

# Orthographic Inconsistencies and Their Effect on the Written Text Clarity

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## Abstract

This study investigated the orthographic inconsistencies face Sudanese EFL learners and their effect on the written text clarity. Since the two spelling systems of both English and Arabic are quite different, it is expected that these learners will face this problem. The descriptive analytical method was adopted to carry out this study. A questionnaire was designed to include twenty five items administered to (17) teachers, besides a writing task distributed to (75) secondary schools students. The collected data was analyzed and interpreted statistically. The result of the analysis indicated that Sudanese learners made various spelling errors. This because there was no sufficient exposure to English language spelling. Another important point is that most teachers did not provide their students with the strategies of how to improve their spelling. Based on these results, the study recommends that the teachers should consider the correction of spelling errors as something decisive and should vary their teaching methods and techniques towards effective spelling strategies in use.

**Keywords:** Orthography, Inconsistency, Text clarity, EFL learners

## 1. Introduction

As a case for learners of English as a second or a foreign language, Sudanese learners are expected to face many difficulties in the process of learning English. Multiple errors are expected to be committed in different aspects of the language mainly in spelling. According to Corder (1981), any learner of English as a foreign language can find some dissimilarities between his mother tongue and English language. So any mistakes or errors they make are natural output result from the learning process. Hildreth (1962) and Brown (2000) support this view. No doubt that spelling errors cause miscellaneous problems in students' writings. These problems represent major obstacles for them through all their life school and after they leave school, or even when they join higher education or any fields of work. Smedley (1983) emphasizes that spelling errors have their negative influence on text clarity. They can widen the gap between the writer and the reader. It is clear that there is a complementary connection between spelling and reading, that is, good spellers are usually good readers and vice versa (Koda, 2005). This indicates that mastering the spelling skills has its effectiveness on developing learners' reading proficiency. From the researcher's long experience in teaching English, great numbers of Sudanese students are considered slow readers because there is no homogeneity between the written and the spoken language. Moreover, Bahloul (2007) adds that even native speakers face difficulties in becoming familiar with the spelling system of their language. Based on some researchers' views, different learners of English as a foreign language or second language will experience such obstacles in terms of spelling errors with their native languages (Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ruzic, (1983); Bahloul, (2007). Accordingly the major differences between Arabic and English have rooted several spelling problems. Swan and Smith (2001: 199) point out that "all aspects of writing in English cause major problems for Arabic speakers." This because the homogeneity between the written form and the spoken form in Arabic is regular but in English is irregular. An example for this irregularity is the letter (*a*) in words such as (*shall, call and take*) has three different utterances. Another example is "silent letters.", in Arabic, silent letters are seldom occur, but they are largely existed in English. As mentioned earlier, another area of excessive spelling errors is mother tongue interference. In Arabic, for instance, voiceless bilabial stop /p/ of English is not existed in this language and it is noticeable in Sudanese context, learners pronounce it as /b/ and spell it as /b/.

The researcher observes that Sudanese EFL students have difficulties with English spelling. Thus, this study is expected to have effective contribution by drawing the attention of teachers, syllabus designers and curriculum developers to the impact of spelling errors on written texts clarity. The study explores the significant role that spelling can play in conveying meaningful written texts. By investigating the orthographic difficulties encounter Sudanese EFL learners, this study aims at answering these questions:

1. To what extent does mother tongue interference affect Sudanese learners of English in terms of spelling mistakes?
2. What are the major obstacles face EFL learners in the spelling system?
3. What kinds of spelling errors do Sudanese learners usually commit when writing their assignments?
4. What strategies do teachers use to solve their students' spelling problems?

This study adopts the descriptive and analytical methods. Data will be collected by means of teachers' questionnaire. Moreover, the spelling errors will be identified and categorized according to their types. In addition, data will be analyzed and presented in tables.

## 2. Literature Review

In Sudanese context, learning and teaching of English involve all the essential skills. Writing is one of the most demanding areas of language learning and teaching. Spelling stands as the most basic aspect of writing and it creates difficult tasks such as misspell of words which result incoherence of sentences (Chandler-Olcott, 2001). Al-zuoud & Kabilan (2013) say that English spelling system yields several obstacles to Arab students. These obstacles have been justified to the variance of the orthographic system between Arabic and English. Brown (2011) emphasizes the importance of learning spelling as a basic element of writing and not to study it in a form of isolated words.

