# Causes of spelling errors

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Understanding the linguistic differences between Arabic and English can help us to better understand the factors prompting spelling errors committed by Arab learners of English. Arabic and English differ in almost all linguistic features (e.g., alphabet, phonology, syntax) , and these differences will be pointed out and discussed below.

## The Nature of Mother Tongue (Arabic)

The nature of the Arabic language is one of the main causes of spelling errors among Arab learners of English. Corder (1993) explains that the L1 causes serious difficulties when learning the L2 if the two languages are linguistically distant as is the case for English and Arabic. The Arabic alphabet is comprised of 28 consonants and is written from right to left. In addition, there are four orthographical representations for each Arabic letter, depending on where it occurs in a word, be it independently, initially, medially, or finally. Furthermore, as only consonants and long vowels have their own respective orthographical symbols in Arabic, diactical signs which indicate short vowels add to the Arabic alphabet Abu-Rabia, 2001). Alliath (2010, 9) states that "Arabic language is a consonantal language, in which only consonants and long vowels are represented by letters”. He adds that many of Arabic consonants are phonologically similar to their English counterparts, expect for the sounds /p/,/g/, and /v/. This implies that phonological difference between both languages could be a predictable variable for spelling errors committed by language learners. Another language scholar, Zarka (2013), explains in his study that Arabic does not exhibit the voiceless stop consonant /p/, while English does. Thus, Arab learners of English tend to resort the voiced stop /b/ instead, employing voicing as repair strategy. Also, the absence of the phoneme /v/ in Arabic prompts learners to employ the nearest “equivalent” in their native Arabic, the voiceless /f/. Moreover, Allaith and Joshi (2011) compared the performance of fourth and sixth grade students (a mixed group comprised of both English native speakers and EFL Arab students) and concluded that Arab learners tend to be confuse the spelling of words that contain the phonemes /f/, /v/, /p/and /b/.

In other words, novel phonemes cause native Arabic speakers to substitute the novel phonemes with non-novel phonemes due to their nonexistence in Arabic. Additionally, Abu-Rabia, Shar, and Manssour (2003) state that, in literary Arabic there is a predictable sound-symbol correspondence between the letter and the sound. It is important to assert that Russak and Saieht- Haddad (2010) found in their study that unique phonological structures (i.e., structures that do not exist in the L1) are a common source of difficulty for language learners.

Another characteristic differentiating Arabic from English is that Arabic presents a diglossic phenomenon, both the standard and colloquial forms exist side-by-side. Abu-Rabia and Sammour (2013) and Abu-Rabia and Taha (2006) agree that Arab native speakers use colloquial Arabic, (an informal form that is usually unique to certain geographical areas and does not have a standard orthography) for daily communication purposes, while Standard Arabic is reserved for reading, writing, and formal spoken situations. Saighet Haddad (2007) maintains that the novel phonological phonemes that are not present in the learners’ L1 are more challenging to access. To sum up, Arab learners tend to rely on their mother tongue as an additional source for learning and developing their L2 (English).

## The Role of Mother Tongue in Language Learning

There are many terminologies that are used to refer to one’s native language (e.g., “first language”, “native language”, “mother tongue”, “L1”, etc.). Gass and Selinker (1992)

state that language acquisition develops from simple structure to highly complex structure progressively and is a complex process dependent upon major linguistic aspects, a basic one of which is proficiency in the L1. They further maintain that language acquisition is a continuous process and the L1 is the starting point for the acquisition. Troike (2016) claims that the previous knowledge of the L1 is responsible for the transfer of knowledge from the L1 to the L2 during second language acquisition. Fundamentally, Corder (1993) clarifies that language acquisition depends on the learner's native language; the ease or difficulty of acquiring specific linguistic features of the L2 depends crucially upon the similarity or difference between the L1 and L2. In other words, similarity between both languages prompts quicker and earlier acquisition, while differences lead to slower and delayed language acquisition. Additionally, Al-Joshi (1994) states that the the L1 can influence the acquisition of the L2 in different ways; on one hand, learners face particular linguistic features in the L2 which are not present in the L1, (e.g., silent letters exist in English but are not found in Arabic). Thus, learners tend to use different strategies to facilitate their language learning.

