

Investigating Study of an English Spelling Errors: A Sample of Iraqi students in Malaysia

SAFA NABEEL SUBHI

School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Email: safa.ahmed90@yahoo.com
Tel: +60182946839

MOHAMAD SUBAKIR MOHD YASIN

School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Email: subakir@ukm.edu.my
Tel: +60389216576

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the spelling mistakes and errors made by the Iraqi students who are studying English language as an essential requirement to begin their academic study in Malaysian universities. Two instruments of data collection adopted in this study were used namely a questionnaire and a writing task. Based on a survey of 30 students, the results indicated a high percentage of spelling errors in Iraqi students writing composition. Furthermore, the results of an examination on the problems behind the spelling errors and the causes of these errors were also discussed.

Keywords: spelling errors; spelling mistakes; Iraqi ESL adult learners; Malaysian universities; language use.

1. INTRODUCTION

Spelling is the learner's ability to write a word correctly. Writing accurate spelling adds to the quality of overall writing texts. The study of learners' spelling errors provides an opportunity to understand and facilitate in the learners' spelling difficulties (Al-zuoud & Kabilan, 2013). Cook (1999 p.1) asserts that "unlike native speakers, students may not know the actual system of English, and will appear to use the wrong letter". Writing well is really a big challenge for both native and

non-native students. In general, it is much bigger with the students of English as a foreign language (Muslim, 2014). Based on an analysis of errors in the writing of learners of English from a range of countries, Cook (1999) concluded that English spelling errors can be classified into four main types of spelling errors; namely, omission, substitution, transposition and insertion errors. Although spelling is “a sign of education” (Cook, 1997, p. 474), and even though it is important for second language learners (L2) / foreign language learners (FL), studies have shown that this area has received scant attention (Al-zuoud & K. Kabilan, 2013; Bebout, 1985; Haggan, 1993). The classification and data analysis of spelling errors in this study is based mainly on Cook’s classification (1999): i) Omissions (the deletions of some letters), ii) Substitutions (replacing one letter with another), iii) Insertions (adding extra letters), and iv) Transpositions (reversing the position of letters). Al-zuoud and K. Kabilan (2013) reviewed the studies that focused on students’ spelling errors, they indicated that a very few studies have been carried out with regard to the difficulties that Arab students have in spelling. However, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the spelling mistakes and errors facing the Iraqi students who are studying English language as an essential requirement to begin their academic study in Malaysian universities.

2. THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

Abdulkareem (2013) stated that one of the biggest problems encountered by Arab students is interfering of their native language (Arabic language), they may use their mother-tongue language in their spelling, this spelling errors are mainly the outcome of anomalies existing in the target language of the learners as well as mother-tongue interference from their internalized Arabic language system (Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, & Ram Gaudel, 2015). In this aspect, as Iraq is one of the Arab countries, according to Dehham and Mohammed (2011), Iraqi learners may have a range of difficulties with spelling and the most difficult aspects of English spelling for them are complex correspondence between sound and letters, Cook (1991:1) asserts that "unlike native speakers, students may not know the actual system of English, and will appear to use the wrong letter" .For example: Choosing between two or three consonants [c, z and s] : *recognice [recognize] *tradicional [traditional] *spetial [special], deciding whether to use /e/ or /i/: *devided [divided] *dided [decided], wrongly omitting vowels, particularly (e) when is absent from the spoken form in the middle of words: *intresting [interesting] *sevnth [seventh] and Substituting one sound by another: *cuikly [quickly] *amd [and]. When second language/foreign language learners learn how

to write in English as a second writing system, they tend to transfer features of their first writing system to the second. Learners not only transfer the phonology, but also other characteristics of their first language (L1). For example, Arabic learners may write <bicture> for <picture> owing to the lack of /p/ in Arabic (Cook, 2014). Moreover, Iraqi English foreign language learners also may have many difficulties with English vowels because Arabic and English have two different vowel (Dehham & Mohammed, 2011).

Moreover, regarding to the Iraqi English foreign language students, the problem of their weakness in the writing of the English language may be due to the years of blockade, chronicle instability, lack of writing assignments and practice from the early years of their learning (Muslim, 2014). Dehham and Mohammed (2011) recommended that more attention is needed to be paid on English spelling errors facing Iraqi students. In addition, one of the obstacles facing Iraqi students in their studies in foreign countries is English spelling errors. And in this particular, this study will focus on the spelling errors facing Iraqi postgraduate students in Malaysia as they are considered one of the largest Arab communities in Malaysia, and the English language is a key issue for continuing and completing their studies in various scientific fields.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions are specified for this study.

