

**THE ACADEMIC WRITING PERFORMANCE AND SPELLING ERRORS OF
ENGLISH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS AT TABUK UNIVERSITY: A
CASE OF THE INTRODUCTORY YEAR STUDENTS
2015**

Malek Jabr M, Albalawi

English Language Center, Faculty of Arts, Tabuk University
Tabuk, SAUDI ARABIA

ABSTRACT

The goal of this research is to investigate the academic writing performance and spelling errors of the introductory year students at the English language Centre at Tabuk University in Saudi Arabia. The study included 45 participants. This is a qualitative- quantitative study. The researcher used random sampling. The findings of the study indicated that the participants committed a number of spelling errors that affect the coherence of their academic written text. These errors involved three main categories; omission, addition and substitution. Also, the findings showed that these spelling errors may be attributed to mother tongue interferences in which they relate to the differences between the systems of both native language and foreign language. This research recommends that future investigations be conducted in the area to confirm the results of the current research in order to examine from other perspectives such as age and grade.

Keywords: Omission, Spelling, Addition and Substitution.

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades English language has become one of the most growing languages in the world. It is used in more than 70 countries in the world as the official language. It is one of the languages that are frequently used in the areas of science, media, TV and cinema etc (Yang, 2007). English as an international language occupied a very prominent place in the Saudi society. It is considered as one of the effective marketing tools in the Saudi economy mainly trading, health, media, press and education sectors. English is a very common language in an educated society such as Saudi since it is used in their daily life. Most of English language learners need to study the basic four language skills i.e. reading, listening, speaking and writing. As far as this study is concerned, writing makes very difficult skills for learners of English language in Saudi (French, 2005). Many linguists and researchers treat writing as a process rather than a product. The main goal of this process is to generate a written work that will function as a tool of interaction between the writer and the reader according to the information they possess (Al-Abed Al Haq and Ahmed, 1994).

This language skill is very demanding process since successful writing needs an appropriate extent of organization in achieving ideas and knowledge and an adequate level of accuracy so that sentential constructs possess contain no vagueness of words meaning within sentences throughout a written text. The appropriate use of grammatical and spelling patterns choices and sentence structures will create a meaningful written work for the readers (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002). Essentially, a written text can be meaningful to its readers when both form and content are unified. In the researcher's point of view, understanding writing as a process is a intricate task for English language learners to expand and learn, mainly in an English as a foreign language context such as Saudi. This is because their knowledge and contact with English language is very restricted to classroom settings. Learners, learning English writing

in an EFL setting encounter many problems concerning a number of structural issues especially when writing and spelling words and phrases, creating suitable and accurate grammatical structures, producing thoughts, and building ideas about a specific writing themes. Notably, they encounter problems in developing practical language skills, such as appropriate spelling of words in English language in a authentic sitting within diverse social contexts in an original manner. These problems of practical language use are degenerated because learners of English as foreign language writing are likely to focus mainly on learning grammar without referring to spelling and dictation in an appropriate manner (Lee, 2002a). Further, they traditionally see their students as inactive English as a foreign language writers. These difficulties, though, are likely to obstruct students from expanding their classroom setting communication and obstruct them from developing more vigorous knowledge in writing (Yi, 2007). Because of these differences between English as a foreign language learners and teachers' teaching techniques, teachers of EFL writing are not certain about how to assist their students interact confidently, to write successfully, and to be more independent writers of educational written texts.

Also, the difficulty is how EFL teachers can facilitate their students appreciate social functions, make their written work united and more consequential as well as creative in different academic and social contexts. Therefore, there is a necessary requirement for writing classes to help students to expand their skills and information by understanding a whole writing process and the knowledge of spelling context in which the writing takes place appropriately (Li, 2009). One of the fields that took the attention of the researcher in this study is writing-spelling problem. Writing-spelling is' the process of writing words by using the letters conventionally established for their structure. It is a balance to communicate using the language, and its understanding of some grammatical components such as like: vocabulary, grammar and semantics. Some problems may encounter the learners in language acquisition in which the learners feel bored when they prepare for dictation (Alkire, 2002).