# 2. The Nature of the Target language (English)

## 2.2 English orthography

One fundamental step toward understanding the difficulties faced by EFL learners , particularly Arab learners, is recognizing the depth of English orthography. “Orthography”, according to Tavosains (2007), refers to the accurate way to write a word in any language; if a learner knows how to speak the language, he will know how to spell. This can be accurate in instances in which the respective language has one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and graphemes. In contrast, if the language presents irregularity between phonemes and graphemes, learners of that language will face difficulty spelling accurately. Venezjy (2011, 29) adds "orthography considered the recognition of morphemic elements as important as the recognition of phonemic ones". (Saiegh-Haddad and Geva (2008) clarify that alphabetic orthographies map the oral language at the level of the phoneme. They add that in shallow orthographies the relation between the spelling of the word and its pronunciation is regular and reliable. Furthermore, orthography can be predicted on grapheme-to phoneme conversion, while in deep orthography (such as English) individual graphemes may map into a variety of different phonemes.

Cook (1997) points out that accurately spelling words in English is dependent upon the knowledge of the combination of letters as opposed to sound-letter correspondence. For instance, English has several possible letter combinations for a single sound (e.g., the letter “c” can be pronounced /c/ or /k/). The multiplicity of such letter-sound combination can be considered a fundamental factor motivatingmisspelling. Thus, Gass and Selinker(1992) add that the acquisition of the phonology of the L2 is indeed largely a matter of progressively reformulating the phonological system of the L1 in the direction of the target L2. Al-Jarf(2010) states that spelling errors can be categorized into two types, based on the factors motivating the errors, namely phonology and orthography. Problems arising from phonology arise when a misspelled word does not sound like the target word, while orthographic problems arise in instances in which the misspelled word sounds like the written word, but the grapheme used in the misspelled word does not correspond with the target phoneme.

## 2.3 Inconsistency in the English Spelling System

The lack of correspondence between the written and spoken forms of words in English does not exist in Arabic and thus presents a series of problems among Arabic learners of English. Bourassa and Treiman (2001, 172) state that "successful spelling performance involves the process of segmenting the spoken words into their phonemic components, and then selecting the appropriate grapheme to represent the phoneme". Said (2018) exemplifies that each English phoneme is represented by a variety of graphemes or sequences of letters. Moreover, other letters in English represent more than one phoneme, or it may not even represent any sound at all (e.g., silent letters). Cook (1997) claims that there are 44 phonemes in English which can be represented by different combinations of the 26 letters. Umera-Okeke (2008) sets forth the problems causing spelling errors in English, and they classify them under the following headings:

• The same letter does not always represent the same sound.

• The same sound is not always represented by the same letter.

• Some letters are not pronounced at all (silent letters).

• We pronounce sounds in some places where there is no letter.

• There are variants of the plural and past tense morpheme.

Fender (2008) states that part of difficulty may be due to the fact that Arabic language literacy skills develop from reading fully vocalized scripts with reliable and consistent grapheme-phoneme mapping. In contrast, English has some variable grapheme-phonemes spelling even for consonants with arguably no straightforward phoneme-grapheme correspondence. Bourassa and Treiman (2001) demonstrate that learners have many choices at their disposal when it comes to selecting the accurate grapheme to represent the phonological depiction of words. For example, some phonemes corresponding to consonants have more than one possible orthographic representation, and the suitable choice depends on phoneme's position in the word. Odlin (1989) discusses that the differences in phonemic inventories can cause perceptual confusion during the process of language acquisition, since the phonemic inventory of the native language does not totally impede perception of L2 vocabulary. Therefore, language learners are capable of adjusting their pronunciation of phonemes to match those of the L2.

# Source of Error

For analytical purposes, it is necessary to explain the distinction between “mistakes” and “errors”, in order to determine the source of errors. Brown (2000) states that errors committed by L2 learners arise from several sources (e.g., interlingual errors of interference, intralingual errors within the L2, sociolinguistic context, and cognitive strategies).