1. What are the most common spelling errors and mistakes that Iraqi students made in their writing?
2. What are the mother-tongue characters of the Iraqi students spelling errors?
3. What are the reasons of the common spelling errors that Iraqi student made in their writing?

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Bearing in mind to above mentioned research questions, these are three objectives of this study.

1. To investigate the most common spelling errors and mistakes that Iraqi students in Malaysia made in their writing.

2. To determine whether Iraqi students use their mother-tongue language or not in their writing.
3. To discover the reasons of spelling errors that Iraqi student made in their writing.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Smith and Swan (2001) indicated that spelling errors are noticeable among Arab students as the existence of linguistic differences in both languages English and Arabic while spelling errors are found to be less among other non-Arabic students as their languages share more similarities with English. The studies related to Arab spelling errors are few and the majority of these studies focus on the spelling difficulties which Arab students face in learning EFL (Al-Jarf, 2005). Al-Jarf, (2005) conducted a study in Saudi Arabia to investigate the correlation between spelling and listening comprehension among students. The findings indicated that EFL students' percentage of spelling errors found to be 41.5% of the words with 49.5% correct responses to the questions in the listening comprehension test and with 52% correct answers on the decoding test.

Al-Jabri (2006) conducted a study on 114 Omani fifth-grade students in two rural schools to investigate their spelling errors. 10- Word spelling test was conducted on the students to collect data. The findings revealed that omission and substitution were the most frequent errors while transposition and insertion errors found to be less frequent. In the United Arab Emirates, Al-Ta'ani (2006) investigated the spelling errors of 200 students' writing at the secondary stage. After classifying and identifying the location of spelling errors in the words, the findings indicated that most spelling errors occur in the middle of misspelled words.

Fender (2008) conducted another study to find the spelling errors among Arabs and non-Arab ESL students. The results revealed that Arab students spelling skills tend to be less success with most spelling difficulties in general and multi-syllabic words. (Al-zuoud and Kabilan (2013) examined the composition spelling errors of 43 EFL undergraduate Jordanian students. 228 errors were resulted from 43 written papers and then categorised and analyzed into four types according to Cook's classification (1999): omission, substitution, insertion, and transposition. The findings revealed that the majority of students committed substitution and omission spelling errors.

Alhaisoni et al. (2015) conducted a study in Saudi Arabia on 122 EFL undergraduate students at the University of Ha'il to examine the types of spelling errors in English composition. 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. 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.

According to Alhaisoni et al. (2015), few research studies focus on the issue of spelling errors and very few studies investigated the Arab EFL spelling errors difficulties. Moreover, most of the studies devoted to Arab EFL students are in their home countries that urge the need for studies about Arab students spelling errors in foreign countries. Therefore, Iraqi EFL students spelling errors in Malaysian university will be addressed in the current study to bridge the gap in the literature.

6. METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of conducting this study, Iraqi students who are studying English language as an essential requirement to begin their academic study in Malaysian universities were randomly selected to take part in this study. Two instruments of data collection have been used in this study namely questionnaire and writing a composition.

The primary instrument of data collection in this study is the questionnaire From Miressa and Dumessa (2011) to investigate the factors that contribute to the students' spelling errors that Iraqi student commit in their writing. The original questionnaire of Miressa and Dumessa (2011) of measuring students' spelling contained seven multiple choice items. Miressa and Dumessa (2011) in their study used this questionnaire to investigate the spelling errors factors. The data was collected through 52 valid questionnaires from student in Don Bosco High and Preparatory School using random sampling techniques. Four of these items were arranged on a four point Likert scale and the other three items stated double-barrelled by grouping different topics in each item. The three items in the original measurement has been divided into some items to measure a specific dimension. Since this study will be conducted on a sample of Iraqi students in Malaysia.

Therefore, this study adapted and modified the measurement of Miressa and Dumessa (2011) in order to measure factors of Iraqi spelling errors. In addition, two items (5 and 6) from Ishii (2011) have been also modified and adapted to measure factors of Iraqi spelling errors. Therefore, sixteen items have been adapted to measure reasons of spelling errors that Iraqi student commit in their writing. Furthermore, the respondents were asked to rate on four Likert-type scale, one (never), two (Some times), three (Usually), and four (Always).

