

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 4 April 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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Spelling and Auditory Discrimination Difficulties of Students in Oman: An Analysis

Maruthi Kumari Vaddapalli, Ph.D.

Abstract

English spelling can be a major problem for Arab learners mainly due to differences between the phonological systems between the Arabic and English. ESL learners are likely to experience difficulties with spelling as a result of mother tongue (L1) interference. There is always some influence of mother tongue on the target language (L2) (Phenix, 2001). Spelling difficulties can also be caused due to the nature of the target language. This paper examines the spelling errors and auditory discrimination problems of speech sounds of undergraduate students at a university in Oman. It identified Omani students' difficulties with the auditory discrimination of sounds which was evidenced in their spelling performance. It is suggested that appropriate measures be

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taken by colleges and schools in Oman to systematically address students' phonemic awareness and spelling skills.

Introduction

Auditory discrimination of speech sounds or phonemic awareness is an important literacy skill. Auditory discrimination of speech sounds leads to better listening skills. Auditory discrimination of sounds is considered the most sophisticated skill that leads to identification of different speech sounds (Stredler-Brown&Johnson, 2004). Differences in the manner of articulation, voicing and place of articulation may lead to problems in listening comprehension as well as speech production. For example, if /θ/ in 'thank' is perceived as /t/ in tank, it can lead to lead to misunderstanding. Similar problems may arise if a voiceless plosive /p/ is understood as a voiced plosive/b/ then a 'pour' becomes a 'bore'. Hence auditory discrimination of speech sounds is important for listening, reading and spelling skills. Listening, spelling and reading are skills that are very much interrelated. Of all the skills, listening is considered the basic and fundamental element of language learning since it involves hearing, perceiving and interpreting sounds (Stredler-Brown&Johnson, 2004).

Difficulties of EFL and ESL Learners in Language Learning

Many non-native speakers learn English as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL). Their exposure to English language is usually very little. The only place where they get formal instruction is the class room. The teacher of English is the main resource of English language to many EFL learners around the world. Better English learning is possible only when the student is highly motivated and explores all the available resources and learns the language.

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In these circumstances, most students have problems in reading, writing, speaking, listening and spelling words due to lack of phonemic awareness and thus developing phonemic awareness allows students to utilize classroom language input more fully.

Spelling Skills

Spelling is a basic literacy skill that helps students become better readers and writers. A writer can concentrate better if he is a good speller and he performs better cognitively. Studies have proved that reading and spelling are closely connected and proficiency in spelling needs a high amount of vocabulary. Therefore, a good reader is bound to be a good speller (Morris, 1999; Templeton, 1991).

Many students in EFL context lack phonemic awareness which causes difficulty in reading and spelling. When students have problems with spelling, it indicates their poor listening skills and lack of awareness of the sounds of English. Since most English words are not written the way they sound and they have irregular spelling, English language learners struggle a lot to gain spelling proficiency. English spelling is unpredictable and irregular sometimes therefore, many EFL and ESL learners have poor spelling performance. Given this situation, it is not surprising to find many children and adults have difficulties and trouble with spelling (Dixon, 1993).

Traditionally spelling has been given less importance both by schools and colleges in Oman. It has been neglected even though it is an essential skill in academics. Spelling proficiency is essential for many reasons. Poor spelling often causes severe strain on the reader and many a

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times a misspelled word may change the actual meaning of the text and may cause a serious miscommunication. A wrongly written word definitely distracts the reader and the reader gets a low opinion of the writer.

Mastery of English spelling needs an understanding of grapheme-phoneme relationship. Beers, Beers and Grant (1977) talk about the importance of phonemic awareness. They suggest that students need at least one year of systematic instruction in phonics in order to develop skills related to letter-sound correspondence. According to the report of National Reading Panel (2000), phonemic awareness training has a “strong and significant effect” on teaching spelling skills that remain effective even after the training. Phonemic awareness leads to better reading and spelling achievement (Munro & Munro, 1993). It builds a foundation for students to understand the rules of the English language. This in turn allows each student to apply these skills and increase his or her oral reading fluency and understanding of the text. Phonemic awareness has been suggested to be the major predictor for decoding and spelling ability.

Children learn to spell unfamiliar words in two main ways; by internalising the orthographic patterns of written words by imitation and by synthesizing their knowledge of letters and letter clusters with how the word is said in an analogy process. The extent to which these ways are influenced by the ability to segment the word into sounds has not been resolved (Goswami & Mead, 1992; Moustafa, 1995).

Phonology of Arabic and English

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The phonological system of English and Arabic are very much different from each other. The English language consists of twenty two vowel sounds and twenty four consonant sounds. In contrast, the Arabic language has only eight vowel sounds and thirty two consonant sounds. Another big difference is the phonetic system of these languages. The English language is a non-phonetic language whereas the Arabic language is a phonetic language, which means there is one to one phoneme-grapheme correspondence.

