

The Relationship between Spelling and Pronunciation in English Language

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to investigate the relationship between spelling and pronunciation in English language. Learning to spell correctly is perhaps as important as learning grammar, vocabulary and phonology. Errors in spelling always create a bad impression of the writer. For English learners, one of the reasons that are very important for learning English language is the relationship between spelling and pronunciation, because they are closely connected to each other. Both spelling and pronunciation have a complicated connection between them and the connection is often inconsistent. In other words, most of the English language errors of spelling and pronunciation are due to the lack of connection between them. One of the best strategies to remove these kinds of errors in English language is for the English learners to use the English dictionary and they should also learn phonetic transcription.

Key Words: English spelling, English pronunciation, English as foreign language, English as second language

Introduction

The purpose of this brief paper is to highlight the relationship between spelling and pronunciation in English language, before inquiring into the relationship between spelling and pronunciation in the English language. We discuss briefly how the English language is the international language in the modern period. Khansir (2013, p.1141) argues that “today, English language is used as a world language around the globe; it is used as a language of international business, science and medicine. Even in countries where English is not the first language, a number of English words are used. English is used as first, second, foreign lan-

guage and *lingua franca* over the world. People of the world prefer to learn English in order to communicate with other people.” According to this idea, Khansir (2014,p. 839) mentions that "it is a fact that with the development of technology and science in the modern world, the role of a communicative language in order to join people to gather around the world is very vital. English teachers should be competent in all methods they want to use".

Problems with English Spelling and Pronunciation

Khansir (2012a) mentions that the English language has words which are sometimes spelt quite differently from the way they are pronounced. In other words, English spelling and English pronunciation are hostile and strangers to each other; hostile, because neither accepts without a quarrel the usage of the other; strangers, because very often one does not recognize the other. Note that the learning of English spelling and English pronunciation are as important as learning English grammar and vocabulary to language learners. We look at the history of English spelling in the English language. Today, no one would deny that in spite of English advantages, the writing system of modern English contains a number of deviations in its phonemic representation. In fact, many of these can be explained historically.

It is important to remember that the phonological system of every language changes, but writing systems do so very slowly. There are many so-called silent letters in modern English spelling which originated at a time when they actually did represent sound segments. For example, the letters "gh" in *fight*, *light*, and *night* date back to the old English sound segment [x], a voiceless fricative produced at the position of articulation of either [k] or [c]. Just as English has borrowed words, morphemes, and phonological features, so it has also borrowed spellings from other languages. For example, in the Middle English period, many literate people knew French as well as English. Many French words were borrowed into English during this period, so many in fact, that the language gradually became quite different from Old English spoken in earlier days and it is not surprising that some characteristics of French writing were extended to English. (Falk, 1978)

Mutual Influence between Alphabetic Writing System and the Phonological System

Khansir (2012a) argues that there is mutual influence between alphabetic writing system and the phonological system of a language. Pronunciation is occasionally affected by the way in which a word is spelt, and spelling may gradually be modified in accordance with

changes in the phonological system. Perhaps because writing is visible and permanent and because it is formally taught in schools, many people object to changes or variations in spelling, although they may fail to even notice parallel changes in pronunciation. In addition, Bloomfield (1933, p.21) observes that “writing is not language but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks”. It needs to have a systematized form by making use of the components, namely graphemes, vocabulary, syntax, and so on, so as to make a decoder understand it clearly. Language is a storehouse of knowledge with many dimensions of production and reception, so a standard system is needed to record a language in coded form. Writing is a form of encoded symbols in the form of print or impression. (Khansir, 2010)

Pronunciation

Pronunciation always plays the key role in the recognition of a word in speech. Learning correct pronunciation of English words is the most important factor in learning and teaching a foreign and second language. In other words, this is a big problem for English language learners, because the English language does not have fixed phonetic rules. An important point to note about the above sentence is that the English language has borrowed words and expressions extensively from many languages throughout its history. That, in fact, is the main reason for the pronunciation of those words which naturally sound different from the spelling, since they were borrowed from other languages into the English language.

Kinds of Words

The words of our speech in English language may be divided into several kinds: the first kind, the words which carry the meaning of the statement uttered and the second kind, the words which help that utterance to become grammatically correct. We give some examples below in order to understand this subject. Observe, for example, 'Ali gone university today'. Obviously, the intended sense is conveyed, but the statement is grammatically incorrect. A correct example in writing is: 'Ali has gone to university today'. Therefore, the two kinds of words are here mentioned as follows: “Ali, gone, university, today” - these words carry the idea of the statement. Thus, they are called content words. The words - *has, to* – help the above words in making the statement grammatically acceptable. These are called structure words.

