'cities' and 'mans' instead of 'men'.

5.2. Omission Errors

This study shows that the spelling pattern of the participants follows the pronunciation pattern, which is an indication of the strong correlation between English words articulation and the ways participants spelled these words. EFL students may associate and manipulate a variety of consonants and vowels combinations while forming words.

The early stage of spelling and writing for beginners heavily depends on their 'phonemic awareness and orthographic spelling knowledge' Kelman & Apel (2004: 57). The findings in this study correspond also with those reported by Aqel (1993) who states that the reason behind omission errors occurrence is mainly due to the distinction and discrepancy found between Arabic and English, in other words, English pronunciation and orthography. For example, students write plase instead of please, coffe instead of coffee, evry instead of every, studing instead of studying and chating instead of chatting

The most common form of omission errors is the phoneme [e] at the end of the words as in 'befor' for 'before', 'ignor' for 'ignore', 'decad' for 'decade', and 'expir' for 'expire'. This is caused by the poor phonological awareness and the fact that Arabic is written the way it is articulated, making it difficult for the participants to develop relationships between letters and sounds. The potential for omission errors in forming accurate spellings in the English language system, which is more complex due to the lack of patterns in articulation and spelling.

Examining the last error (chating - for chatting), the instance of omitting a consonant [t] explains why participants were confused with -ing rules: words ending in C-V-C and one syllable words. The verb "chat" consists of short vowel followed by one consonant so we should double the last consonant before adding -ing.

5.4. Transposition Errors

As can be noted in the table above, errors of transposition, or miss ordering, had taken place of the least frequently noticeable errors. Depending on this fact, transposition errors should not be neglected since the purpose of this study is to enhance the students' performance in English writing. As can be noted in the table above, errors of transposition, or miss ordering, had taken place of the least frequently noticeable errors. Depending on this fact, transposition errors should not be neglected since the purpose of this study is to enhance the students' performance in English writing. For instance, transposition errors as in 'dialy for 'daily', 'foucs for 'focus', and 'deid for 'died could be attributed to students' carelessness. This type of errors also are classified by Carney as analogy errors that students commit because of "confusion between elements of words" (1994, p. 84).

6. Conclusion

In general, the process of learning a second language is challenging where learners are expected to commit errors. Consequently, those who are interested in learning English should take into their consideration the fact the both Arabic and English language have completely different writing system. For instance, Arabic writing style starts from right to left whereas English writing style starts from left to right, this may cause confusion for the student.

In addition, the way we speak English differs from the way we write it; this is due to the fact the English is not a phonetic language while Arabic is. Accordingly, based on the results of this study, students committed spelling errors due to many factors such as the interference of students' first language. For example, the absence of some letters in Arabic phonological system such as /p/ and /v/ so students substitute these two letters with /b/ and /f/ that they have in their language as in *bunishment* for *punishment*. Students who learn English as a second language may suffer some difficulties with spelling. Consequently, focusing on how students spell and pronounce words could be the best solution for second language acquisition.

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