As taking place in one's native language spelling indicates the formation of words from single letters in a correct form (Hornby, 2000). This means the arrangement of these letters should be clear and concise and if not, it will fall the learners in what is so called spelling errors Al-Jarf (2010). Spelling errors can make problems in communication since they result from breaking down the rules or norms (Shaw, 1970). Any kind of learning is definitely accompanied with errors anticipated to different stages of education (Corder, 1967). Writing the spelling of English is apparently difficult which results from inconsistent pronunciation of many words (Cummings, 1988).

Sudanese learners usually mix up these inconsistencies that they do not write words as they are pronounced and some words have silent letters. These are the main reasons make students hesitant and commit spelling errors unintentionally. In order to help EFL learners become competent spellers, some procedures recommended by (Perfetti et al., 2002) which can be presented as follows: First, learners can divide the words that they need to learn their spelling into separate sounds and syllables. This enables them to relate the written and spoken forms of these words. Second, learners try to locate precisely whether a word includes a silent letter or whether a letter has a different sound in it. Third, learners focus on words meaning as isolated units and try to state the roots of these words and whether they include prefixes or suffixes. Fourth, it is important for the learners to investigate the historical background of these words. This will allow them to initiate relationship and similarity between these words.

When one learning a language, language skills should be mastered first. In doing so, a learner in his initial processes of learning should reshape a complete idea about the orthographic system of that language. In the case of English, Sudanese learners in general have real dilemma in structuring a connection between the pronunciation and orthography of words. Thus, they make terrible spelling mistakes even in advanced levels of education (Bahloul, 2007). Several researchers agree upon using wide range of reading materials in order to reinforce students' spelling skills. In addition diverse writing exercises can go in line with these reading materials to improve this essential skill which can be chosen from the students' textbooks (Asselin, 2002). These methods can enable the learners to spell the words well in different contexts with numerous pronunciation of some letters within these words. Furthermore, Fitzsimmons and Loomer (1978) suggest some strategies which practically can improve one's spelling ability to spell out new words correctly. They started their strategies with the correction process of the spelling errors that should be by the teacher himself. Then, they stressed that learners should be given a spelling test in the beginning of their study program. The goal of this test is to diagnose the areas of their spelling mistakes. They go further to emphasize the significance of assigning weekly lesson for teaching spelling only. They concluded that learners should learn words with their spelling in a sentence instead in a list. Templeton (1986) also presents these spelling strategies which can improve students' spelling as well. He recommends to pronounce out each new word gradually and then to highlight the part which can cause difficulty to learn its spelling later. In addition that he suggests to trace similarities between any two words or two family words with regard to their part of speech and the way they are pronounced.

It is known that in Arabic there is a correspondence between what is spoken and what is written. This means that there is a harmony between both orthographic and pronunciation systems in Arabic language. For this reason, Sudanese learners experience difficulty in vowels. For instance some learners replace (u) with (o) in a word like (fol) instead of (full), (c) with (s) in 'nise' for 'nice'. Sterling (1983) confirms that incorrect sounds produce incorrect spelling and vice versa. Furthermore, Bahloul (2007) mentions that even native speakers spend much time to learn the spelling system of their language. Another applied linguist is Hildreth (1962) says that spelling difficulties can notably affect the inconsistencies of English word structure. In brief, the chief reason of this irregularity is that no single word has one-to-one correspondence between its written and its pronunciation forms.

Several researchers indicate that learners of English make various spelling errors. The researcher will focus mainly on the errors that result from an exchange of a letter with another one. In addition to spelling errors that happen when learners remove a letter from a word. Other spelling errors take place from the addition of a letter to a word. The fourth type of spelling errors appears when learners displace two or more letters in a word (Cook, 1999). All these four types will be investigated. It is claimed that spelling in the Sudanese context has not been given the status that it merits. Thus, this study will demonstrate teachers' views in this regard. This demonstration will involve the methods and techniques that students use to produce a clear text which is free

from spelling mistakes. Additionally, the study will give some hints on how to assist students improve their writing skills in general and spelling skills in particular.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The population of this study includes English language teachers and students from Hasaheisia locality in Sudan. Seventeen secondary school teachers and seventy five secondary school students from the third class were selected randomly as a sample from the total population of secondary school teachers and students in this locality.

#### 3.2 Materials

Two tools were employed for data collection: a questionnaire and a written assignment. The questionnaire includes (25) items and was given to (17) English language teachers. The data was also collected through a writing task. The seventy five students were given three topics: 1- "Khartoum is the capital city of the Sudan" 2- "Sudan Independence Day" 3- "Gezira project is the backbone of Sudan economy". They were required to write a composition on one of these three mentioned subjects. The aim is to focus on the anticipated spelling errors that students might make and then to analyze the most frequently spelling errors committed by them.

