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Problems of Spelling in Common English Learners of Saudi Arabia and Strategies for Improvement: A Case Study in Preparatory Year College, Najran University, KSA

Irshad Ahmad Khan, M.A. (Linguistics) Bilal Ahmad Itoo, M.A. (ELT)

ABSTRACT

Learning and teaching of foreign language is a challenging task and the task is learnt through skills of language i.e. writing, listening/speaking, and reading with the help of the rules of grammar. The problems to spell the words in English for FLL (foreign language learner) lie behind lack of learning these skills and practicing it. The purpose of this study is to review the literature on spelling problems and try to find out strategically specific point of solution that can help our student of CPY. Moreover, that one point problem solving factor should cover a wide range of solutions of Preparatory year college English language learners, Najran University, Najran, KSA or in a wider sense; Arab EFL learners. The study aims to know the reasons that lie behind these problems among the students of CPY. In other words, we can say that the aim of this study is to search and adapt the practice that can help our students to improve the spellings while they write in classes or in exams.

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Irshad Ahmad Khan, M.A. (Linguistics) and Bilal Ahmad Itoo, M.A. (ELT)

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A. INTRODUCTION

This is a widely accepted fact that the *Second Language learning/Foreign Language Learning* (SLL/FLL) is always a difficult task than our own mother tongue. Language learning or language acquisition is skill based learning process that can only be acquired by practicing of skills just like any other skills. Learning other skills like driving, swimming, playing gymnastic games etc. are the skills that cannot be forgotten in whole life once acquired, so as language. However, the parameter of learning skills goes up and down according to the level of practice. For this reason, language proficiency tests all over the world (for example; IELTS and TOEFL) have their own validity of time because the language learners can lose some mastery over the language they have learned if not practiced/used according to the required level of knowledge and skills.

It has been observed through the long period of teaching that some particular language speakers learn and pronounce English language well than the Arab language learners of English. On the other hand, the Arab language learners are able to pronounce some of the sounds of English more accurately than the sub-continent language learners. Obviously, some conditions must be applied on the learners' ability to pronounce English language if we compare these subcontinent-Arab learners' ability to learn the target language as a whole and pronunciation in particular. Here, the aim is not to compare these two different language speakers' learning or the pronunciation correctness, but it leads us on one observation. That is, the variations of phonetic sounds between the target language and the mother tongue affect the learners' ability to learn, and it needs the different strategies of teaching and learning. Language that has more similar sounds and orthographical system with target language may learn the target language more accurately than those who do not have. However, these hypotheses are just the observations that have been observed through the long period of teaching and do not have any evidence of literature in our knowledge and this is the matter of a different research and enquiry.

Furthermore, with reference to a wide known fact that the mother tongue has its own impact and influence on the target language such as; semantics, orthography, sentence construction, pronunciation, grammar, phonology, morphology, culture, and the tendency of direct translation from mother tongue to target languages etc. The relation between writing, reading/pronunciation of written text and oral use of target language/spoken form of target language in day-today life with its' effect of mother tongue leads us to have enquiry about the problems as a case study of spellings in CPY and have some strategies to cope with the problems. The importance of this study can be understood with the fact that spelling is not merely a representation of writing skill/phonetic sound combination of letters; moreover, it is a bridge between writing words and their creative command to spell words through the judgement of phonetic sound order of words. Because spellings in English language have some rules, some

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irregular forms, and some has different construction with reference to pronunciation and vice-a-versa. Therefore, the English spelling system has both regularities and irregularities which can be problematic for non-native speakers learning English. But it is very much possible for the teachers to know them and teach students the inconsistencies. This paper tends to have a survey on the similarities and differences between English and Arabic sound-spelling and identifies the problematic area for CPY students/Arab learners.