These learners of English as a foreign language need to emphasize on the meaning, the accuracy and the growth of their language. To be more particular, any written text can be dictated with a writing spelling skill from a single word to a full paragraph. Some of these paragraphs can be dialogued; it depends on the quality of a teacher and the learner's strength (Davis and Rinvoluceri, 2002). Other learners of English as a foreign language may view spelled -dictation more difficult than other skills in writing-spelling skill. Particularly, when an EFL teacher has weak learners of second language acquisition, these learners may not possess the skill to write the words properly. The learner of second language may be perplexed to appreciate the words because of his first language. Thus, other learners don't give consideration for their errors in dictation (Montalvan, 1990). They don't check their errors to obtain the accurate ones. Some teachers may make a sudden written work in their classes. A question may concern for researchers that how can learners of second language acquisition correct or check their mistakes when they have a written practice or composition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dictation has a special place in classroom environment, and teaching devices favour it in language teaching. Some researchers look at dictation negatively, because they found that it's difficult and hard to teach anything, although they believe and use testing devices. However, dictation gives badly needed practice in listening comprehension (Myint, 1998). Spelled -dictation is not always a good way to teach a language, because of the difficulty of these language, which can make problems for teachers to improve and teach this language. But

according to R. Montalvan (1990), there are “at least 20 advantages of dictation, and the most important are: 1) dictation can help develop all four language skills in an integrated way; 2) it can help learn grammar; 3) it helps to develop short-term memory; 4) practice in careful listening to a speaker will be useful to learners in the future in the note taking activities, for instance, listening to lectures; 5) dictation fosters unconscious thinking in the new language; 6) correction can be done by the students - peer correction of written dictation leads to oral communication.” The difficulty in producing a text and accuracy in writing (BBC teaching English online, 2005). Learners find this difficulty in spelled -dictation test, especially when they compare the original text and what they did in the test, which increases their ability to check writing and dictation mistakes with their spelling mistakes- which are popular- in these tests. Teacher has the control to correct these mistakes with – for sure- the student’s suggestions. Davis and Rinvoluceri (2002) demand that dictation contains a wealth of new techniques to extend the traditional language-learning activity of dictation. The activities range from the traditional focus on spelling and punctuation problems to exercises that emphasize personal attitudes and opinions of both teachers and students.

Dictation provides activities suitable for a wide range of levels and ages, example texts for many activities, opportunities for students to create their own texts, and a variety of suggested correction techniques. Additionally, it “normally turns out that in any average group of European teachers more than half do use dictation either regularly or from time to time in their teaching. Rahimi (2008) conducted a research to explore the effect of dictation on improving language proficiency. The samples of the research composed of 65 FL learners in order to observe if it assists them improve their language proficiency. This was an experimental research. The findings of the research indicated that development for both groups in their performance on the whole proficiency test. Though, with respect to the structures of the test, the EG revealed that progress in grammar, vocabulary, reading, and listening comprehension, while the control group showed improvement just in the vocabulary section of the test. Similarly, Chun (2010) investigated the effects of dictation of rapid speech on developing listening skills and the impact dictation had on students’ listening/speaking ability. The sample of the research included 50 undergraduate TESL program students. This study was a case study of the Long-Term Dictation Tasks Using Rapid Speech. The results of the research showed that students gained significant TOEFL and dictation scores through dictation practice. This study recommends that dictation is very helpful for improving listening and speaking skills.

Likewise, Kuo (2010) conducted a research to investigate the using partial dictation of an English teaching radio program to enhance EFL learners’ listening comprehension. The sample of the study comprised an intermediate-level Freshman English class with 31 Engineering students at Taiwanese University. The findings of the research indicated that in order to determine these serious listening issues, an activity which combines partial dictation with listening to an English teaching radio program appropriate to students’ English proficiency was designed by synthesizing findings, suggestions, and proposals of various FL/EFL researchers. A suitable and consistent listening test served as pre- and post-test and two short teacher-made questionnaires were adopted to collect the essential data. Nation and Newton (2009) considered dictation a valuable language focused Teaching and learning technique. In terms of teaching technique, they pointed out that instructors can design activities to enhance students’ perception of errors detected through dictation. As a learning technique, dictation provides feedback on students’ perceptual errors and gaps, which helps raise consciousness or awareness of these errors. Nation and Newton’s findings support Field’s proposal on the use of dictation to enhance FL/L2 listeners’ decoding ability.