The second instrument have been used to collect the data from the students is the writing task. In the Arab context, Al-Jabri (2006) Al-Jabri (2006) used the classification of Cook (1999), and he classified spelling errors with Omani students. Alhaisoni et al., (2015) also used the same classification in their study in the purpose of investigated the types of spelling errors among Saudi 122 EFL students at the University of Ha'il in Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, Al-Zuoud and K. Kabilan (2013) used the same classification in their study in the purpose of analysing the spelling errors among 43 English language and literature university students, they found a total of 228 spelling errors that occurred in 43 written papers and subsequently classified them into four types: (a) Insertion (b) Substitution (c) Omission (d) Transposition, the authors recommended to use this instrument in the Arab context. Given that, the instrument was reliable and valid. Therefore, the current study will adopt the classification of Cook (1999) for the purpose of this study. Further, the Iraqi students who are considered as the sample of the current study are already in Malaysia, so after a discussion with Iraqi English language lecturers to choose appropriate topic so that students could produce an essay. Hence it has been chosen the topic of (life and culture in Malaysia). Furthermore, the researcher will assign students to writing task on this topic.

7. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

From a total of 30 questionnaires, 23 (77%) of the respondents were male and 7 (23%) were female. The majority of the respondents (57%) were less than 30 years old, 30 to 40 were comprised 40% of the respondents, and only 3% were aged 41 years and above. The respondents were also asked to

verify their field of study. The data showed that three-quarters of the respondents (77%) were Master students, and 33% were completing their Ph.D degree.

7.1 ANALYSIS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRES

SPSS software (Statistical Package for Social Sciences; version 22.0) was employed for the purpose of data coding, screening and data analysis. The standard deviation was applied as dispersion index to indicate the degree to which individual within each item differ from the variable mean. Among all the 16 items, the individual value of item 8 deviated the most from their relative mean (SD = .915). In the other side, the lowest deviation from the mean was item 4 (SD = .563). From the descriptive, the mean of all 16 items were 2.97 with a minimum scale of 1 and maximum scale of 4.

Table 1 below shows the results of the respondents' perception on their spelling errors. The means of all 6 items number 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 were 3.10, 2.53, 3.50, 3.60, 2.83 and 3.13 respectively with a minimum scale of 1 and maximum scale of 4.

Table 1: The respondents' perception on their spelling errors

No:	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	How often do you care about the spelling of words when you write?	3.10	.712
2	How often do you commit spelling errors?	2.53	.629
3	How often do you feel the important to know the correct spelling of words?	3.50	.731
4	How often do you feel the important of learning the spelling of words?	3.60	.563
5	How often do you read over your composition again when your teacher returns it to you?	2.83	.747
6	How often do you feel it is important to you to have as few errors in English spelling as possible in your written work?	3.13	.730

As shown in Table 1, the highest mean with 3.6 refers to the importance of learning the words spelling followed by item 3 with a mean of 3.5 which refers to the importance of knowing the words' correct spelling. The mean of 3.13 goes to item 6 that refers to importance of having as few errors in writing English as possible and item 1 with a mean of 3.1 which refers to taking care of

spelling errors while writing English. Item 5 with a mean of 2.83 refers to students' revision of their writings after getting feedback from their teachers and finally the lowest mean goes to item 2 with a mean of 2.53 which refers to students' knowledge of their spelling errors.

Moreover, Table 2 below shows the results of an examination on the problems behind the spelling errors, the means of all 3 items number 7, 8, and 9 were far away from a midpoint 3.03, 2.70, and 3.23 respectively with a minimum scale of 1 and maximum scale of 4.

Table 2: The problem of your English spelling errors lies in

No:	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
7	Lack of materials in my country is often the main problem in learning spelling.	3.03	.890
8	Lack of interest to learn is often the main problem in learning spelling.	2.70	.915
9	Lack of good teachers in my country is often the main problem in learning spelling.	3.23	.858

As indicated in Table 2, the highest mean with 3.23 goes to item 9 which refers to the main cause of spelling errors is lack of a good teacher in home country followed by item 7 with a mean of 3.03 that refers to the main cause of spelling errors is lack of learning materials in home country. Finally, the lowest mean with 2.7 goes to item 8 which means the main cause of spelling errors is lack of interest to learn. This indicates that the average of the respondent's perception claimed that lack of good teachers was their main problem in learning spelling followed by Lack of materials in their country was another main problem in learning spelling correctly.

Furthermore, the results in Table 3 below show the causes of the spelling errors, the mean of all items number 10, 11, and 12 were 2.97, 2.67, and 2.53 respectively with a minimum scale of 1 and maximum scale of 4.

Table 3: The cause for your spelling errors lies in:

No:	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
10	The difference between written and spoken English.	2.97	.765
11	The origin of English words.	2.67	.844
12	Carelessness.	2.53	.900

As can be noticed from Table 3, item 10 with the highest mean of 2.97 refers to the main cause of spelling errors is the difference between the spoken and written language while item 11 with a mean of 2.67 refers to the main cause of spelling errors is the origin of English words. Finally, item 12 with a mean of 2.53 refers to the main cause of spelling errors is carelessness.