B. BACKGROUND

The subjects of the study are students of two classes. These two sections of students are very new in the College of Preparatory year. They just have completed their secondary school education. Almost all of these students face writing/spelling problems in their study during one year or two semester education. College of Preparatory year is the pre-university college that every student has to admit for their bachelor degree in different disciplines like Engineering, medical sciences, Arts and Sciences etc. English is the medium of instruction in universities officially, but like any other country it has native language impact on the students. But this impact seems stronger like any other Arab nation because the use of English language outside university campuses i.e. in public places doesn't seem welcome. Institutions like banks, government offices and multinational private companies are the places where English language is serving as a common language among different nationality including Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

C. DATA AND TEACHING AIDS

The data has been collected from the two different classes of first semester students of year 2011-2012. These two classes had 16 and 20 students respectively. We have collected the data after two weeks of classes and before two weeks of first mid-term examination so that the students got familiar with the teachers and could freely talk to teachers about their problems. The reason of timing to collect the data just after two weeks of classes is that the students we got in CPY are new, and they should be trained in English language as they can understand and grasp the future course of study well in target language. Thus, CPY study is very much crucial for the universities in Saudi Arabia. So this is a very challenging task for the EFL teachers or the teachers of the ELC (English Language Centres) in Saudi Arabia. It was decided that data should be collected through paragraph writing test, so that the students can have the opportunity to use their mental vocabulary of target language. It helped us to understand the previous knowledge of words they are familiar with and their spellings. Total students were 36 in two groups. After giving two weeks supplementary classes to both the groups, researchers have got the following results that are mentioned here forth. Only 10 sample papers are given in the form of *Appendixes* 1-10 and the results are mentioned in A-J *Tables of Appendixes*. Among 36 participants /

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informants, 6 students were absent when data was collected. Only 5 students have not made any error. Additional data is mentioned below under the heading *Statistical Data Analysis*.

Regarding teaching aids, the students have been given four line notebooks to practice English words and alphabets to know the root level cause because they usually make mistakes while they write similar morphemes/phonemes. The students were asked to write two pages of writing/dictation everyday strictly as a home assignment in the form of given fables and short stories. This task has shown great interest among students. Black board, power point presentations and the use of four line notebook have played a very important role in teaching aids.

D. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several researches have been conducted on different areas of language skills viz. listening, speaking, reading and writing but a very few works have been done on the area of spelling. In each and every language, spelling matters especially English in the context of Arab EFL learners. As far as spelling is concerned, the writing is difficult to imagine without spelling in English. "While it's true that we learn a lot of what we know about spelling from reading and writing, I think we now know that for many children spelling is not caught-it must be taught. Certainly, we know from research and from experience in the classroom that for many children reading and writing alone are not sufficient for learning to spell" (Hughes and Searle, 1996).

One of the good works is Margaret Peters' little classic, Spelling: Caught or Taught. According to Peters "most people don't realize that the incidental versus systematic teaching of spelling controversy has been going on for over a century" (Peters, 1985). Early spelling emerges in developmental stages. It is very natural for the emerging speller to go through a "babbling" stage of spelling, a stage of abbreviated spelling (CT for cat), a stage of spelling by ear (EGL for eagle), and a stage of spelling by eye (FRIDE for fried) (Gentry, 1996). These stages are the foundation of later spelling competency (Gentry, 1987; Gentry and Gillet, 1993; Wilde, 1992). "I think it's important to remember that, for many children, spelling must be taught" (Gentry, 1996). "It's important to remember that spelling must be individualized. Spelling cuts across the curriculum. It should be connected to writing and reading. The goal of a spelling program should be to develop writers and readers who have spelling consciousness and good spelling habits" (Hillerich, 1977). It's easy to judge if a good spelling program is part of an elementary classroom, secondary classroom or a higher secondary classroom. Simply ask, "Are children in this classroom engaged in the spelling process: finding words, inspecting words, mastering words, and developing good spelling habits?" (Gentry, 1995).

