Improving Libyan EFL University Students in Using Effective Strategies to Monitor Spelling

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to pinpoint the most appropriate and effective methods and strategies that university teachers adopt to raise their students' awareness of spelling rules, which in turn reduces the chances of committing spelling mistakes in their written work. To accomplish the objective and fulfill the purpose of the study, students' writing compositions were examined and analyzed. The quantitative data was collected by distributing sixty writing exam papers to 4th-year students. These exam papers were chosen randomly. The content analysis method was used to analyze the collected data. The findings obtained from data showed that 'omission', 'substitution', 'addition', and 'disordering' were the most common error types committed by university students. It also provides several useful insights and effective techniques that can be adapted by English language teachers to improve their students' writing skills.

Keywords: Libyan university students' ability, English language, effective strategies, spelling control.

تحسين قدرة طلاب الجامعات الليبية الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على استخدام استراتيجيات فعالة لمراقبة التهجئة

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ملخَّص البحث:

هذه الدراسة تهدف إلى التركيز على أكثر الطرق الفعالة المستخدمة بواسطة أساتذة الجامعات لرفع مستوى إدراك الطلبة لقواعد الهجاء، حيث تقلل من فرص ارتكاب الاخطاء في كتاباتهم. حيث قام الباحث بتوزيع 60 ورقة امتحان لطلبة السنة الرابعة لجمع البيانات لغرض تحقيق الهدف والغرض من الدراسة، اوراق الامتحان اختيرت بطريقة عشوائية وجمعت وحللت البيانات باستخدام برنامج التحليل الإحصائي، النتائج اظهرت أن الاغفال، الاستبدال، الإضافة، والاطراب كانو من أكثر الاخطاء الاملائية التي يقع فيها طلبة الجامعات، هذه الدراسة تضيف العديد من التقنيات والاساليب الفعالة التي تساعد معلمين اللغة الانجليزية في تطوير مهارات الطلبة في الكتابة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: قدرة الطلاب، الجامعات الليبية، اللغة الإنجليزية، استراتيجيات فعالة، مراقبة التهجئة.

1. Introduction

Writing is an important skill, particularly for instruction. It is even more important and is known that EFL students have problems in developing their writing skills at the university level. The ability to write is not a naturally acquired skill, but it is usually learned and culturally transformed as a set of practices in formal instructional contexts. Writing skill, as Carson (2001) demanded is an acquired art that is learned from practice and experience. Spelling errors are one of the challenges and the most common errors that affect Arab students' written work. It causes a major obstacle for students throughout their educational stages.

2. The Conception of Spelling

Spelling is an important element that learners of English must have to think about to be able to write accurately (Gentry, 2004). In literature, the term spelling has been defined by many researchers, for example, Al Otaiba and Hosp

(2010: 6) viewed spelling as "a linguistic skill that involves 'encoding linguistic forms into written form in which[t] he linguistic units-phonological strings, morphemes, and words are provided by the spoken language". Alber and Walshe (2004:24) also defined spelling as "an essential and complex visual memory, phoneme-grapheme awareness, as well as, orthographic and morphemic knowledge". According to Coyne et al.,(2006: 133) spelling is "recognizing or reproducing a correct sequence of letters in oral or written forms the actual process of spelling involves the critical integration of phonological and alphabetic skills of beginning reading". Spelling is how the learner can correctly write words; not only that but also, it is not based upon a single act but requires a variety of skills. In their research, Graham and Miller (1979) defined spelling as the ability to recognize, recall, reproduce, or obtain orally or in written form the correct sequence of letters in words.