There are many ways in which we can classify the sources of such errors, for example Selinker (1972) proposes the following categories:

1. Language transfer

2- Transfer of training

3- Strategies of second language learning

4- Strategies of second language communication

5- Overgeneralization of target language.

Other researchers such as James (2013), Brown (2000) and Oldin (1989) point out that learners' errors are caused by different processes which include transfer, overgeneralization, and communication strategies.

## Errors vs. Mistakes

Essentially, it is important to make a distinction between “mistakes” and “errors” in order to analyze the learners' language performance. Brown (2000) states that the term “mistakes” refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a slip, in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. The term “error”, on the other hand, refers to a noticeable deviation from the grammar of an adult native speaker and reflects the competence of the learner. Errors cannot be self-corrected, while mistakes can, if the deviation is mentioned.

## Interlingua (interference)

Interlingual errors account for a considerable number of errors among SLA (second and foreign language learners). The term was first used by Selinker (1972) to indicate the linguistic knowledge of an L2, and the errors denote the interference of interlingual errors)..Gass and Selinker (1992) define “interlingual” as a system intermediate between the L1 and L2. They, additionally, use it to refer to "the temporary or permanent use of linguistic features from one language in the performance of another (p. 26)". Corder (1981) suggests that interlanguage is a systematic production of the L1 and L2. In other words, the learner's production of language is distinctive and comprises features from the L1 and L2. Oldin (1989) and Brown (2000) define “language transfer (interference)” as the carrying over of previous systematic or linguistic knowledge to subsequent learning, adding that " it is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language, that has been previously acquired (p. 27)". “Transfer” can be classified into two types: positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs when the preceding linguistic knowledge facilitates the acquisition of the L2, while negative transfer occurs when previous performance disrupts performance in the L2. Brown (2000) asserts that negative language inference is surely the most immediately noticeable source of errors among language learners. Fender (2008) dictates that one way in which the L1 influences language spelling in the L2 is in the transfer of phonological knowledge or the transfer of grapheme-phoneme correspondence skills. In other words, transfer includes not only the familiarity of the letter but also the corresponding letter mapping. Oldin (1989) categorizes the errors in speech and writing into three types, namely: substitution (for example Arab learners occasionally commit spelling errors by substituting the letter /p/ with the letter /b/ both phonologically and orthographhically), calques, and alteration.

## Intralingual Errors

Kaweera (2013) states that intralingual errors can be defined as deviations from the language which are caused by conflicting information present in the L2. These errors are not related to language transfer; however, they comprise the L2 itself. In addition, Lott (1983) posits that intraligual errors reflect general features of rule learning, such as overgeneralization, incomplete application of rules, ignorance of rules, and failure to learn.

# Related Studies

Native language interference has become a topic of interest among linguisst internationally, motivating them to examine and identify errors made by L2 learners in order to better understand the factors prompting such errors. The present study focused on this very phenomenon as it pertains to Arab-Israeli learners. A number of studies have been conducted in different countries. For example, Allaith and Joshi (2011) examined the influence of the phonological system of the L1 on the L2, comparing the spelling performance of Arab students to the performance of English nativess by administering spelling tests. The resultsdemonstrated the importance of phonology in spelling as well as the influence of the L1 on spelling performance in the L2. Similarly, Al-Jayousi (1994) states that errors are attributed to a number of causes such as irregularity of the orthographic system in the L2 and L1 interference. Saiegh-Haddad and Geva (2007) show the significant correlation between phonological awareness in English and Arabic.

In a study conducted in Israel specifically, Russak and Saiegh-Haddad (2010) investigated the relationship between phonological awareness in Hebrew (the L1) and English (the L2), among normal reading and reading-disabled Hebrew native speaking adults. They confirmed that the process of acquiring reading in a specific language is contingent upon awareness of the phonological structure of that language, not only among normal readers, but also among disabled readers. It is important to note that the present study is based on Russak & Saiegh-Haddad (2010) for examining Arab learner's spelling performance.

# Limitations of the Study

It goes without saying that this study was not without some limitations. Firstly, the participant pool was solely comprised of Arab-Israeli students which may have affected the results. Secondly, all of the participants were students at the same elementary school. Consequently, the findings of this study might not be applicable to all Arab-Israeli EFL students.

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