Therrien et al. (2009) compared essay-writing skills in 13-year olds (7th and 8th grade) with and without reading and writing difficulties. They examined the effectiveness of a 6 step special education program teaching the students how to analyze the essay prompt, to outline and write a response, and to review the answer. Therrien et al. reported a strong effect of the training program on the writing strategies taught $d = 1.7$ but also a significant effect $d = .7$ on a general essay measure consisting of six analytical traits: ideas and content, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. At the same time, the students with reading and writing difficulties after training still performed below the level of the control group on the general essay measure. However, the study involved major limitations. No IQ-measure was taken of the participants, the control group consisted of average achievers nominated by their teachers, and the essays were evaluated by two school psychology graduate students. In the present study, we analyzed written reports of students with dyslexia in higher education to know whether they experience specific problems when they are faced with written assignments.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims at achieving the following objectives:

- i. To examine the categories of spelling errors that are committed by introductory year students at the language Center at Tabuk University and their effect on the achievement of their academic writing.
- ii. To investigate the causes of these spelling errors.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to achieve the objectives of this research, this study addresses the following research questions:

- Q1. What are the categories of spelling errors committed by introductory year students at the language Center at Tabuk University and their effect on the achievement of their academic writing?
- Q2. What are the causes of these errors?

RESEARCH METHODS

The population of the study consisted of 45 male students at the introductory year the language center- Tabuk University in Saudi Arabia for the academic year 2015/2016. The researcher used random sampling process to select the participants. The age of the sample of the study ranged between 18 to 20 years.

Procedures

In order to achieve the objectives of the research, the researcher obtained a permission to conduct the study and informed the participants about the purpose of the study. Then, he encouraged the students to hear a text recorded on a cassette by a native-like English language teacher. After that they were informed to write what they heard. The researcher analyzed the elicited data and classified the errors based on three different categories: 1) addition, 2) omission, 3) substitution. The errors were counted and listed on separate sheets.

Discussion and Findings

The participants in the study committed a number of mistakes classified into three main categories as depicted in the next section below: (*' mean that the word is misspelled).

i. Addition Errors

This type of error is committed by students when they *add extra letter* that is not supposed to take place within the standard spelling of the word. The participants in this research committed many errors of such type. This included word such as:

- *withe for (with), *famouse for (famous).
- *prouduce for (produce).
- *development for (development).

Some addition errors occurred when a letter was doubled where it shouldn't be doubled such as: *assistant for (assistant) and *eattng for (eating).

ii. Omission Errors

Omission is the second type of errors be investigated in this research. This type takes place when there is a *deletion of one or two letters* in the standard spelling of the word. The cause of committing this type of errors may relate to *the inconsistent correspondencē* between the sound and the letter system in English language. The participants committed a number of errors particularly in the silent letters. For example:

- *blak for (black).
- *jaket for (jacket).
- *frind for (friend).
- *hous for (house).

Other omission errors took place when one of two similar adjacent letters was omitted such as: * hapy for (happy) *apropriate for (appropriate).

iii. Substitution

The third type of errors investigated in this study is substitution. This relates to the substitution of one letter for another. This type of error is caused by the misspelling of the word. The participants committed some errors when they wrote the words according to their pronunciation. This is connected with the fact that some English letters may possess varied pronunciations in different contexts. For example:

- The letter [c] pronounced /k/ in car, microphone and cat.
- The letter /s/ in words like: city, nice and mice.

When a letter depicts more than one pronunciation, this may results in the substitution of one letter for another that contains the same sound in spelling. Also, relevant substitution errors took place in the vowels of English language. For example:

- *hangry for (hungry).
- *thes for (this).
- *fascenating for fascinating.

There was a very important type of substitution in which the connotation of the entire word varied. This takes place with words that seem alike, i.e. homophones. This substitution is very difficult since it leads to a modifications over the indented meaning. For example:

- students substituted *sea for (see). - two for too. - *warm for (worm) or vice versa.

Table (1): Total Number and Percentage of Spelling Errors Committed by Introductory Year Students Based on the type of Errors

Type of Error	Number	Percentage
Addition	50	27%
Substitution	65	35%
Omission	70	38%
Total	185	100%

Table (1) states that the total number of errors committed by 9th grade students in this study recorded 185 errors in which 50 (27%) were addition, 65 (35%) were substitution and 70 were omission making a total of 100%. Also, it is indicated that there a variation in the frequencies and percentages of errors committed by the participants accordingly; addition, substitution and omission. But the percentage f the omission recorded the highest compared to the rest of the types of errors. This is because some of the participants had the tendency to omit certain silent / mute letters whether consonants or vowels that sounds not necessary. Consequently, the researcher will provide a discussion on the sources and causes of the spelling errors committed by introductory year students at Ader Elementary School for Boys. In this regard, the sources found out by the researcher were categorized as :