2.1. The Importance of Spelling

At the beginning of the 21st century, people have learned about spelling as a brain-building boon for effective reading and writing. They recognized that fluent reading is a process of instantly matching the words on the page with the dictionary of spelling in the brain and fluent writing is getting thoughts on paper (Gentry, 2004; Paulesu, 2001; Willingham, 2015). According to Berninger and Fayol (2008: 234), spelling is a code that uses letter sequences to represent specific words that have an associated pronunciation and meaning within the mental dictionary, they identified three types of codes that contribute to spelling: (1)a phonological code (coding and awareness of sounds in spoken words); (2)an orthographic code (coding and awareness of letters in written words); (3)a morphological code(word parts at the beginning of words that modify the shade of meaning and at the end of words that mark tense, number, or part of speech).

Recent studies referred to spelling as a critical component due to different reasons such as communication, literacy, and employment. In this respect, Burns et al., (2005) looked at spelling as a cognitive linguistic process and they emphasized its relation to reading. Being on the same track, Snow et al., (2005) argued that spelling and reading build and rely on the same mental representation of a word. Therefore, knowing the spelling of a word makes the representation of it sturdy and accessible for fluent reading. More to the point, the correlation between spelling and writing skills has been deeply discussed in several studies such as DOE (2001) who stated that spelling is a crucial part of written communication and is seen as an important tool in writing. Croft (1983)

also argued that the learning and teaching of spelling should take place as far as possible within the context of writing.

2.2. Assessing Spelling

Spelling assessment is important to the improvement of spelling. Using a useful and appropriate approach helps the teacher to understand whether students can spell in authentic communication tasks, and which of the spelling knowledge they use successfully and which they struggle with (Templeton, 2003). Moreover, it has been argued that "existing measures of spelling performance are not sufficiently structured or standardized" (Kohnen et al., 2009: 50). This means that there is still a need to further our current understanding of how to assess spelling ability (Treiman, 2017). More recent research such as Karing et al., (2011) suggests that global judgments of teachers have higher accuracy than task-specific judgments. According to (Templeton, 2003:48), "One well-constructed spelling assessment, teachers can determine students' level of spelling knowledge through the identification of types of words and patterns that are most appropriate for spelling study". The most important information teachers need to be aware of are the students' writing skills and spelling strategies they use, and these can be obtained by watching students in action while writing, analyzing work samples, and talking with them about their insights into the processes of spelling (Westwood, 2005).

2.3. Types of Spelling Errors

Spelling errors are categorized as mechanical errors which include punctuation, spelling, and capitalization (Kato, 2006). It has become increasingly difficult to ignore the importance of spelling (Alsaawi, 2015) and that appears in its correlation with some skills. The researchers classified the errors into several types, for example, Kyte (1958: 49) identified six types of spelling errors, namely (addition, omission, inversion, substitution, pronunciation errors, and miscellaneous). Whereas, Wing and Baddeley (1980) and Cook (2004) classified spelling errors into eight types: (addition, omission, substitution, transposition, grapheme substitution, word space, and capitalization). Being the same track, Cook (1999: 240) categorized spelling errors into four types: "omission, substitution, insertion, and transposition". More to the point, recent studies such as YanYan (2015:29), divided spelling errors into two types, namely typographic errors and cognitive errors. The former includes errors such as letter insertions, letter omission, letter substitution, and transpositions;

whereas, the cognitive errors stem from phonetic similarities such as writing academy.

2.4. Effective Strategies to Monitor Spelling

Spelling learning strategies are considered methods or actions learners use when encountering new words (Ismaiel et al., 2018). They highlighted the strategies suggested by (Anderson, 1987: 20) which the spellers might employ such as sound, rules, analogies, words related in meaning or structure, dictionaries, visual information, and error classification schemes. Similarly, Al Bulushi (2016:63) mentioned some strategies such as the use of syllabification, spelling rules, body activities, dictionaries, and technology. In contrast, Rippel (2009: 77) suggested four categories of spelling strategies: phonetic, rule-based, visual, and morphemic; whereas, Malone, (2004: 66) identified four spelling strategies which are letter rehearsal, over-pronunciation, comparison of the remembered and the correct spelling, morphological analysis, and visualization. Moreover, Oakley et al., (2018:23) added other strategies that can be applied in everyday writing at every given opportunity. They went on to say that these strategies enable children to embed spelling patterns and rules. These strategies are: 'Word of the week', 'Topic words', 'Word games', 'Glossary sheets for science vocabulary', 'Word trees', and 'Personalized dictionaries'. The researchers believe that teachers might be aware of a variety of strategies, activities, and learning styles to deal with students with different background knowledge while teaching.