Ways to Learn Vocabulary

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Davies and Pearse (2000) argue that one of the ways to learn new vocabulary is that students must be able to recognize and produce the form of a new vocabulary item as well as understand its meaning and use. They added that the students must learn how the new item is pronounced, and how it is written. Ur (1996, p. 52) mentions that "the aim of pronunciation improvement is not to achieve a perfect imitation of a native accent, but simply to get the learner to pronounce accurately enough to be easily and comfortably comprehensible to other (competent) speakers." He added that learners' errors of pronunciation derived from various factors such as 1) A particular sound may not exist in the mother tongue, so that the learner is not used to forming it and therefore tends to substitute the nearest equivalent he or she knows; 2) A sound does exist in the mother tongue, but not as a separate phoneme: that is to say, the learner does not perceive it as a distinct sound that makes a difference in meaning. Carter and Nunan (2001) say that in language learning, pronunciation is used as the production and perception of the significant sounds of a particular language in order to achieve meaning in the contexts of language use.

Birjandi, et al. (2006, p. 175) mention that "the acquisition of a good pronunciation in the target language is commonly held to be the most difficult of all tasks in language learning". They add that the concept of pronunciation may be said to include (1) the sounds of the language, or phonology; (2) stress and rhythm; and (3) intonation. Kenworthy (1990) indicates that the native language speaker has a vital role in learning the pronunciation of English to foreign language learners. Bose (2005) argues that most of the errors in pronunciation are due to the interference of the mother tongue; learners of language use the sounds of their mother tongue instead of those of the target language.

Jonse (1972) discusses the five kinds in the matter of pronunciation as follows:

- 1) A language learner must learn to recognize readily and with certainty the various speech sounds occurring in the language, when the language learner hears them pronounced; he/she must moreover learn to remember the acoustic qualities of those sounds.
- 2) A language learner must learn to make the foreign sounds with his/her own organs of speech.

- 3) A language learner must learn to use those sounds in their proper places in connected speech.
- 4) A language learner must learn the proper usage in the matter of the sound-attributes or prosodies as they are often called (especially length, stress and voice-pitch).
- 5) A language learner must learn to link sounds, for example, to join each sound of a sequence on to the next, and to pronounce the complete sequence rapidly and without stumbling.

Spelling

Spelling contains the rules which govern the way letters are used to write the words of speech; a particular sequence of letters in a word. The history of English spelling begins with the origins of English in the British Isles 1500 years ago. This long history has led to many oddities of English spelling. They are factors that have caused the complexity between sounds and spelling in English Language: first factor is that the pronunciation of English Language has changed over the last 500 years and second one is the thousands of words English has taken from other languages such as India, Latin, and Greek... (Khansir, 2012a).

Spelling is a linguistic unit of language which refers to writing skill directly. Hence, definition of writing as one of language skills is necessary for discussion in this paper. Hedge (1983, p. 89) mentioned that "writing is the way in which a writer puts together the pieces of text, developing ideas through sentences and paragraphs within an overall structure". Khansir (2012b, p.281) argues that " writing plays an essential role in language learning. Writing is defined as art of a writer". He adds that the learning of writing is one of the most important skills that second language learners need to develop their ability to communicate ideas and information effectively in target language. Writing can be recognized as an integral part of the language learning process in ELT classroom.

Spelling System

An English language learner has to know English spelling system in order to write down English sentences. Kenworthy (1990) said that the spelling system are considered in two different situations: the situation of the reader and that of the writer. In writing, a person has to recall the spelling of a word that he or she wants to write down, something must be pulled out of memory, whereas, in reading, a person uses the patterns on the page to decide

how to pronounce a particular word. It is true that the problems of the reader and the writer are not the same. However, in English language, the problem of the reader is certainly usually simpler than the writer's problem.

