Investigating EFL Learners' spelling mistakes in exams at the University of Halabja\ Department of English language

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Abstract

Students commonly make spelling mistakes, especially in exams. The researcher perceived this phenomenon throughout his teaching experience for about four years. That is why he decided to conduct this research study to investigate these mistakes and analyze them. To achieve this aim, he has given a theoretical background about English spelling and some commonly misspelled words. Then, he has taken a sample of the students' exam sheets from the module he teaches. In these exam sheets, he found out the total number of words each student used to answer the questions and the number of misspelled words to determine the percentage of misspelled ones. Finally, he has drawn conclusions and recommendations on the basis of this analysis. The major findings of the study show that no exam sheet is free of spelling mistakes. This means that making spelling mistakes is not related to the level of the students because even the students who got high marks made certain spelling mistakes.

Keywords: Spelling mistakes, Writing, Exam sheets, Spelling rules and English spelling system.

1. Introduction

Language is the common tool of communication in every human society. These societies have tried to create a system for writing down their language. Writing has developed from picture-painting about 8,000 years ago. At the beginning, writing was used in magic rituals, astronomy and accounting. Though writing is a slow and awkward process compared with speech, the ability to write down a message with conventional symbols added enormous new power to human language. You have to be within hearing distance to receive a spoken message and you need an accurate memory or special sound-recording tools to store a spoken message. But we can keep accurate and permanent records for long periods of time with the development of writing. We can send written messages anywhere (Carney, English Spelling; Language Workbooks, 1997, p. 1).

Nowadays, everyone is supposed to be able to read and write, but in the previous times a great number of the population was illiterate. So, only wealthy and professional classes were in need of reading and writing. In the nineteenth century, with growing industrialization and the rise in industrial societies of a middle class with an appetite for self-help, literacy became more widespread. Now literacy is regarded world-wide as a basic human right, since it is the essential key to an education for the modern world (Ibid).

Furthermore, Carney (English Spelling; Language Workbooks, 1997, p. 2) argues that there are some writing systems which keep a pictorial element, such as Chinese and the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt. However, English has an alphabetic writing system that represents letters from speech sounds and speech sounds from letters. Alphabetic writing is a later development of writing system. About 3,000 years ago, the Greeks believed that people can represent a sequence of speech sounds "phonemes" by a sequence of written letters, by using one symbol for each phoneme and one phoneme for each symbol. This belief influenced the writing systems of their neighboring races. The ancient Greeks developed a complete alphabet of letters for both the vowels and the consonants

of Greek. Their neighboring races had only developed symbols for consonants. Even the word 'alphabet' came from the first two letters of Greek: the vowel letter 'alpha' <α> and the consonant letter 'beta' <β>. English did not borrow its alphabet directly from the Greeks, but from the Romans, who had been quick to develop their own version. Over the centuries, English spelling conventions have been strongly influenced by French.

People think that the ability to spell a word is rule-governed. So, they think that they have broken a rule when they make a spelling mistake. But they cannot provide any spelling rule if they are asked. For example, literate people may forget the structured way in which they were taught to read and write. That is why it is not easy to learn English spelling. Though there are certain rules to spell English Words, but there are many exceptions to these rules. Even some spellings and pronunciation seem to be illogical. For this reason, the learners of English language need to learn most of the word spellings (Field, 1998, p. 46). Nevertheless, certain rules can be drawn to the English spelling, a number of which will be discussed in the next section.

Moreover, Wolman (2008, p. 2) believes that spelling and orthography are synonyms. He argues that the only difference between them is that orthography refers to the whole writing system of a language. This means that it does not just include spelling, but also punctuation and capitalization. That is why this research study focuses only on "spelling mistakes of students in the exams" not the other kinds of mistakes which students make in their writing.

However, Bell (2013) states that the 44 English sounds are spelt with 205 graphemes. Because several English sounds are spelt differently in different parts of words, such as "hate, hay, kick, ship, station", Field (1998, p. 46) argues that English has 85 main spelling rules or patterns. This makes even learning the basics of

reading and writing (or phonics) much more difficult than with simpler writing systems.