2.5. Spelling Difficulties and Causes

To improve students' writing skills, their spelling difficulties and their causes should be recognized. Due to the complexity of English, it is very difficult to learn about the relationships between letters and sounds and that might cause significant spelling difficulties in all development stages of learning (Moats, 2006). Knowing specific signs of spelling difficulties is important for teachers (Schaffler, 2007).

Moreover, Ahmed (2017) reviewed several causes identified by many researchers such as Bahloul (2007) and Al Hassan (2011) and confirmed that one of the potential causes is the irregularities of the English spelling system, and this means that the way English words are spelled is complex and inconsistent., Berkel (2005) indicates that the differences between the learners'L1 and L2 languages represent the main causes, for instance it is difficult for L1 speakers to pronounce or spell at phonological level the

consonant sound which is non-existent in the L1 (Muvindi,2013). Furthermore, other causes were identified as extrinsic (outside the learner) and intrinsic (within the learner) causes (Schaffler, 2007: 201). These causes are explained as follows:

a) Extrinsic causes: Ineffective teaching methods

- Not enough time is spent on teaching spelling.
- Some educators assume that spelling rules should have been mastered in the preceding grades already and therefore need not be attended to in the current grade .
- Not enough time in class for spelling control
- Ineffective language education in the mother tongue in the home by primary caregivers.
- Ecosystem factors. e.g. poverty, travel, distances to school, poor learning facilities in the home, family disruption, etcetera .

   b) Intrinsic causes:
- The learner has no self-confidence in his spelling ability.
- No interest in writing in general and as a result of no motivation to spell correctly.
- Fear of failure and stress.
- Poor knowledge of language structure (morphology, phonology, syntax, phoneme/grapheme relation) in mother tongue as well as FAD.
- Limited vocabulary .
- Poor cognitive control (metacognition) of own writing and spelling processes and products.
- Poor perceptual skills, visual and auditory
- Physical barriers, e.g. learners with cerebral palsy, etcetera.

Previous literature also shows that one of the difficulties that Arab learners face is that the Arabic language has a different direction from English and other orthographies i.e. it reads from right to left. Many Arab learners transfer their previous knowledge from their mother tongue into English (Cook, 2004; Fender, 2008). Another essential reason that causes different problems for Arab learners of English is that Arabic is a consonant-based alphabetic system (Cook, 2004). In Arabic, all the pronounced letters have written equivalents. Thus, English words with silent letters often cause trouble for the learners.

3. Methodology

This study adopted only a quantitative approach to investigation. Students' writing compositions task test is used as a data collection to know if students commit spelling mistakes or not. Sixty writing exam papers were distributed to 4th year students. These exam papers were chosen randomly. The content analysis method was used to analyze the data.

4. Results

In this study, several analytic procedures were carried out to analyze the data collected from the writing mid-term task exam. First of all, the researcher checked carefully for the writing tasks which were scored analytically by the teacher. Moreover, the number of spelling errors was identified and counted in each piece of writing. After that, the researcher classified the errors into four main types: (1) Omission: deleting a letter or more in a word; (2) Substitution: substituting a letter or more for another; (3) Addition: adding a letter or more to a word; (4) Disordering: refers to disordering some letters in a word. It is worth noting that this categorization is different from the cook's classification in just two types.