Based on my experience as a teacher of English in the Arab world, I have noticed that most students lack phonemic awareness of short vowels and certain consonants. It has been observed that students mismatch vowels and consonants by substituting a wrong vowel or a consonant. The reason for this could be mother-tongue interference.

It is to be noted that the features of the learners' first language (L1) interfere with the features of the learners' second language (L2). Odlin (1989:112) emphasizes that the phonetics and phonology of the first language are powerful influences on the phonology of the second language. Irrespective of whether the teacher of the second language wants the L2 learner to have his L1 in mind, they always keep their L1 in their minds. They usually connect the L1 with the knowledge of the second language that is being created in every way possible. This causes the mother tongue interference (Cook, 1992).

Students in Oman

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Tertiary level students in Oman complete their secondary school and enter the university. The first year of the university education usually includes a basic foundation course English. Despite their participation in courses at school and colleges, the learners in Oman face spelling difficulties. Since the main language of Oman is Arabic, almost all schools use Arabic as the medium of instruction except for a few private schools. English language literacy until a few years ago began in Grade 5 and other than English, all the subjects were taught in Arabic. After graduating from high school, the students enter tertiary level with poor language skills, especially poor spelling skills and limited strategies for learning. A majority of students of poor seem to have poor spelling skills and thus have reading difficulties. There has been very poor performance on spelling assessments. Phonemic awareness skills are required to possess the ability to segment spoken words and analyze the constituent parts of individual words in spelling.

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Aim

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the spelling error patterns that are made by the students at Dhofar University with respect to short vowels and certain consonants and thus identify the spelling difficulties they face. The study also aims at offering suggestions in teaching spelling to Arab learners of English.

Limitations

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The study includes only three lettered words. This study is limited to only short vowels and certain consonants. There is scope for further research on all the types of spelling errors including consonant clusters, word with irregular patterns, loan words in English etc.

Method

A spelling test of about 20 three lettered words that included short vowels and some problematic consonants was administered to find out the types of errors the student at undergraduate level make. The participants included both male and female. The test was administered to students of an Advanced English course called Advanced Academic English 1 in the department of languages and Translation, Dhofar University, Oman. Each word was repeated twice with a short interval of time. At the end, they were give an opportunity to check their work. An inventory that highlights the errors had been prepared in order to observe the ways students misspell words.

The test has been directly taken from the book “Building Basic Skills:Spelling” written by Czerwonka(2003). The twenty test item words are zip, cut, gap, ten, made, win, wet, rub, men, lot, hut, win, fox, bad, sit, peg, dip, job, hum, jam and pin.

Data Analysis

The chart below gives us the data on the types of mistakes the students have made.

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No.	Test Item	% of errors	types of errors
1.	zip	55%	sep, zep, zap, zeap, zeuba, zeb, zeeb, sip, zab
2.	cut	20%	cat, cet
3.	gap	65%	jab, gab, gad
4.	ten	30%	tan, tean, tin
5.	mad	25%	made, mind, med,
6.	win	55%	when, when, wen, wat, wiat
7.	wet	65%	wat, wiat, what, wheat, whet, wite, watt
8.	rub	95%	rup, rap, rab, raue, rib
9.	men	30%	man, min
10.	lot	20%	loat, leitt, lat
11.	hut	55%	hat, hit, hot, het
12.	fox	15%	focs, fex, fax
13.	bad	0%	
14.	sit	45%	set, sat, sut
15.	peg	85%	pig, beg, bage, pag, big, bug, heg, head, dap, bag, hug, hag
16.	dip	50%	dap, dep, deab, dept, deep, dib,
17.	job	20%	goob, gab, jop, gob
18.	hum	55%	ham, hurm, harm, hom, home
19.	jam	45%	jum, gam, jan, juma, jan, jame, jamb
20.	pin	45%	pen, pain, bin

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The word 'zip' was misspelled by 45% of the students. It is interesting to note that they had a wide range of misspellings that include vowel mismatch (zep, zab,), consonant mismatch(sip,sep).Some of the misspellings were bizarre. They spelled 'zip' as 'zeuba', 'zeep',zeap'.

The word 'cut' was spelled correctly by 80% of the students. Only 20 percent of them misspelled it as either 'cat' or 'cet'.

It is observed that 65% of the students made errors with the word 'gap'. Most of them had a consonant mismatch. They used the letter 'j' instead of g and also 'b' instead of p. The errors also included mismatch of the vowel letter 'a', The misspellings were 'jab', 'gab', and 'gad'. It is interesting to note that the students are unable to discriminate the phonemes /p/, /b/ and /d/. This could be due to mother tongue influence because in Arabic there is no discrimination between a /p/ and a /b/.

For the word 'ten', the problem occurred only with the vowel. They mismatched the vowel in ten my writing 'tan', 'tin', 'tean'. Thirty percent of the students had errors with spelling of the word 'ten'.