In (1957) Lado hypothesized that errors in the second language (L2) are caused by the interference of the student's native language. Such errors reflect the student's inability to separate L1 and L2. Therefore, a contrastive analysis of L1 and L2, he thought, will help predict the areas

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of difficulty in L2. Odlin (1989): James (1980); Brown (1987) pointed out that students' errors in L2 are caused by several processes. These include transfer, overgeneralization and communication strategies. Transfer refers to the effect of L1 on the learning of L2. In transfer, patterns from L1 are borrowed. Two types of language transfer were identified: negative transfer and positive transfer. In negative transfer (interference) the use of an L1 pattern or rule leads to an error or inappropriate form in L2. Positive transfer occurs when L1 and L2 have the same form. Positive transfer makes L2 learning easier. In Overgeneralization, patterns may be extended from L2 by analogy. Overgeneralization is a process common in both L1 and L2 learning in which the student extends the use of a grammatical rule of linguistic item beyond its accepted uses, generally by making words or structures follow a more regular pattern. A communication strategy is used to express meanings using the words and grammar which are already known (Ellis 1985; Davies, Criper, & Howatt 1984; Selinker 1972). A review of the L2 spelling literature has indicated that the acquisition of spelling by elementary students from different language backgrounds who are learning English as-a-second language was the focus of several studies

Cook (1999) also discusses spelling difficulties and suggests three main problems which are single words, pronunciation-based, and spelling correspondence problems. Single word problems come from the fact that English consists of many individual words and so learners have to study some words individually. Pronunciation-based problems occur when learners do not know the English sound system and therefore use the wrong letters. Spelling correspondence problems, Cook argues, are "the most difficult aspects of English spelling for many students". This is true for native speakers of English too – words are harder to spell when the sequence of letters has to be remembered because it does not correspond to the sounds. Cook also highlights four types of spelling errors that learners of English commonly make. These are omissions (leaving letters out), substitutions (replacing letters with incorrect ones), transpositions (reversing the position of letters), and insertion/additions (including extra letters). With specific reference to Arabic, Cook suggests that the most common spelling errors relate to pronunciation and that this is shown through substituted vowels and phonological mistakes. Arabic learners' problems in spelling English also stem from the differences between the writing systems of Arabic and English (e.g. no capitalisation in Arabic and generally regular correspondence between sounds and letters). These kinds of spelling problems which Arabic speakers have are discussed in more detail in Swan & Smith (1987) and Kharma & Hajjaj (1989). The former, for example, highlight problems Arabic learners of English have with the 'mirror' shaped letters (e.g. p and q) and comment on the difficulties which stem from the fact that Arabic is written from right to left (thus learners may write crwon rather than crown).

Many researchers have investigated various problems encountered by Arab EFL learners, (e. g. Mourtaga 2004; Abdul Haq 1982; Wahba 1998; Abbad 1988; Rabab'ah 2003). In addition,

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many studies have been conducted in Arab countries to investigate lexical, phonological, and syntactic errors made by Arab EFL learners (e.g., Abdul Haq 1982; Wahba 1998; Zughoul/Taminian 1984). Furthermore, many researchers such as: Abdul Haq (1982), Wahba (1998), and Abbad (1988), state that Arab learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing. But little has been done on spelling problems. This area of study and research is almost ignored at different levels, for example; at the level of curriculum in universities, syllabi, teaching methods, academic activities like spelling competition in universities, homework, course assignments, dictionary consultation and so on so forth.

E. STUDY

This study covers the following steps:

1. Classification of Spelling Errors

Spelling problems can be classified into phonological and orthographic problems. Phonological problems refer to errors in which the misspelled word does not sound like the target word because the whole word, a consonant, a vowel, a syllable, a prefix, a suffix, a grapheme or a grapheme cluster is not heard at all, is misheard, is added or reversed with another. Here the written symbol does not correspond with the spoken sound, syllable or word (Al-Jarf, R. 2010).

But here we are mainly concerned with orthographical problems because phonological errors are more related with spoken form that can be dealt with other kinds of courses like reading skill and pronunciation. Spelling errors are classified into whole word errors, faulty graphemes and faulty phonemes. Thus the unit of analysis is the whole word, faulty grapheme and faulty phoneme (excluded), each of which is defined below.

