Errors made by Iraqi college students of English in the area of spelling

Asst .Inst .Ashwaq Abdul mehdi Hussein   *University of Diala College of Education*
Dr.Zainb Abbas Al-Sadi   *University of Diala College of Education*

Section One

1.1. Introduction

Language is a vital means of communication . By language ,one can communicate with others whether through talking to them or reading what they write . Al.Hammash and younis (1980:7) state that "man need to use system of symbols including language to express his needs and to make others help in fulfilling them " .

Normally , the main skills of teaching any language are classified into four types : listening , speaking , reading and writing while the language system is composed of sounds , the writing system consists of letters and written symbols. Because spelling is very important in writing skill, it will be thoroughly discussed in the research.

1.2. The problem and Its significance

English is not a phonetic language ,i.e, it is not written as it is spoken or it does not have closer phoneme grapheme correspondence . Al.khffaji(1987:7) stresses that" to spell correctly makes written communication easier while misspelling might lead to interruption of communication and misunderstanding" . Spelling difficulties are excepted to rise not only for foreign students learning English as a foreign language , but also for native speakers. As a result , the researcher developed an impression that Iraqi university students face some spelling problems when they need to write in English . The findings of the research may be of value to those concerned with the preparation of program for teaching English as a foreign language at the university level.

1.3.The Population, The Sample and The Test

This research is limited to the investigation of spelling errors made by fourth year students in the university of diala (college of education) for the academic year 2007-2008. The total number of the study is sixty. Consequently, twenty students were randomly chosen to represent the population. The researcher has supplied a test of free composition assuming that it will measure the students' ability in spelling. Some title are given for the students such as "My future , My hobbies, The sea, The food we eat and My best friend….etc"

1.4. Definition of Basic Terms

1- Error : a deviation form accuracy of correctness or an inaccuracy in   speaking   or   awriting   .
(the random house dictionary , 1983)
2- College Students : A college student is a student who is undergraduate, i.e, a university student who has not taken his /her first degree .   *(Oxford word power 1999:806)*
3- Spelling : the formation of words by using letters , orthographically ; a combination of letters representing a word .
(New Webster's dictionary ,1985)

Section Two

2-1. The Importance of Spelling

Spelling is a very important activity in writing and in learning a foreign language. Baron (1975:viii) stresses that "It is of little importance that a person be a good penman unless he can spell correctly". So spelling occupies a major role in the various aspects of language. Pronunciation occupies the first place in most linguistic studies , especially in matter of teaching and learning languages . Schon(1987:23) remarks that "International communication and international understanding are essential these days because of high technology and rapid transportation ". therefore , this leads us to pay more attention to the correct spelling since the spelling has great influence on pronunciation .

Therefore , in order to avoid confusion and interference by orthography , many linguists suggest that the use of writing should be

in the early stages of learning . They stress that orthography can be introduced only after the student has developed correct pronunciation

In relation with writing composition , spelling is very essential because spelling errors affect comprehension , and for readers , make confusion in meaning . Hughes and lascaraton (1982:171) state that" errors in spelling create the great difficulties for comprehension . Spelling which may result in lexical confusion should be as heavily penalized result in lexical errors themselves "

They add that " spelling errors will affect comprehension , even if the readers knew the topic of composition in which the errors occurred , e.g , The book was red . The book was read ."

Indicating the importance of spelling regarding the role of correct spelling in understanding what the writers write , Stricland (1957:368) States that " the main purpose of spelling is to enable readers to gain meaning from what is written " .West (1975:216)supports the mentioned views concerning the importance of spelling when he emphasizes that " a change in spelling often losses the original meaning of a word ". He adds that " another problem created by a drastic spelling reform would make practically useless all the books , magazines , and other written records now current " .Spelling achieves another important benefit to the learner of English as a foreign language . Because of the close relationship between the sounds and letters , spelling gives the learners the opportunity for thinking about how to form the words especially the words containing many syllables .