#### 3.3 Procedure

The questionnaire and the written assignment are designed and used as tools to collect data for questions verification. The data obtained through the teachers' questionnaire was analyzed by using statistical procedures. Percentages are computed and tables are used to present the statistical information in a simple format. For the students' spelling errors, the classification and data analysis of them are based on what is presented earlier that the deletion of some letters, taking the place of a letter by another, inserting more letters, and changing the place of letters. Cook developed this classification of spelling errors in (1999). Thus, the researcher used it as a reliable instrument.

### 4. Discussion and Results

This part displays the analysis and discussion of the data that has been collected by means of a questionnaire to (17) teachers and a writing task distributed to (75) students. This section is also intended to answer the research questions against the results that have been obtained.

#### 4.1 The analysis of the teachers' questionnaire

Table 1. Descriptive Percentages of the Teachers' Response

Responses with Frequencies							
Item	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Cumulative percent
1	English language has inadequate spelling system.	50.0	29.0	5.0	10.0	6.0	100.0
2	Students should take frequent spelling tests to measure their achievement in spelling.	60.0	20.0	5.0	5.0	10.0	100.0
3	Textbooks include enough spelling activities.	5.0	6.0	2.0	32.0	55.0	100.0
4	Dictation helps students remember the correct spelling of words.	37.0	45.0	3.0	5.0	10.0	100.0
5	Students make spellings error as a reflection of their developmental stage in learning the language.	48.0	27.0	4.0	6.0	15.0	100.0
6	When students learn the spelling of a word, they should pronounce it correctly.	31.0	28.0	22.0	11.0	8.0	100.0
7	Spelling instruction should include activities of words analysis.	39.0	27.0	2.0	17.0	15.0	100.0

Responses with Frequencies							
Item	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Cumulative percent
8	Spelling is best taught when integrated with teaching writing.	22.0	28.0	24.0	7.0	19.0	100.0
9	Learner's misspellings because there is no homogeneity between letters and sounds.	41.0	23.0	10.0	12.0	14.0	100.0
10	I make use of a number of colors to teach spelling.	15.0	18.0	4.0	36.0	27.0	100.0
11	Developing students' writing mechanism helps improve their spelling skills.	43.0	22.0	11.0	17.0	7.0	100.0
12	Knowing the differences between vowels and consonants helps develop EFL students spelling.	34.0	22.0	12.0	14.0	18.0	100.0
13	Students avoid to spell out the new words.	33.0	21.0	3.0	17.0	26.0	100.0
14	Giving weekly spelling lists helps develop students' spelling.	23.0	40.0	4.0	17.0	16.0	100.0
15	Administering weekly tests helps develop students spelling.	18.0	21.0	1.0	33.0	27	100.0
16	Dissimilarities between English and Arabic represent the problematic area of spelling mistakes.	15.0	31.0	3.0	28.0	23.0	100.0
17	Weak readers are usually weak spellers.	21.0	25.0	8.0	24.0	22.0	100.0
18	Students poor listening proficiency is the cause of students' poor spelling.	13.0	12.0	7.0	24.0	44.0	100.0
19	Spelling error analysis improves students' spelling skill.	37.0	31.0	0.0	14.0	18.0	100.0
20	Providing students with effective spelling strategies will produce skillful spellers.	36.0	22.0	17.0	19.0	6.0	100.0
21	The use of spelling bees- and other fun activities helps develop students spelling.	33.0	27.0	9.0	13.0	18.0	100.0
22	Reading of magazines, newspapers journals is an effective way for students to relate writing to spelling.	22.0	40.0	10.0	11.0	17.0	100.0
23	Demonstrating the most difficult areas of spelling will reinforce students' spelling skills.	24.0	38.0	11.0	7.0	20.0	100.0
24	Vowel sounds are the main source of spelling mistakes.	16.0	42.0	21.0	8.0	13.0	100.0
25	The students' writing is difficult to understand because of the ill-spelt sentences in composition.	38.0	24.0	13.0	11.0	14.0	100.0