- (1) Whole word errors are those in which the student does not write anything in the gap (in dictations) or in which the target word is substituted by an extraneous word, or by a partially or a fully invented word.
- (2) Faulty graphemes or grapheme clusters are those where the misspelled word does not look like the printed target word because a grapheme is deleted, added, substituted by another or reversed with another. A faulty grapheme can be a deleted, added, reversed or substituted written vowel, consonant, vowel or consonant digraph, phonogram, morpheme, suffix or prefix.
- (3) Faulty phonemes are those in which the misspelled word does not sound like the target word because a consonant, a vowel, a syllable, a prefix, a suffix, a grapheme or a grapheme cluster is deleted, substituted by faulty ones, added, or reversed with other. Here the written form does not correspond with the spoken sound as in writing "rember" or "member" instead of "remember" (Al-Jarf, R. 2010).

2. Identifying Spelling Errors

Students' responses are marked individually. Any word that does not match the target

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word in part or in full is marked as a misspelling. Any faulty words, faulty graphemes (single vowel, single consonant, vowel, digraphs, consonant digraphs, phonogram, suffix or prefix) within a word are counted as an error. Any graphemes that are added, deleted, substituted by another or reversed are counted as misspellings (Al-Jarf, R. 2010).

So the process of identification of errors in spellings is marked on the basis of four major areas of problems. These are as follows: *Addition, Deletion, Substitution and Reversal*. The researchers go through the students' papers one by one, recording the faulty forms given by each student for each target piece of writing. Thus in each target piece of writing, all misspelled forms given by all the participants are recorded. Each faulty phoneme and/or grapheme in each misspelled word is encircled. The spelling error corpus is then divided into the following groups: Addition Deletion, Substitution and Reversal as a faulty grapheme or a faulty phoneme.

3. Identifying spelling strategies

A strategy refers to the conscious or unconscious processes which students employ in learning and using a second language. It is the way in which a student attempts to figure out the meanings and uses of words, grammatical or spelling rules. A learning strategy may be applied to simple tasks, such as learning a list of new words, or more complex involving language comprehension and production (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992).

An omission or deletion strategy is used when the student deletes a word, a vowel, a consonant, a syllable or a suffix or more from the target word. Examples of omission strategies are: Leaving out the target word, deleting silent vowels, reducing double consonants into one consonant, reducing a vowel digraph into one vowel, deleting

a morpheme, deleting a vowel, deleting a silent consonant, deleting a vowel digraph, deleting a consonant, deleting a middle or a final syllable, or deleting a hidden consonant.

An insertion or addition strategy is used when the student adds a vowel, a consonant, a syllable or a word that is not part of the target word. Examples of the insertion strategy are: filling the blank with any unrelated word, with a word that forms with the target word a minimal pair, with a rhyming word, with a rhyming invented word, with a homophone, with an invented word that begins with the same initial consonant, with a similar word, with a real word beginning with the same initial consonant or syllable, with a synonym, with any invented word, with a derivative, with an invented word that has the same final or middle syllable; adding a morpheme; adding a vowel; adding a final vowel; adding a consonant or adding a silent digraph.

A substitution strategy is used when the student substitutes a word by another real or invented word, substitutes a vowel by one or more vowels, substitutes a consonant by one or more consonants or substitutes a syllable or a suffix by another. Examples of substitution strategies at the grapheme level are: changing a vowel, changing a vowel digraph, changing a single vowel into a digraph, changing a consonant digraph into another, changing a morpheme

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into another, changing a phonogram, changing a consonant or replacing a consonant by another consonant with the same sound.

A reversal or transposition strategy is used when the student reverses the order of two target words, two vowels, two consonants or a vowel and a consonant in the target word. Examples of reversal strategies in dictations are: filling a gap with the word that the student was supposed to write in a previous gap, filling a gap with the word that the student was supposed to write in a following gap or reversing two vowels, reversing two consonants or a consonant and a vowel in the target word.

