**Research proposal**

**The Arabic College for Education -Haifa**

**Morphological processing in English as a foreign language among Arabic L1 learners.**

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**Introduction**

English has become a *lingua franca* in many parts of the world. In Israel in particular, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors prompt Arab students to learn English as a third language. The multilingual situation of Israel means that Arab students are required to learn three different languages (i.e., Arabic, Hebrew, and English) in a short period of time, namely the first three years of their primary school education. Arab Israeli students first begin learning reading and writing skills in Arabic (L1) in the first grade. As Hebrew is the official language of Israel, it is mandatory for Arab Israeli students to learn it as an L2 starting from the second grade. They then start learning English (L3) in the third grade on account of its international status.

The three languages in question differ drastically for a multitude of reasons including, but not limited to, the differences in their orthographic systems, phonetic inventories, lexicon, and language family classification. The stark differences between these languages present many obstacles for learners (Abu-Rabia & Siegel, 2003). Even though Bryant (2015) posits that the (s) rules are considered one of the simplest rules in English, the lack of correlation between the phonology and orthography of many words in English often confuses students. For instance, the plural inflection (s) can be pronounced in three different ways: [s] (e.g., *cats*), [z] (e.g., *dogs*) and [iz] (e.g., *bees*). The aforementioned plural types often present lack of correlation between the sound of the word and its spelling and consequently present difficulties for the English learner. Bryant (2015) referred to the lack of correlation between the sound of the word and its spelling as ‘irregular relationships’ (e.g., the [z] in *quiz* is written as z). ‘Regular relationships’, on the other hand, refers to instances in which the sound of a word and its spelling are dissimilar (e.g., the [z] in *bees* is represented by *s*).

By analyzing data gathered through spelling dictation tests completed by 34 Arab Israeli students, the present work will explore the spelling errors made when writing words in their plural and/or third person singular forms. Both regular and irregular relationships will be investigated. More specifically, this paper aims to provide insight into Arab Israeli students’ morphological processing of the inflectional (s) in English plural and third person nouns. These two relations will be checked according to the students' dictation. Moreover, this paper is going to present the morphological processing that 34 EFL Arab students have with the inflectional (s) in both plural and third person. This paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of errors do EFL Arab students make in their writing with the realization of the (s) representation inflection in both first person singular and plural ?

2. What types of spelling errors with the (s) morphemic representation characterize native Arabic (L1) English learners?

**Literature review**

**Spelling**

Spelling is the ability of the student to write correctly and accurately in the language being learned. Accurately spelling in English is important to native speakers and learners alike. More than 200 million people learn and speak English as a second or third language all over the world. The language development of English differs for native speakers and learners. Many researchers have proved that unlike monolingual speakers, English students draw upon their knowledge of their first language to spell in a new learned language (Crystal, 1997, as cited in Figueredo, 2006).

Krashen (1989) suggested a direct link between the amount of time spent reading and spelling accuracy. The same conclusion was reached in his article (1993) wherein he mentioned that the exposure to unfamiliar words encountered during reading can be beneficial even though the students are not focusing on learning spelling while reading. Abu-Rabia and Taha (2004) also posit a correlation between writing and spelling, suggesting that spelling demands more effort than reading, as the development of spelling differs from the development of reading. That is to say, spelling demands translating the phonological sounds into orthographic symbols (while in reading, the opposite is the case). Abu-Rabia explained that the existence of multiple phonemes for the same orthographic letter complicates spelling for students. Consequently, it is more important for students of English to have a strong understanding of the orthographic units than the reading process itself. It is a good step in developing many language skills including pronunciation. Dimitris and Eleni (2012) reiterated this point by expressing that for English students "the basic aim of spelling is to make students be able to create orthographically corrected text by themselves".

Lennox and Siegel (1998) explained that spelling process goes through two different channels. Firstly, children learn phonological patterns and how to represent the sounds phonologically by translating the phonemic symbols into graphic ones. Secondly, children learn to spell by using both phonological and orthographic techniques (i.e., direct lexical access without phonological intervention).

**Spelling errors of morphemes**

Strong reading skills can positively influence spelling accuracy (Krashen, 1989; Dimitris & Eleni, 2012), as can a strong sense of phonological awareness, orthograpical knowledge, visual memory skills, and lexical knowledge. Spelling errors trouble native and non-native English speakers alike. Al-zyoud and Kabilan (2013) maintain that students who have difficulty spelling are unable to express their ideas easily. They further express that spelling in English is particularly difficult for Arabic (L1) learners of English, due to the dissimilarity between the two languages.

Abu-Rabia and Taha (2004) stress the importance of analyzing children and English students’ spelling errors in order to gain better insight into the acquisition of spelling rules. Their data yielded the following five key types of spelling errors: i) phonetic errors which include words that are written in accordance with their sounds, not their orthographic patterns (e.g., *cigarette* – [sigaret]); ii) semi-phonetic errors based on omission or adding of isolated specific phonemes; iii) dysphonetic errors; iv) visual letter-confusion that occurs when visual shapes of letters are similar; v) irregular spelling rules that demonstrate lack of mastery for students in the language itself. All these errors strengthen the aforementioned claims about Arab students’ ability in learning English and their limitations when spelling in English. Cook (1999) also investigated the spelling errors that English learners make. The errors were classified into four major common errors: i) omission (i.e., when student leave out one letter); ii) substitution (i.e., the replacement of the original letters with others); iii) transposition (i.e., changing the position of the letter); iv) insertion (i.e., adding extra letters).