Kenworthy (1990) focuses on several possible causes of spelling problems among foreign language learners as follows:

1. Among learners whose native languages use the Raman alphabet, as English does, problems may be caused by confusion between the sound value of a particular letter in the native language and its value in English.
2. Learners whose native language uses a non-alphabetic system will have to adjust to alphabetic conventions.
3. Another source of difficulty is the English spelling system itself. As soon as learners are exposed to written English, they start to make generalizations about how the system works. Since English is an alphabetic system, this means basically sorting out which letter corresponds to which sound.
4. Last item is that there is the pronunciation of the learner. If a learner has difficulty in distinguishing English /p/ as in 'pet' from English /b/ as in 'bet', then, in doing a dictation, he or she may spell 'pill' as 'bill'.

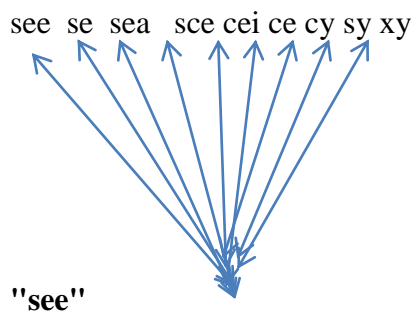
Bose (2005) argues that one of the important errors in learning of English language is spelling errors. He believes that most of the language learners make errors in spelling due to wrong learning of the spelling of words and lack of practice in spelling. He mentions that the words are spelt according to their syllables in order to remember the spelling and a good dictionary can help the learners to improve the spelling errors in English language.

Same Pronunciation/ Different Spellings

Other sets of English words are pronounced alike but spelled differently, as school children learn when they are taught sets of homonyms like led/lead, bear/bare, and to/two/too. Consider the set of words in figure 1 where a single sound is represented by nine different spellings, as in the word sees. Still other spellings for the sound of the word see could be cited, including some relatively common ones like *cease*, *seize* and *siege* and some relatively rare ones like *situ* and *cee* (the name of the letter). Notice that the single letter x, as in *sexy*,

actually represents the two sounds /k/ and [s]; thus the phenomenon of identical pronunciations represented by different spellings applies not only to groups of letters but to single letters as well.

Figure –1
see/senile/sea/scenic/ceiling/cedar/juicy/glossy/sexy

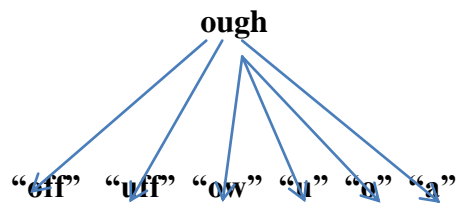


Same Spelling/Different Pronunciations

Observe the variety of pronunciations represented by the same letter or series of letters in different words. Consider the pronunciations of the following words, all of which are represented in part by the letters *ough*:

Cough	“koff”
Tough	“tuff”
Bough	“bow”
Through	“thru”
Though	“tho”
Thoroughfare	“thurafare”

Though the precise sounds of words *cough*, *tough*, *bough*, *through*, *though*, and *thoroughfare* may vary somewhat among English speakers, still the lesson of the distant relationship between sounds and letters will not be lost on any of them. Orthographic *ough* represents at least six different sounds in English, as indicated as seen below in figure 2.



International Phonetic Association

In 1888, the scientific description of speech sounds appeared to develop a phonetic alphabet to symbolize the sounds of all languages over the world. Richards, et. Al. (1992, P. 188) mentioned that “a system of symbols for representing the pronunciation of words in any language according to the principles of the international phonetics association. The symbols consist of letters and DIACRITICS”. To overcome the problem of the mis-match between sounds and letters in English language, phoneticians have evolved an International Phonetic Alphabet (I.P.A.). In other words, The IPA can be used to represent in writing the sounds, words, phrases and sentences of any language of the world. Such representation is called phonetic transcription. To illustrate how this is done, take the English words, 'cent' and 'can't' both begin with the letter c. The first is transcribed as [sɛnt] and the second as [kɑ:nt] . From the transcription it is clear that the letter c is pronounced differently in these two words. The particular characteristic of Phonetic transcription viz, ‘one sound, one symbol’ enables us to show the pronunciation of words unambiguously in writing, thereby making it possible to provide pronunciation in dictionaries.