It is very interesting to note that none of them made a spelling mistake in writing the word 'bad'.. Usually, it is noticed that students mismatch 'p' and 'b' because they are one and the same in

Arabic. However that didn't happen with this word, which shows that all of them have consciously learned the spelling of this word.

The word 'mad' was written as 'made', 'mind' and 'med'. We observe letter insertion in this word by one of the student. 75% of the students wrote the word correctly.

The misspelling of the word 'win' gives us very interesting information. Most students have written the word as 'when' because there is an equivalent word in Arabic /wen/ which means 'where'. Some of them had a kind of bizarre spelling. They wrote 'win' as 'wat' and 'wiat' and some of them wrote it as 'wen'. It is very important to notice that the students are unable to distinguish nonsense words from English words. The percentage of errors with this word was 55%.

Sixty five percent of the students could not write the word 'wet' correctly. There are a wide range of types of misspelling ranging from vowel mismatch, letter insertion, bizarre or non sense words. The misspellings for the word 'wet' are 'wat', 'wiat', 'what', 'wheat', 'whet', 'wite', and 'watt'.

Ninety five percent of the students could not write the word 'rub' correctly. The misspellings are 'rup', 'rap', 'rab', 'raue', and 'rib'.

Thirty percent of the students made mistakes in spelling of the word 'men'. They wrote the word either 'min' or 'man'.

The word 'sit' was misspelled by 45% of the students. They wrote the word as 'set', 'sat' and 'sut'.

The students seem to be familiar with the spelling of the word 'lot'. Only 20% of them misspelled the word. Those who misspelled wrote it as 'loat', 'leitt', and 'lat'. These errors show vowel mismatch, letter insertion and bizarre words.

The word 'hut' has been misspelled by 55% of the students. They spelled it as 'hat', 'hit', 'hot', and 'het'. One vowel has been perceived in four different ways. This shows that there is lack of phonemic discrimination.

The word 'fox' has been spelled correctly by a majority of the students. Only 15 % of them misspelled the word as 'focs', 'fex' or 'fax'.

The word 'peg' seems to be an unknown word to the students. Only 3 students wrote the word correctly. 85% of them made mistakes. The mistakes were made in many different ways. They wrote the word as 'pig', 'beg', 'bage', 'pag', 'big', 'bug', 'heg', 'head', 'dap', 'bag', 'hug', and 'had'. This kind of spelling performance demonstrates their poor listening skills and especially poor phonological awareness.

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The word 'dip' was misspelled by 50% of the students with many types of spelling errors like vowel mismatch, letter insertion for example, 'deab', 'dep', and consonant mismatch, for example, dib.

Quite a good number of students seem to know the word 'job'. Since these students are undergraduate students who would take up a job after their graduation. However, 20% of the students misspelled the word as 'goob', 'gab', 'jop', 'gob'.

Fifty five percent of the students misspelled the word 'hum' as 'ham', 'hurm', 'harm', 'hom', 'home'.

The words 'jam' and 'pin' have been misspelled by 45% students. the word 'jam' was written as 'jum', 'gam', 'jan', 'juma', 'jan', 'jame', and 'jamb'. The word 'pin' has been written as 'pen', 'pain', and 'bin'.

From the above data, it can be understood that there could be a multitude of reasons for the spelling problems of the students. English spelling system, Arabic phonology, lack of proper spelling instruction at schools and colleges, lack of motivation and seriousness among students, poor reading skills, poor listening skills can be some reasons. Let us take for instance, the problems with vowels due to the phonological variations of Arabic and English. The Arabic speaking students face a major problem with the English vowels since Arabic dialects have only

a limited number of vowel Phonemes. Sometimes, the students fail to recognize and discriminate the English vowels because some allophones of Arabic phonemes are actually phonemes in English.

. For example, many Arab students find difficulty in using the right vowel quality in a minimal pair like *ant* /ænt/ and *aunt* /ɑːnt/ although both [æ(:)] and [ɑː] exist in Arabic. This is due to the fact that both vowels are considered by speakers of Arabic as phonologically ONE vowel phoneme. Lack of phonemic awareness of English sounds is one of the main reasons of spelling problems of these learners whether it is vowels or consonants.

It also shows that the students haven't been giving importance to accuracy in spelling. However, the teachers of English and also the teachers of other subjects who are teaching in English should take this serious problem into consideration and look for solutions to this problem. At an undergraduate level, if the students have problems with auditory discrimination of sounds, that has to be tackled with.

Conclusion

Based on the data analysis, it is important to note that the students at undergraduate level are unable to discriminate speech sounds. It also proves that most students lack phonemic awareness. The students who lack phonemic awareness and thus make spelling errors need appropriate and timely instructional intervention in order to develop these necessary skills. It is suggested that the instructional method for the students in the Arab world should include code

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based approach as well as whole language approach which is basically meaning based rather than skills based. It is also suggested that automatizing spelling is essential for word identification (Graham, 1983).

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