- i. Errors caused by non-phonetic nature of English spelling. That is, a lot of English as foreign language learners demonstrate that spelling is not phonemic, i.e. in which a number of words are not produced in connection with their pronunciation. This sounds problematic for the native and non-native speakers with regard to spelling mistakes in English language. Also, this counts that spelling for EFL learners remains inconsistent and irregular. An example of vowel irregularities of English language spelling is the representation of vowel sounds. This means that English language possesses 5 vowel sounds in which they represent 25 vowel sounds. This leads to spelling errors such as: spelling errors which can be related to the non-phonetic nature of English spelling are due to *homophony*, i.e. words that sound alike. These results in spelling errors that may cause a change in the meaning of the indented word. *Homophony* accounts for spelling errors such as:

- *two for (too).
- *ate for (eight).
- *wear for (we're).
- *right for (wright).

Also, there are errors related to to the fact that some letters (silent or mute letters) in English are spelled but not pronounced. For example, students had the following misspelling:

- *blak for (black).
- *pleas for (please).
- * tak for (talk).
- *lisen for listen.

- ii. Errors caused by the differences between the sound systems of English and Arabic (the student's native language). It is generally observed by teachers that learners of English as a foreign language spell English words in most cases according to their pronunciation. This is considered as one of the most problematic issues that face Arab learners of English as a foreign language, particularly English words' spelling. This observed due to the variations of the sound systems in both English and Arabic languages. This is felt in terms of the variation between the two bilabial plosives [p] and [b] in which Arabic language possesses only one sound that is [b]. Consequently, this results in difficulty for Arabs learners of EFL in both pronunciation and spelling of English language. They may spell words with [p] using [b] or vice versa. This difficulty may report errors such as: *blay (play) and plack for (black). This may be related to teachers' concern about the distinction between [b] and [p] in speaking and writing. Likewise, introductory year students committed a number of errors in which they substituted [f] for [v]. This is referred to Arabic language interference since Arabic does not have the voiced bilabial [v]. For example, they committed errors like: *lofe for (love), and *fan for (van).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study investigated the effect of spelling errors on the development of academic writing skill of introductory year students at the language center at Tabuk University. The main objective of this research was to examine and categorize these errors. The results of the study indicated that EFL students the spelling errors committed by the students were categorized into three different categories including omission errors, substitution errors and addition errors. Also, the findings showed that spelling errors may be related to some plausible sources such as errors caused by non-phonetic nature of English spelling and others resulted due to differences between the sound systems of English and Arabic languages. This study recommends further studies to reveal if there are significant difference in spelling errors due to the following criteria age, grade since EFL teachers and learners in Saudi schools symbolize the model of accurate pronunciation, an investigation is proposed to appraise the training courses that intends to teach them on how pronounce and spells English words correctly.

References

- Al-Abed Al Haq, F. and Ahmed, A. (1994). Discourse Problems in Argumentative Writing. *World Englishes* 13 (3).
- Alkire, S. (2002). Dictation as a Language Learning Device. *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. French, G. (2005). The Cline of Errors in the Writing of Japanese University Students. *World Englishes*, 24(3), 371-382.
- Davis, P., and M. Rinvoluceri (2002). *Dictation. New Methods, New Possibilities*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, I. (2002a). Teaching Coherence to ESL Students: A Classroom Inquiry. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 11(2), 135-159.
- Li, M. (2009). Adopting Varied Feedback Modes in the EFL Writing Class. *US-China Foreign Language Journal*, 7(1), 64-75.
- Montalvan, R. (1990). Dictation Updated: Guidelines for Teacher-training Workshops. *English for Specific Purposes World*, v.8, issue 23.
- Myint, M. K. (1998). Dictatory: A New Method of Giving Dictation. *English Teaching Forum*. Vol. 36. No 1.

- Nation, I. S. P., & Newton, J. (2009). *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking*. New York: Routledge Publisher.
- Phillips, L. and Jorgensen, W. (2002). *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. London: Sage.
- Yang, M., Badger, R. and Yu, Z. (2006). A Comparative Study of Peer and Teacher Feedback in a Chinese EFL Writing Class. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 15(3), 179-200.
- Yi, Y. (2007). Engaging Literacy: A Biliterate Student's Composing Practices beyond School. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16(1), 23-39.
- Zhang, D. (2009). The Application of Blog in English Writing. *Journal of Cambridge Studies*, 4 (1), 64-72.