The first statement is presented as follows: "English language has inadequate spelling system" and to elicit the participants' responses, it is found that (79%) of them agree that English does not have adequate spelling system, only (16%) disagree and (5%) is assigned against the scale "neutral". In statement (2), (80%) of the participants opinionate that students should take frequent spelling tests to measure their achievement in spelling. In statement (3), great numbers of teachers (87%) confirm that textbooks do not include enough spelling activities. Participants in statement (4) present multiple responses, the majority (82%) emphasize that dictation

helps students remember the correct spelling of words. Statement (5) says students make spellings errors as a reflection of their developmental stage in learning the language. There is a big number of teachers (75%) confirms that spelling errors are part of the students' developmental stage. In statement (6), (59%) of the participants agree upon teaching the spelling of the word with relation to its pronunciation. According to the statistical analysis of statement (7), (66%) of the participants support the idea that spelling instruction should include activities of words analysis whereas (32%) of them gave negative responses. Statement (8) tried to elicit the best method of teaching spelling and significant number of participants (50%) say spelling is best taught when integrated with teaching of writing. Twenty four percent are neutral and (26%) of the participants disagree with this statement. Statement (9) went deep to investigate the causes of the students' spelling errors and it is found that (64%) say these errors result from inconsistent relationship between letters and sounds. The researcher tries to check the styles or techniques that teachers expect to use when teaching spelling patterns. In statement (10), for example, it is found that only (33%) make use of a number of colors to teach spelling. In contrast (63%) of the participants do not use them. Statement (11) asks different teachers who have different years of experience about whether writing mechanism helps improve students spelling skills. A large number of the participants (65%) support the importance of writing mechanism and an unavoidable number of (24%) went against this statement. In statement (12), (56%) of the participants say it is necessary for student to distinguish between vowels and consonants to develop their spelling skills, whereas (32%) are against this statement. Avoidance sometimes makes the process of learning spelling more complicated. Thus, in statement (13) considerable numbers of the participants (54%) indicate that some of their students avoid to spell out the new words. reasonable numbers (43%) go against this view. Statement (14) indicates that the majority of participants are in agreement that students should be given weekly spelling lists to develop their spelling skills. These percentages are highlighted as (63,0%) agree and (33,0%) disagree. The statistical representations of statement (15) illustrate that only (39%) of the participants welcome the idea of administering weekly spelling test which helps develop students' spelling skill, whereas great numbers of them (60%) reject completely this idea. Statement (16) explains that (51%) of the participants agree and (46%) disagree and only (3%) are neutral, this proves the assumption that dissimilarities between English and Arabic represent the problematic area of spelling mistakes. Statement (17) shows contrastive analysis that (46%) of the participants agree that weak readers are usually weak spellers and the same percentage (46%) disagree about this statement. Statement (18) indicates the majority of participants (68%) disagree with the view that students' poor listening proficiency is the cause of their poor spelling. Statement (19) focused on investigating the type of spelling errors and how to deal with it. It is found that the majority of the participants (68%) are in agreement that spelling error analysis improves students' spelling skill. Statement (20) seeks for the strategies that can make students effective spellers. Large numbers of the participants (58%) prove the importance of additional support, skills and strategies from the teachers' side in order to create effective spellers. Statement (21) closely corresponds to the previous statement. They both involve spelling techniques and strategies. In statement (21), (60%) of the participants agree upon the use of spelling bees- and other fun activities which help develop students' spelling skills. Moreover, in statement (22), (62%) of the participants said reading of magazines, newspapers and journals is an effective way for students to relate writing to spelling. In statement (23), (62%) of the participants have an opinion that demonstrating the most difficult areas of spelling will reinforce students' spelling skills. Statement (24) investigated the problematic area that cause spelling errors and it is noticed that (58%) of the participants confirm that vowel sounds are the source of the students' spelling errors. (21%) of the participants are neutral and (21%) disagree with this statement. The last statement focused on the effect of spelling on text clarity. It is worth noting that (58%) of the participants agree that ill spelt sentences in composition lead to difficulty in understanding what is written.

#### 4.2 The analysis of the students' spelling errors

Table 2. Spelling Errors: Categorization and Analysis (Cook, 1999)

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Omission	512	54.3%
Substitution	316	33.5%
Insertion	73	7.7%
Transposition	42	4.5%
Total	943	100%

The spelling errors in table (2) are presented and analyzed with reference to the four categories mentioned in the previous section. This table shows the statistics of (75) students who took part in the writing task. This table presents that learners made different types of spelling error in their writing. As seen on table (2), the largest numbers of errors committed by learners are the deletion of letter(s) 54% (512 errors), then errors of exchange with a proportion of 33.5% (316 errors). The spelling errors resulted from addition of letters take the third place with a proportion of 7.7% (73 errors). Spelling errors occur as result of displacing two or more letters

in a word come in the end of the list with a proportion of 4.5% (42 errors).