Bell (2013) thinks that the main cause of the exceptionally slow pace English literacy acquisition is its irregularity: 80 of its 91 basic spelling patterns have unpredictable alternatives. The spellings of "wait, straight, eight", and "they, weigh, duvet", for example, do not follow the patterns of "gate, late, mate..." or "day, play, say..." Additionally, Field (1998, p. 46) claims that at least 4,219 common words have such unpredictable spellings. This ensures that even gifted spellers take around 10 years to become confident writers. Most people never get to control all of them, and nearly half of all adult speakers of English have severe spelling problems.

Because English spelling has not been modernized for several centuries, it is now extremely irregular and there is great scope for improving it. Therefore, even deciding what to change first and how much is not obvious. To make English spelling as regular as Finnish, for example, a considerable change is necessary and would be challenging for currently proficient readers and writers, although this would clearly benefit new learners. A more practical approach is probably to identify a small number of changes which would greatly reduce the time currently needed for learning to read and write, but without causing considerable problems for current users (Bell, 2013).

By analyzing the spellings of the 7,000 most used English words, Bell (2013) has established that progress with learning to read and write is underdeveloped most seriously by seven irregularities, the worst of which are "inconsistent consonant doubling", such as "shoddy – body, sloppy – copy" which affects more than 1,000 words, and the "unpredictable spellings for the *i:* sound", such as "speak, speech, shriek, seize, scene, siege..." in 456 words.

Lahad (2007, pp. 46-47), who is a teacher at Al-Mustansiriyah University\ College of Basic Education, conducted a research study entitled "Identifying Errors made by EFL College Students in Dictation" in the academic year 2005-2006. The results of this study shown that spelling mistakes are the most frequent ones in EFL students' dictation among other types of errors which are investigated throughout this study. The number of spelling errors is 661 out of 1023 errors with the percentage of % 64.61.

2. Rules and mistakes

2.1 Correspondence

It means there is a regular one-to-one correspondence between each phoneme and its spelling. This does not always occur in English spelling. For example /h/≡<h>, as in "hat". But we have <wh> of "who", the <sh> of "shop", the <th> of "think", etc. However, we can consider some English spelling forms as correspondence rules, but they are restricted to particular contexts. For example <C> doubling occurs after a short stressed vowel, such as "tack" but not "*ckat". Another example is: '<ig>≡ before final <m, n>' such as "design and paradigm" (Carney, English Spelling; Language Workbooks, 1997, p. 53).

2. 2. Reference rules

Carney (English Spelling; Language Workbooks, 1997, p. 53) describes reference rules as memorable rules to which you can refer when you are not sure about a particular spelling. He classifies the most common types of these rules as the following:

1. '<i> comes before <e> except after <c>', such as "field" and "receive".

This rule does not apply to phonemes other than /i/. Although "seize" and "seizure" are exceptions, "heifer" with /e/≡<ei> or "rein", "vein" are not included in this rule. The letters <ie> are not a usual spelling of the phoneme /e/, in spite of "friend", or of /i:/. The variable pair "either" and "neither", which usually have /ai/ in British English and /i:/ in American English, are outside the rule. In American English "leisure" is also an exception; in British English, with /e/, it is outside the scope of the rule. The rule is not applied on names, such as: "Dalgleish", "Feilden", "Keith", "Leigh", "Monteith", "MacNeice", "Neil", "Reid", etc. So, it is better to restate the rule as: "In spelling, an invariable with the letters <i> and <e>, the <i> goes before the <e> except after <c>."