Baron (1973:16) states that " clear thinking is an essential preliminary to good spelling. Bad spellers too frequently think of a word as a vague jumble of letters : the good speller splits each difficult word into syllables   and tackles each syllable in turn " . kinsella (1975 : 325) mentions that " poor spelling may be a serious handicap for reasons other than it may cause " . There is an economic importance trying to learn to spell ; employers every where assume that poor spelling is a sign of stupidity and illiteracy . Anderson (1972:362) says that " perhaps , they reason , rightly or not , that careless in spelling is a visible , measurable sign of carelessness in other more important things . And because it can be easily seen and easily judged , it has become one of the first test of a person's education and his fitness for a job " .

Many linguists agree that the process of learning how to spell correctly is valid and a best opportunity to realize many important subjects regarding phonetics and phonology .

2.2 The Difficulty of English Spelling

A constant problem accompanying alphabetic writing is that of spelling . Many learners, writers and highly educated people have difficulty with spelling . The main reason of these difficulties related to inconsistency of English spelling system . The question is emphasized by many linguists .

The irregularity of English spelling is mentioned by Taylor (1981 : 317) . He says that" there is no one- to- one correspondence between sound and letters ".

It is well known that English has the most un phonetic spelling. In this regard ,West (1975 : 214) states that " the difficulty with spelling partly , because of the lack of phonetic relationship between the written and spoken words "

It has been observed by all writers of English language that the orthography or spelling of words is very irregular . Bolton (1966 : 157) points out that " the same letter often expressed by different sounds , and the same sound often expressed by different letters " . Hook (1976 : 97) also says that" since we have only twenty – six letters to symbolize more than forty sounds , some letters must perform at least a double duty " .

A language like English can cause many difficulties because of the effect of irregularities of its spelling . Thus , " foreign learners who have learned to pronounce (head) as / hed / , may also apply this in pronouncing (heal) and the same spelling for words like (lead) : /li:d/ and lead : /led/. "(politzer, 1970 :85)

2.3. Spelling Errors In English
2.3.1 Errors in General

Approximately , each work has been looking at errors from a certain angle because errors are not only language specific but there are many other factors which could be taken in to consideration such as psychological , cultural or sociological . Many researchers have been successful in attempting to reveal some of error relation them to the interference of the first language (L 1) .

Others are not quite happy about such works claiming that interference from first language is not the sole source of error in the second language learning . Some linguists divide errors in to three categories : Individual ,
language specific and general . The individual errors may occur both in the speech of native speakers or (L2) learners . The specific errors are those which result from contact between two structure systems and general errors are those common to all groups regardless of differences in source of language structure .

2.3.2 Error analysis

Error analysis is a field which falls within the domain of applied linguistics . Today , there is a growing interest in it from both linguists and teachers . This is so because : first , errors analysis has relevance to measuring and grading of achievement in language teaching. Nickel (1973:22) argues that " there is agreement on the nature and significance . There can be no objectified measuring " . Secondly , error analysis has a considerable contribution to psychology of learning because errors provide the linguist and psychologist with evidence of how language is learnt . Thirdly , error analysis contributes to the designing of teaching material since " staging , sequencing and grading rely to a certain extent upon error analysis .
It can be said that tradition error analysis has been an attempt to deal with the practical needs of the teacher since it involves a collection of common errors , Their classification in to categories (e.g .errors omission , addition , substitution etc .) and is concerned with practical goal of correcting and eradicating errors . The results of errors analysis can be used as a feed back for designing syllabuses as well .

Recently , many linguists (such as corder , strevens , selinker and others) have revolutionized the concept of traditional error analysis . While traditional error analysis as an obstacle to the learning process , the new way of looking at errors is that errors are inevitable feature of learning process . This recent motion is expressed by many researchers such as Jain (1974 : 208) who regards errors as " an essential condition of learning" .

Section Three

This section aims at analyzing the errors of the subject through adopting an error analysis approach .The researcher will start with the identification of errors and classifying them in categories .