In addition, Table 4 below shows the results of the respondents regarding to the case when they do not know how to spell a word, the mean of items number 13, 14, 15 and 16 were 3.07, 2.57, 3.63 and 3.47 respectively with a minimum scale of 1 and maximum scale of 4.

Table 4: What do you do if you do not know how to spell a word?

No:	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
13	Write it as I feel it is.	3.07	.691
14	Ask my friends.	2.57	.774
15	Ask my teachers.	2.63	.809
16	Check it up in the dictionary.	3.47	.860

As depicted in Table 4, the highest mean with 3.47 goes to item 16 which refers to if students don't know how to spell a word, they check it up from the dictionary followed by item 13 with a mean of 3.07 that refers to if students don't know how to spell a word, they write it as they feel it. Item 15 with a mean of 2.63 refers to if students don't know how to spell a word, they ask their teacher. Finally, the lowest mean with 2.57 goes to item 14 that means if students don't know how to spell a word, they ask their friends.

7.2 ERROR CATEGORIES AND RATES

The results in Table 5 below show the numbers and the percentages of spelling errors based on 30 students writing composition according to the four categories suggested by Cook (1999); the percentages in the table below:

Table 5: Frequency and percentages of spelling errors

No:	Type of error	Frequency	Percentages
	Insertion	84	24 %
	Omission	182	53 %
	Substitution	62	18 %
	Transposition	16	5 %
	Total	344	100%
	Total number of words	1109	31%

As indicated in Table 5, after identifying and categorizing the spelling errors of 30 students writing composition, the total number of spelling errors found in student writing are 344 errors out of 1109 words. The students committed 182 omission spelling errors with a percentage 53% of the total followed by 84 insertion spelling errors with a percentage of 24%. There are 62 substitution spelling errors with a percentage of 18% of the total and only 16 transposition spelling errors with a percentage of 5% of the total. The majority of spelling errors are centralized in omission and insertion with 266 errors out of 344 which forms a percentage of 77% of all the errors committed by students.

The main cause of insertion errors is the lack of knowledge of the relationship between the spoken and written language (Amaizing, bulding) and faulty pronunciation. While in omission errors, students omit some letters from words, because they do not know the actual spelling of the words (Indan, unversity). Some examples of spelling errors that the students commit in their writing of a composition in this study are displayed in table 6 below:

Table 6: Examples of spelling errors

Type of error	Examples	Actual Word
Insertion	Amaizing	Amazing
	Bulding	Building
	Spaicy	Spicy
Omission	Indan	Indian
	Unversity	University
	Confict	Conflict
Substitution	Stady	Study
	Compere	Compare
	Gatecories	Categories
Transposition	Beutifual	Beautiful
	Natrual	Natural
	Chinees	Chinese

8. DISCUSSION

Nearly One out of three words (31%) are misspelled by students which is indicated a high percentage of spelling errors in Iraqi students writing composition and this agrees with Smith and Swan (2001) that spelling errors are noticeable in Arab students writing and with Al-Jarf (2003) who found the percentage of spelling errors to the total number of words is 41%. The findings indicated that Omission and insertion errors are the most frequent and this is consistent with Al-

Jabri (2006) and Al-Zuoud and Kabilan (2013) findings in term of omission and in contrast in term of substitution. The findings indicated that most errors occurred due to wrong use of vowels, in the middle of the word and in multi-syllabic words which all found to be consistent with Al-Ta'ani (2006) who found most spelling errors occurred in the middle rather than the initial or end of the words, Fender (2008) who found spelling errors are more frequent in multi-syllabic words than shorter one and most importantly with Alhaisoni et al.(2015) who found most errors occurred in wrong using of vowels rather than consonants.

8. CONCLUSION

Iraqi students spelling errors in their writing composition are very high (31%) which is considered a critical issue that needs to revise the reality of teaching English as a foreign language in Iraqi schools and universities. One key factor that needs to be addressed urgently is the type of English curricula and teachers in Iraqi educational institutions as the portion of writing skills activities to other skills such as reading and speaking is insufficient and unfair. Iraqi English curricula must be enriched with writing and speaking activities such as dictation, guided and free writing and audio-visual writing to overcome such problem. Iraqi English teachers must be more equipped and trained to develop students English language skills equally in order to bridge the poor writing skill among Iraqi students that leads to many spelling errors in their writings. More attention in writing drills and activities must be paid to vowels using, multi-syllabic words and errors that occur in the middle of the words.

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