2. <-y> is changed to <-ie> before adding <s>', such as "orgy – orgies", "deny – denies". According to this rule, the plurals of "army, penny, sky" are "armies, pennies, skies" not "*armys… etc." The verb forms "envies, marries, relies" not "*envys… etc." However, the rule is not applied on spellings with <oy>, <ay>, <ey>, as in "employs, relays, obeys" not "*emploies… etc." This rule is not applied on the possessive <s>, as in "Tommy's" and "anybody's". When we add a suffix to a word which ends in <-y>, the <-y> usually changes to <i>, as in: "contrariwise, defiant, dutiful, fanciful happiness, hardihood, kindliness livelihood, merrily, merriment, penniless, pitiless, reliance, wearily and wearisome". The change also applies to <-ed>, as in "defied" and "pitied", but not to <-ing>, as in "defying" and "pitying", since it is not possible to have two <i>s together. This is the same in "babyish, essayist, lobbyist, rowdyism, toryism". Words rarely end in <-i>, such as "ski" and "taxi". In these words it is possible to use "skiing" and either "taxiing" or "taxying", "taxis" or "taxies", but not "*skying".

2. 3. Graphotactic rules

These rules can also be referred to as letter-distribution rules which restrict possible letter sequences. Such rules cannot be stated easily as quotable reference rules. For instance, words do not end in <j>, <q>, <u>, <v> or a single <z> unless they are foreign, as in "raj, Iraq, guru, fez, slang, spiv, or baz" (Carney, English Spelling; Language Workbooks, 1997, p. 54).

2. 4. Adaptation rules

These rules change the spelling of a morpheme when it becomes part of a complex word. For example:

• 'full is spelt <-ful> as a suffix, as in "fretful" and "spoonful".'

• 'all is spelt <al-> as a prefix, as in "always" and "altogether".'

• 'One letter of a complex spelling is deleted when the same letter follows at a morpheme boundary', such as "threshold" not <-shh-> and "eighth" not <-tth> (Carney, English Spelling; Language Workbooks, 1997, p. 55).

3. Types of spelling mistakes

The most common spelling mistakes in English language can be classified into the following types:

3. 1 Competence and performance mistakes

Carney (English Spelling; Language Workbooks, 1997, p. 57) refers to competence mistakes as misspelling and performance mistakes as temporary mistakes. He claims that most of the mistakes in English spelling are performance mistakes which are of the following types:

3. 1. 1 Variant mistakes

These are mistakes of choice among various spellings of the phoneme. Such as: "*compleat – complete" and "*prefurred – preferred". The reason behind these mistakes is that the phoneme can be spelt like that in other contexts.

3. 1. 2 Slips

These are carelessness mistakes. The main reason behind these kinds of mistakes is anticipating the next spelling that requires a kind of attention. This is a common type of slip.

For example: "*innaccuracy – inaccuracy" and "*ommitted – omitted", especially when we have similar words such as "innocent" and "committed". These are more common when there is a double letter in the word; such as "*ussually – usually".

More examples of this type are: "*whispher – whisper", "*realeased – released" and "*lenghth – length". These are examples of regular sequences of letters; "<ea>, <ph>, <kh>, <th>". However, the newspaper headline: 'PM dampens hopes of *kakhi election.' is an example of misplacing, rather than anticipation.

3. 2 Analogy errors

Carney (A survey of English spelling, 1994, p. 84) referred to these types of errors as confusion between elements of word structure. He divided them into the following types:

3. 2. 1 Jumbling

These are mistakes of confusion between elements of word structure. For example, "*apostrophy – apostrophe" and "*catastrophy – catastrophe" are false analogies with "atrophy" and "trophy". Also, "*unindated – inundated". This results in jumbling.

3. 2. 2 Splits and Mergers

They result in putting unnecessary spaces within words: "*to gether", "*out side", "*<be fore" and "*in tact". The opposite can also occur, which is called mergers. For example, "He went on leave for *awhile.".