4.1. The Main Types of Spelling Errors

The total number of spelling errors obtained with their percentages are categorized according to their types as illustrated in Table (4.1) below:

Table 4.1 Types of Spelling Errors

Type of Errors	Number of Errors	Percentages
Omission	49	20.4%
Substitution	38	15.8%
Addition	15	6.3%
Disordering	18	7.5%.
Total	120	50.0%

Table (4.1) shows that the omission errors were 49 with a percentage of 20.4%; whereas substitution errors were 38 with a percentage of 15.8%. In contrast, addition errors were 15 errors with a percentage of 6.3% and disordering errors were 18 errors with a percentage of 7.5%. The total number of errors committed by students in their written essays was 120 errors with a percentage of 50.0%. Significant differences were noticed between the types of errors committed in terms of number percentage. By a descending order, omission errors were at the top with a percentage of 20.4% followed by substitution errors with a percentage

of 15.8%, disordering errors with a percentage of 7.5%, and addition errors with a percentage of 6.3%.

5. Discussion

5.1. Types of Spelling Errors

This section discusses only the spelling errors committed by students. These errors are omission, substitution, addition, and disordering. These errors are subsequently discussed as follows:

5.1.1. Omission Errors

The findings explained that omission error was the highest type of spelling error committed by students with a percentage of 20.4%.where appear in the wrong use of vowels and pronunciation by students. This is because they are not aware and know of the actual spelling of some words, the rules of silent letters, and different sequences of sound segments and that mostly occurs in writing contexts when students de forced to write. This is confirmed by Alhaysony (2012) that errors of this type are generally increasing due to insufficient English writing practice.

5.1.2. Substitution Errors

The data also revealed that substitution was the second error that frequently occurred in most students' written contexts with a percentage of 15.8% and that refers to students' misunderstanding of phonics and phonological of the target language system. Vaddapalli (2012:273), concluded that the "lack of phonemic awareness of English sounds is one of the main reasons of spelling problems". Some students substitute vowels with consonants because of a lack of knowledge of the relationship between sounds and written symbols and faulty pronunciation.

5.1.3. Addition Errors

The researcher found that students add some letters that are not required, they try to pronounce words the way they are pronounced in Arabic and they write them as they are heard. For example, the word "different" was written "differently" by several students. The results showed, that students committed addition errors with a percentage of 6.3%. That explains the differences between the written and sound systems of English and Arabic are one of the main causes of addition errors. Bowen (2011), assured students guess words in English inaccurately and add some letters which are not related to the word being written because of the absence of written vowels in Arabic text.

5.1.4. Disordering Errors

The findings also show that students' limited knowledge of English spelling rules in addition to the phonemic, phonological, and linguistic differences between L1andL2 were the main causes of disordering errors which appeared in students' writings with a percentage of 7.5%. students replace some letters with another in some words such as in the word 'difficult', the letter 'u' was replaced by 'a' and was written 'difficult'. This is like Al-Jarf's (2008: 73) findings where he confirms that "learners sometimes write words that do not correspond to the target word for different reasons".

6. Conclusion

According to the findings obtained, spelling is a significant issue that teachers have to care about throughout their teaching process. Due to the limited use of appropriate teaching methods and effective strategies, spelling difficulties are widely spread among university students. The findings obtained showed that 'omission', 'substitution', 'addition', and 'disordering' were the most common types of spelling errors committed by the participants. More to the point, the research findings revealed that students' carelessness, limited practice, and misunderstanding of English spelling rules negatively affect students' performance in the writing process.

6.1. Pedagogical Implications

•Teachers should focus on using the repetition strategy to improve their students' proficiency in spelling.

•Using electronic dictionaries is necessary for being able to know the right pronunciation of the intended word.

•Teachers need to enrich their knowledge about the nature of spelling rules and how can be taught to students in a motivating way.

•Instant and valid corrective feedback should be given to students to develop their spelling proficiency in a short time guided by spelling checkers and well-experienced teachers.

•Students' phonological, morphological, and phonetic skills should be critically evaluated and tested to find out and verify the significance of phonological processing involved in spelling.

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