3.1.The Types of Spelling errors in English
3.1.1. Errors in spelling

1- Wrong representation of vowels and diphthongs :
This category has actually proved to be thorny and problematic because It has been difficult to define and to find causes for explanation .The responses have been diversified and each student has made a different type of mistakes in this respect . If the word (hope) which is a small word , taken as an example , one can find the following types of errors : Haup , houp , howp, houpe .
 The total number of errors is (22) . (13) errors have made by male students . This constitute a percentage of (20) in comparison with those made by female students which have been (9) and constitute percentage of (13.84).
 The researcher found that the errors made in the use of vowels and diphthongs have been much numerous than any other spelling errors and form the most problematic area for Iraqi students . The main reason for the two types of errors can be attributed to unawareness of the students of the inconsistency and irregularity of the English spelling system .
   For example , they cannot realize that the long /u:/ can be represented in writing in   different   letters like , soon , do, group , blue .
2- Substitution of consonant letter by another :
The total number of this type of errors is (11) . male students have made (6) where as female students have made (5) . The percentages are (9.23) and (7.69) respectively.

Examples of such type of errors are:
Proplem for problem , bicture for picture
        Peach for beach
        think for thing..…etc .

The main reason of these spelling errors can be attributed to English language system which has two distinctive bilabial . Plosives /p/ and /b/ , where as Arabic has only /b/ .

There fore , sometimes Iraqi student substitute /b/ for /p/ and
 vice – versa .

3-   Dropping the final (e) in some words :

The total number of spelling errors is (9) . Male students have committed (5) errors with apercentage of (7.69) in comparison with those made by female students which have been (4) with a percentage of (6.15) .

Examples of such types of errors are :

tim	for	time	besid	for	beside
hom	for	home	els	for	else

4-Wrong inversion of vowel digraph (ei , ie) :

The total number of the mistakes is (4) with a percentage of (6.15) for male and female   students . examples of such types of errors are :

thier	for	their
freind	for	friend
acheive	for	achieve

3.1.2.Errors in punctuation

   The total number in this part is (19) errors distributes between full stop errors (8) with a percentage of (42.10). for male and female students , capital letter errors (5) , (3) errors for apostrophe and (2) errors for comma with percentages of (31.57), (15.78) and (10.52) respectively for male and female students . Examples of such errors are :mr. for Mr.,

    Books for books , iraq for Iraq, Oclock , oclo'ck for o'clock, Theyll for they'll , Yes he will for yes , he will…..etc.

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3.2. General conclusions

It is obvious from the results that Iraqi learners of English find English spelling system complex and difficult to learn and they seem to fail to master this system with its difficult rules . It is obvious that wrong spelling representation of vowels and diphthongs as well as substitution of consonant letters by another form the largest portion of errors among other types of spelling errors which also constitute large number of errors.

The researcher believes that one of the most important conclusions that has been arrived is that identification of the exact sources of errors made by the students is not ambiguous and that an error may be attributed to more than one sources .

As noted above , most of learners' errors could be traced back to his mother tongue and the writing habits of his first language , i.e, most of the errors made by the students are transfer error .

Other main causes of errors in spelling may be traced back to some possible reasons such as :

1-	The complexity of English spelling system.
2-	The differences between Arabic and English sound system .
3-	The incomplete application of spelling rules.
4-	The non-phonetic nature of English spelling.
5-The inefficiency of the teaching techniques.
6-The students' carelessness and overgeneralization.

3.3.Recommendations and suggestions

Since teaching spelling is essential to the students learning English as a foreign language and since a good teaching program can highly effective in reducing the errors of learners , more developed means and materials should be devoted for spelling activity .

The researcher recommended the following points :

1-Since English grammar, pronunciation and punctuation play essential part in spelling , teachers should give more attention to teach these activities. They have to associate their related points with the rules of spelling.

2-Teachers should pay more attention to explain the rules of English spelling and its exceptions.

3-Special emphasis may be given to contrastive phonological points where Arabic language differs from English .

4-Teachers need to be more a ware and knowledgeable of divergent dialects and the role they play in pupils' spelling and writing ability .

The following suggestions are made here to improve the teaching of spelling :

1-   Constructing courses for improving the beginner teachers and developing their spelling ability.

2-   Teachers may pay attention to the form and meaning in improving the spelling . Direct from-to- meaning association reduce confusion between alternative spelling .

3-   Using dictionary as a spelling aid can help students to improve spelling .

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