4. Some Commonly Misspelled Words

Fitzgerald (2009) identifies the following words as the most commonly misspelled words when used by people:

accelerate	fiery	pastime
accessible	fluorescent	pejorative
accessory	fluoride	penultimate
accommodate	foresee	perennial
acknowledge	fulfill\ fulfil	perseverance
acquaint	government	persuade
acquire	grammar	phenomenon
across	grievous	pneumonia
aficionado	guarantee	Portuguese
aggressive	handiwork	preeminent
amphitheater	handkerchief	prerogative
anecdote	harass	privilege
anomaly	heinous	pronunciation
apparent	hemorrhage	proverbial
arctic	hygiene	pursue

asphalt	hypocrisy	quandary
auxiliary	idiosyncrasy	receive
bachelor	indispensable	remuneration
berserk	inedible	rendezvous
besiege	innocuous	renowned
bizarre	inoculate	repertoire
bookkeeper\ bookkeeping	intercede	restaurateur
caffeine	invigorate	rhyme
camaraderie	iridescent	rhythm
Caribbean	irresistible	sacrilegious
category	laboratory	seize
collaborate	leisure	seizure
committee	liaison	separate
concede	manoeuvre\ maneuver	sergeant
consensus	mayonnaise	silhouette
corollary	medieval	smorgasbord
curriculum	Mediterranean	solely
deceive	memento	soliloquy
de rigueur	millennium	sophomore
desiccate	minuscule	subtle
dilapidated	miscellaneous	supersede
diphtheria	mischievous	susceptible

diphthong	misspell	synonymous
dissension	non sequitur	tariff
duly	noticeable	tenterhook
dysfunction	nuptial	threshold
ecstasy	occasion	tortuous
embarrass	occurrence	tragedy
exaggerate	offered	Ukrainian
excerpt	ophthalmology	vaccinate
exhilarate	Pageant	vacillate
experiential	Parallel	vague
February	Parliament	weird

5. The study

5. 1. The procedure

In order to achieve the aim of the study, which is to investigate EFL Learners' spelling mistakes in exams, the researcher has taken a number of exam sheets of the students and examined them in terms of spelling mistakes. He did so by counting the number of the correctly and incorrectly spelled words in each exam sheet. Then he analyzed all the results by using SPSS statistics software and Microsoft Office Excel to determine the percentage of the incorrect spellings compared to the correct ones. Meanwhile, he presented some examples of the spelling mistakes. After that, he discussed the results and drew conclusions on the basis of these results. Finally, he suggested several recommendations to the teachers and students. These recommendations can be considered

by the teachers when scoring the exam sheets and by the students when doing their exams to overcome the difficulties which the students face in this regards.

The total number of words and misspellings for each individual student is shown in the appendix (1). As it is seen in the appendix, the researcher referred to the students by assigning an ID number to each student. The purpose of this is to conceal the identity of the students.

5. 2. The population and sample

The researcher teaches "introduction to research methods" in the third stage at the department of English language\ university of Halabja for the academic year (2014-2015). He has randomly chosen 55 first-semester exam sheets of the students from this module as the sample of the study. According to Dessel (2013), Smith (2013) and (http://www.research-advisors.com/tools/SampleSize.htm, 2006), the researcher has taken the following factors into account to determine this sample size:

The population is 63 students.

The margin of error (confidence interval) is % - + 5

The confidence level is % 95

The standard of deviation is 5

These students have studied modules on "vocabulary" and "writing" in the first and second stages and have "essay writing" in the third stage. This means that they have studied modules to improve their writing skill, especially their spelling. So, they are supposed to have a good spelling performance in the exams.

5. 3. Analysis and discussion of results

After checking the students' exam sheets, the researcher found out that the average number of words each student has written to answer the three questions of the exam is (243.836) words, while the average number of misspelled words is (23.564) words per sheet. So, the percentage of the average spelling mistakes each student has made is (% 10.026). The number of the words each student has written to answer the three questions range from the smallest, 108 words, to the largest, 450 words. The number of the spelling mistakes range from the smallest, 9 words, to the largest, 50 words. So, the percent of the spelling mistakes range from the smallest, % 3.714, to the largest, % 19.417. This verifies that the researcher has chosen the exam sheets randomly and shows that the students are of different abilities and levels.

The above statistics indicate that the students have not made very significant spelling mistakes. However, most of the types of their spelling mistakes are within the types discussed in the previous parts of this research paper. Among them, performance mistakes are very common.