**Morphemic structures and rules for the (s) in both third person and plural**

This research will deal with the (s) of the third person and plural according to its use by the Arab English students. The development of spelling skills in English requires adding (s) to singular nouns (to pluralize them) and at the end of third person singular verbs. According to Nagy & Abbott (2006) in plural nouns, inflectional (s) can be spelled either *s*, *z* or *es*. In the third person form, however, it is always spelled (s). Students usually learn the plural form first, because these rules are easier to use and apply compared to those of the third person. They also mentioned that even students who are English learners take more time to understand and apply the rules of the third person (s) correctly. Bryant, Mitchell and Kemp (2015) suggested that the system of English spelling is generally difficult to grasp. There are many inconsistencies between phonology and spelling. For example, [z] can be written (s) and pronounced [z] as in *bees*, but at the same time it can be written (z) as in *zoo*. They added that simple morphological spelling rules are not always employed, citing individual differences in children and adults. The (s) ending in both plural and third person verbs are considered two of the simplest rules in English, as the same (s) is written at the end of the nouns and present verbs that are inflected in the third person.

**Morphological processing of spelling**

The word ‘morphology’ refers to the language level related to morphemes, (i.e., the smallest meaningful parts or units in language). ‘Spelling’ refers to the encoding of letters and words into their correct written form. Spelling is difficult for English learners and it is a crucial component for literacy (Dimitris & Eleni, 2012). Moreover, awareness of morphological processing can help to provide students with a deep knowledge of spelling rules and further help them to overcome spelling difficulties. When students learn English as a second or foreign language, completing meaningful dictation activities is important in the development of students’ knowledge of morphemic structure and analysis. It also helps students develop their orthomorphology (i.e., the relationship between spelling patterns and morphemes). Dimitris and Eleni (2012) also explained that due to the difficulty students face regarding accurately spelling words, morphological awareness helps students understand how words are spelled.

**Method**

**Research overview**

The aim of the present study is to focus on Arab students’ spelling errors when realizing the inflectional (s) in the plural, nouns, and third person singular verb forms in relation to it morphemic representation. The research group is comprised of 34 Arab students in the tenth grade who learn English as an L3 and are not exposed to it much in their daily life. There is an important need to shed light on this aspect, in order to uncover the exact problem that Arab students in Israel encounter when spelling the inflectional (s).

**Participants**

The participant pool was comprised of 34 tenth grade students at an Arab school in northern Israel. All of the participants have Arabic as their L1, and this is the language employed in their daily life and communication. They have been learning English as a third language since the age of nine. Hebrew, the official language of the country, is their L2, while English, a global language, is their L3. It is also important to note that formal/literary Arabic (also known as Modern Standard Arabic or Classical Arabic) is restricted to formal or literary situations and differs from colloquial/spoken Arabic (i.e., the informal language variety used in day-to-day interactions) phonetically, syntactically, semantically, and lexically. These students learn English in a heterogeneous class with a non-native English teacher and attend five lessons per week (each of which is 45 minutes in duration). They are not exposed to English outside their English lessons, as there is little to no opportunity for them to use it in their daily life or surrounding environment. The daily languages are Hebrew and Arabic as they are the two official languages of the country.

**Materials**

The materials included two lists comprised of twenty words each (one list with verbs and one with nouns). The focus on students' dictation will be on the spelling errors made when orthogtaphically realizing the morphemic plural and third person (s) which get pronounced as [s], [z], and [iz]. Both lists are included in the appendix.

**Procedure**

34 tenth grade students were given a dictation assignment. Each student was administered forty words, twenty of which were verbs including (s) as an inflection in the third person. The twenty other words included nouns to present the plural. Dictation was deemed the best method for data collection, on account of its importance in developing the knowledge of morphemic structure and the ability to morphologically analyze words (as well the semantic knowledge of relations between spelling and morphemes) (Dimitris & Eleni, 2012). The list of twenty verbs was divided into the following four categories: i) five end in an (s) that gets pronounced as [z] (e.g., *runs*); ii) five end in an (s) that gets pronounced as [s] (e.g., *cooks*); iii) five end in (es) that gets pronounced as [iz] (e.g., *kisses*); iv) five end in (s) as part of the verb (e.g., *express*). The list of words that presented plurals also included twenty words divided into four categories: five end with (s) pronounced as [z] (e.g., *trays*); ii) five end with (s) pronounced as [iz] (e.g., babies); iii) five ended in (s) pronounced as [s] (e.g., *boats*); iv) five ended with (s) as part of the word (e.g., *James*).

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**Appendix**

List of verbs ends with s

Verbs ends with s pronounced \es\

Notices

Watches

Fixes

Splashes

Kisses

Verbs ends with s pronounced \s\

Cooks

Laughs

Accepts

Admits

Finds

Hunts

Writes

Verbs ends with s pronounced \z\

Runs

Knows

Cries \*

Plays

Fails

Flies \*

Verbs with s as part of the word

Express

Guess

Impress

Pass

Press

List of words for dictation

Plural with (es) pronounced as /IZ/

1. Dishes

2. Babies

3. Boxes

4. Churches

5. Quizzes

Plural with (s) pronounced /s/

6. Boats

7. Skates

8. Answers

9. Plants

10. Notebooks

11. Sharks

Plurals ends with (s) pronounced \z\

12. Trays

13. Rivers

14. Cards

15. Seasons

16. Computers

Names that ends with (s)

17. James

18. Amos

19. Carlos

20. Elias