**Examples of errors based on the above frequency of errors:**

**1.A. deletion of silent letters like: (ofen- instead of often)**

(tak instead of talk)

(begining instead of beginning)

(traveling instead of travelling )

B. deletion of the final letter /e/ at the end of the words

like: (nic- instead of nice)

B. Consonant doubling errors like:

(swiming- instead of swimming)

(runing - instead of running)

2. Some examples of substitution

A. vowel Substitution Errors Like

(helpfol instead of helpful )

(lyfe- instead of life)

**B. regular past tense substitution srrors**

(looket) instead of (looked)

(talket ) instead of (talked)

**C. consonants Substitution Errors**

(menshen) instead of (mention)

(vizit) instead of (visit)

(elefannt) instead of (elephant)

(bool) instead of (pool)

(fisitor) instead of (visior)

(kold) instead of (cold)

(offise) instead of (office)

3. Insertion of [t] like the following examples;

(reatch ) instead of (reach)

(mutch) instead of (much)

(luntch) instead of (lunch)

4. Transposition Errors

Transposition errors refer to the errors that are committed as a result of mis-ordering the letters.

Examples of them is-ordering of the vowels \_ie': (freind) instead of (friend)

(thier) instead of (their )

5. Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization refers to imposing certain spelling features on words that do not contain them Al-Jarf (2000). It is found that Sudanese secondary school students commit spelling errors as a result of misusing certain rules. For example;

Forming the plural form in irregular manner, for example, (wifes instead of wives)

(ladys instead of ladies)

(citys instead of cities)

As mentioned earlier, this study has some questions to be answered. The first question asks about the effect of the mother tongue interference on Sudanese learners of English in terms of spelling mistakes. In table (1), statement (16), it is found that (51%) of the teachers say the dissimilarities between English and Arabic represent the problematic area of spelling mistakes. Moreover, the analysis of the students' errors proves that the first language has great influence on the second language learning. The second question focuses on the main obstacles face Sudanese learners in the spelling system. Again in table (1), statements (9), (16), (20) and (24) summarize the noticeable areas which cause problems in the spelling system such as: lack of the relationship between Arabic and English. The third question recalls the spelling errors that Sudanese learners usually commit when writing their assignments. Based on the second instrument which was used in this investigation, it is found that spelling mistakes that students commit lie mostly in omission of the silent letter or phoneme or consonant doubling. Question four investigates the strategies that teachers use to solve their students' spelling problems. In table (1), statements (1), (10), (14), (15) present various strategies to facilitate learning the spelling of words. For example (60%) of the teachers agree upon the use of spelling- bees activity. Also, the majority of the teachers are in agreement that students need to be given weekly spelling lists to develop their spelling skills. In contrast only (39%) of the teachers do not welcome the idea of administering weekly spelling test. Moreover, only (33%) make use of a number of colors as a simple technique of teaching spelling.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigates the orthographic inconsistencies face Sudanese learners and their effect on the written text clarity. The English writing system is considered a problematic area for Sudanese learners. This emphasizes the practical need for such research in this field. The results of the teachers' questionnaire and the analysis of the students' spelling errors reveal that the main problem of Sudanese students is the deletion of letters because they do not know the true spelling of these words. In addition to the four categories of errors that Sudanese learners usually commit, another common spelling error could be considered is overgeneralization rule. This kind of error refers to the application of grammatical rule in cases where it does not apply. For example, a learner may say or write "foots" instead of "feet" overgeneralizing the morphological rule for making plural noun. Another claim presents that students make spelling errors as a reflection of their developmental stage in learning the language. It is important to show the students the differences between vowels and consonants and this in turns help them develop their spelling skills. It is also important to consider carefully the students' needs whether they are in need for additional support, skills and strategies which make them effective spellers. It is worth mentioning that reading of magazines, newspapers, journals is an effective way for students' to relate writing to spelling.

In the light of these findings, the following could be recommended:

1. More spelling activities and exercises should be included in school textbooks.
2. Teachers should use different techniques to develop their students' spelling skills. They need to involve the use of pronunciation within meaningful communicative activities. Teachers should consider the fact that students need more exposure to the second language in order to reduce the amount of these spelling errors.
3. Teachers should take the correction of the spelling errors as something decisive. The correction usually involves three stages: First, to draw the students' attention on the error. Second, to explain the error. Third, to provide the intended correct form. These stages can be taken inside the classroom where enough time should be devoted to these three stages.

The findings of this study indicate that there are absolute dissimilarities between English and Arabic which are considered the main source of students' spelling errors, besides the interference of mother tongue. Teachers should make use of the strategies that create efficient and effective spellers.

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