6. Conclusions

On the basis of the discussion and analysis of the results, the researcher has drawn the following conclusions:

1. The theoretical background of this research study shows that English spelling is somehow difficult and confusing because the way we pronounce the words does not correspond to the way we spell them. That is why it is not always easy to separate the

spelling of a word from another. This results in making spelling mistakes by the learners.

2. A careful analysis of the students' spelling mistakes leads us to the conclusion that the students might have known the right spelling of the words which they have misspelled. This might be because of being in a hurry in the exams, carelessness in writing the answers, stress…etc. This makes them not to pay attention to the words they write. As the result they write them in a wrong spelling. For example some students used "*wich" instead of "which", "*reserch" instead of "research", "*wether" instead of "whether", "*judjment" or "*judgment" instead of "judgement", "*brod" instead of "broad" and "*approperat" or "*approperate" instead of "appropriate".

3. Making spelling mistakes is not related to the level of the students because even the students who got high marks have made certain spelling mistakes, but, of course, less than the low level students.

4. There is no exam sheet in which all of the words are spelled correctly. However, the students are of different abilities and levels in making spelling mistakes.

5. The percentages of the spelling mistakes are not significant. In other words, the average of the students have not made significant number of spelling mistakes.

6. Most of the spelling mistakes seem to be performance mistakes rather than competence mistakes.

7. Recommendations

On the basis of the conclusions reached, the researcher presents the following recommendations:

1. The students need to review their exam sheets before submitting them in order to correct certain spelling mistakes that they have made as the result of being in a hurry to transfer their ideas into the paper.
2. The students need to pay more attention to the spelling of the words they write in order to allow the least amount of spelling mistakes.
3. The teachers need to mark the spelling mistakes of the students when scoring the exam sheets to inform them about their spelling mistakes because they might not notice or see their own spelling mistakes even after they get back their exam sheets.
4. The students need not to be in a hurry during the exams in order to prevent spelling mistakes.
5. The students need to be more careful in writing down easily misspelled or confusing words.

6. The students need to practice English spelling more in order to overcome the spelling mistakes and be more familiar with the English spelling system.

7. The amount of time given to the students in the exams to answer the questions should be suitable to the number of the questions and the amount of their answer.

Appendix (1)

The total number of words and spelling mistakes for each individual student.

Student ID	Number of words	Number of Spelling Mistakes	Percent of Spelling Mistakes
Student 1	108	12	11.1111111
Student 2	320	12	3.75
Student 3	370	15	4.05405405
Student 4	306	50	16.3398693
Student 5	350	13	3.71428571
Student 6	270	32	11.8518519
Student 7	220	29	13.1818182
Student 8	210	39	18.5714286
Student 9	160	20	12.5
Student 10	290	37	12.7586207
Student 11	380	26	6.84210526
Student 12	310	23	7.41935484

Student 13	320	38	11.875
Student 14	130	14	10.7692308
Student 15	290	17	5.86206897
Student 16	270	15	5.55555556
Student 17	210	25	11.9047619
Student 18	332	29	8.73493976
Student 19	240	38	15.8333333
Student 20	180	19	10.5555556
Student 21	290	28	9.65517241
Student 22	210	18	8.57142857
Student 23	190	21	11.0526316
Student 24	230	25	10.8695652
Student 25	176	12	6.81818182
Student 26	240	45	18.75
Student 27	450	25	5.55555556
Student 28	206	40	19.4174757
Student 29	220	33	15
Student 30	180	15	8.33333333
Student 31	250	35	14
Student 32	234	31	13.2478632
Student 33	230	23	10
Student 34	260	30	11.5384615
Student 35	224	14	6.25
Student 36	118	9	7.62711864
Student 37	406	18	4.43349754
Student 38	156	9	5.76923077
Student 39	207	12	5.79710145

Student 40	314	13	4.14012739
Student 41	247	40	16.194332
Student 42	220	25	11.3636364
Student 43	190	20	10.5263158
Student 44	230	24	10.4347826
Student 45	163	17	10.4294479
Student 46	236	17	7.20338983
Student 47	199	18	9.04522613
Student 48	130	9	6.92307692
Student 49	390	28	7.17948718
Student 50	260	18	6.92307692
Student 51	245	27	11.0204082
Student 52	287	33	11.4982578
Student 53	140	15	10.7142857
Student 54	189	20	10.5820106
Student 55	228	26	11.4035088
Average	**243.836364**	**23.5636364**	**10.026417**