Discussion

In the case of sound system, it is necessary for English language learners to have a good knowledge of English sounds (consonants, vowels), so that they are found useful to help the learners use these sounds correctly in their normal speech. It is important for an English teacher that he/she should introduce English consonants and vowel system to his/her students. Shuja (1996) indicates that for an English teacher is necessary to have adequate knowledge of phonetics to be able to hear mistakes in the students "pronunciation, in order to cover their faults precisely in terms of articulatory positions and movements and then to devise some useful remedial exercises when just imitation does not show desirable results. She adds that the teacher should also be able to imitate the students' pronunciation accurately to present right and wrong forms side by side for the sake of comparison. However, there are fixed prin-

cipal reasons for the discrepancy between the written representations of many English words and their actual pronunciation:

1. English orthography had several diverse origins with different spelling conventions:

(a) The system that had evolved in Wessex before the Norman Invasion of 1066 gave us such spellings as *ee* for the sound in words like *deed* and *seen*. (b) The system that was overlaid on the old English system by the Normans, with their French orthographic customs, gave us such spellings as *queen* (for the earlier *cween*) and *thief* (for earlier *cheef*). (c) A Dutch influence from Caxton, the first English printer, who was born in England but lived in Holland for thirty years, gave us such spelling as *ghost* (which replaced *gost*) and *ghastly* (which replaced *gastlic*). (d) During the Renaissance, an attempt to reform spelling along etymological (that is, historically earlier) lines gave us *debt* for earlier *det* or *dette* and *Salmon* for earlier *Samon*.

2) A spelling system established several hundred years ago and is still used for a language that continues to change and develop its spoken form. Thus, the initial *k* in *knock*, *knot*, *know*, *knee*, and certain other words were once pronounced, as was the *gh* in *knight* and *thought*, among others.

3. English is spoken differently in different countries throughout the world (and in different regions within a single country), despite a relatively uniform standard for the written orthography. Though, this orthographic uniformity certainly facilitates international communication, it also increases the disparity between the way English is written and spoken in any given place.

4. Words (and their meaningful subparts) alter their pronunciation depending on the adjacent sounds and stress patterns. For example, in *electric* the sound *c* represents the sound [k] as in *kiss*, but in *electricity* it represents the sound [s] as in *silly*.

5. Spoken forms differ from one set of circumstances to another - for example, in formal and informal situations. While some degree of such variation is incorporated into written system (*do not/don't*, *it was/'twas*), there is relatively little tolerance for such spelling var-

iations as gonna (going to) wanna ('want to'), gotcha ('got you'), and jeat yet? ('Did you eat yet?').

6. Such variable spelling of variable speech would force readers to determine the pronunciation of the represented speech before arriving at meaning, instead of reading directly for meaning as adult readers normally do, without the necessity of silent pronunciation.

Conclusion

Languages change throughout their existence - new words get introduced, old words dropout of use, meanings shift and pronunciation alter. English language is no exception. Every word in English has a history. There are certain words in English which do not have the same spelling or even the pronunciation as in the period of Anglo Saxons, 2000 years ago. The written form of the English Language represents its spoken form. In English Language, sometimes one sound is represented by one single letter, sometimes one sound is represented by more than one letter and sometimes more than one sound represent only one letter.

The present study highlights the point that there exists no perfect correspondence between the spelling (letters) and the pronunciation (sounds) in English. One of the reasons could be due to the fact that English has borrowed so many words from so many languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, French, Latin and so on. Today it is almost impossible to say anything without at least one borrowed word. Because of this mismatch between the spelling and the sound, a learner of English language finds it difficult to pronounce a new word encountered in his/her reading; he/she cannot decide how to spell a new word heard by him/her. To overcome this problem, phoneticians have evolved an alphabet that is called the International Phonetic Alphabet (I.P.A.). The use of IPA symbols should therefore be learnt by the learners of a foreign language in order to speak the language with appropriate pronunciation. Foreign learners of a language can use this system effectively. Hence learners of English language can also make use of IPA symbols for learning the sound system of English. Once the learners know symbols representing English sounds, they may consult an English Pronouncing Dictionary effectively in order to solve their problems and thus confusion between the spelling and pronunciation can be easily removed.

An elementary knowledge of English Phonetics is therefore recommended to the non-native learners of English language in order to overcome the problems caused by the confu-

sion between the sounds and letters in English. In the end of the study, for better information about English spelling, some rules are recommended so they can be used by learners of English language to become more familiar with the relationship between spelling and sounds. They are as follows:

1. The learners should be able to distinguish between vowel and consonants letters.
2. The learners should be able to identify affixes.
3. The learners should be able to identify how many syllables a word has.
4. Finally, the learners should be able to promote their ability to pronounce English approximately close to the sound system of British English.

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