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لێکۆڵینهوهله هەڵەی سپێڵی فێرخوازانی زمانی ئینگلیزی له تاقیکردنهوهكاندا له زانکۆی هەڵه بجه/ بەشی زمانی ئینگلیزی

پوختهی توێژینهوه

خوێندکاران به شێوهیهکی بهرچاو هەڵەی سپێڵ دهکهن، به تاییهتی له تاقیکردنهوهکاندا. توێژهریش هەستی بهم دیاردهیه کردووه له ماوهی کارکردنیدا وهك مامۆستا بۆ ماوهی چوار ساڵ. لهبهرئهوه بریاریدا که ئهم توێژینهوهیه ئهنجامبدات بۆ ئهوهی له هەندێك لهو هەڵانه بکۆڵێتهوه و شییان بکاتهوه. بۆ گهیشتن بهم ئاما نجه، پێشهکییهکی دهربارهی سپێڵی وشه له زمانی ئینگلیزیدا باس کردووه لهگهڵ نمونهی هەندێك وشه که زۆرجار به سپێڵی هەڵه دهنوسرێن. پاشان نمونهی دهفتەری تاقیکردنهوهی چهند خوێندکارێکی وهرگرتووه لهو وانهیهی که خۆی دهیلێتهوه. لهم دهفتەرانهدا، کۆی گشتیی ئهو وشانهی دهستنیشان کردووه که هەر خوێندکارێك بهکاری هێناون بۆ وهڵامدانهوهی پرسیارهکان لهگهڵ ژمارهی وشه هەڵهکان بۆ ئهوهی رێژهی وشه هەڵهکان دیاری بکات. له کۆتاییدا، لهسهر بنهمای ئهم شیکردنهوهیه چهند دهرئه نجام و پێشنیارێکی خستۆته ڕوو. گرنگترین دهرئه نجامهکانی توێژینهوهکه ئهوه دهردهخهن که هیچ دهفتەرێکی تاقیکردنهوه نییه هەڵەی سپێڵی تێدا نهبێت. ئهمهش مانای ئهوهیه که ئه نجامدانی هەڵەی سپێڵ پهیوهندیی به ئاستی خوێندکارهکانهوه نییه چونکه تهنانهت ئهو خوێندکارانهش که نمرهی بهرزیان بهدهستهێناوه هەندێك هەڵەی سپێڵیان کردووه.

التحقيق في الأخطاء الإملائية لمتعلمين اللغة الإنكليزية في الامتحانات في جامعة حلبجة/ قسم اللغة الإنكليزية

ملخص البحث

تجعل الطلاب الأخطاء الإملائية بشكل عام، وخاصة في الامتحانات. اكتشف الباحث هذه الظاهرة طوال خبرته في مجال التدريس لمدة أربع سنوات. هذا هو السبب أنه قرر إجراء هذه الدراسة البحثية من أجل التحقيق في عدد من هذه الأخطاء وتحليلها. لتحقيق هذا الهدف، انه أعطى خلفية نظرية عن إملاء اللغة الإنكليزية وبعض الكلمات التي بها أخطاء إملائية بشكل شائع. ثم، انه اتخذ العينة من أوراق الامتحان للطلاب من مادته التدريسية. في هذه الأوراق الامتحان، اكتشف الباحث عدد الكلمات استخدم كل طالب للرد على الأسئلة وعدد الكلمات التي بها أخطاء إملائية لتحديد نسبة الاخطاء الإملائية. وأخيرا، انه وضعت الاستنتاجات والتوصيات على أساس هذا التحليل. وتشير النتائج الرئيسية للدراسة أن لا ورقة الامتحان خالية من الأخطاء الإملائية و حتى الطلاب الذين حصلوا على درجات عالية جعلت بعض الأخطاء الإملائية.