Table 1 is a sample of the specific problems of orthographical errors that shows consonant, vowel, consonant-vowel and other errors made by participants/informants throughout the period of drilling and observation. Table 2 shows the list of phonograms and their variants that the students have been made aware about, and it helped the students to realize the possible areas of committing mistakes while they spell. Table 2 also shows the list of phonograms, their variants with examples to make them understand better.

Table 1: Examples of orthographical problems

Orthographical problems	Target words	Errors
1. C Problem		
Double C	Middle	Midle
Silent C	Excellent	Exlelant
C digraph	Brought	Brout
C forms	Economical	Echonomical
Hidden C	Question	Equesion
2. V Problem		
V digraph	Cheapest	Cheepest
Silent V	Relatives	Relativs
Remembering VV sequence	Break	Braek
3. CV Problem		
CV sequence	Use	Ues
Confusing homophones	Hall	whole
4. Other Problems		
4.1 Confusion to spell		
In one piece of writing same		
word has right and wrong		
spellings	Grass	Gras, Grace and so many
4.2 confusion in letters and		
alphabates	p, b,t, l, r, v, m, n	
Phonogram	connects	connex or conekt or konnect
Silent digraph	neat	neaght

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Table2: Example of the Phonograms and their Variants

Phonogram	Variants	Examples
I	/i/ie/ee	Ski
n	/n/ng/	ink
и	/u/ue/oo/oul/	truth
y	/ee/ie/i/	happy
er	/er/err/	very, marry
ar	/ar/or/er/err	solar, error, supper, terror
or	/or/er/	work
ie	/ie/ee/ and/i/dropped	pie, greet
ui	/ue/ to /oo/	quit, suit
ough	/uf/of/ or /ow/oe/oo/aw/	dough, plough, through
ey	/i/ dropped so its /ee/ae/.	key, prey
ei	/ee/ae/e/	receipt,
ed	/d/t/	played, dropped

Table of Appendix A

Wrong Spelling	SET	Right Spelling
1. Sothern	D	1. Southern
2. Araubi	A	2. Arabia
3. Parkes	A	3. Parks
4. Pleas	D	4. Places
5. Cefeteria	S	5. Cafeteria

Note: SET= Spelling Error Type

Table of Appendix B

Wrong Spelling	SET	Right Spelling
1. Butful	D	1. Beautiful
2. Trae	S	2. Tree
3. Nise	S	3. Nice
4. Cafetria	D	4. Cafeteria
5. Prayer hell	S	5. Prayer hall
6. Greun	S	6. Green
7. Grouds	D	7. Grounds
8. Chidren	D	8. Children
9. Vist	D	9. Visit
10. Lov	D	10. Love

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Table of Appendix C

Wrong Spelling	SET	Right Spelling
1. Cabal	S	1. Gabal
2. Playerounds	R	2. Playgrounds

Table of Appendix D

Wrong spelling	SET	Right spelling
1. Pasketball	R	1. Basketball
2. Global park	S	2. Gabal park
3. Cafteria	D	3. Cafeteria
4. Pest place	S	4. Best place

Table of Appendix E

Wrong spelling	SET	Right spelling
1. Ary	S	1. Are
2. Chidren	D	2. Children
3. Butefull	R	3. Beautiful
4. Kapsa	S	4. Kabsa
5. Juse	S	5. Juce
6. Sanduch	R	6. Sandwich
7. Cafteria	D	7. Cafeteria

Table of Appendix F

Wrong spelling	SET	Right spelling
1. Barks	S	1. Parks
2. Speding	D	2. Spending
3. Weakends	S	3. Weekends
4. Slibes	S	4. Slides
5. Pepple	R	5. People

Table of Appendix G

Wrong Spelling	SET	Right spelling
1. Vare	S	1. Very
2. Plantes	A	2. Plants
3. Rectrint	R	3. Restaurant
4. Kodo	S	4. Kudu
5. Kentaki	R	5. Cantucky
6. Hardise	S	6. Hardese
7. Mousk	R	7. Mosque
8. Bathrom	D	8. Bath room
9. Weekind	R	9. Weekends
10. Hapy	D	10. Нарру
11. Beautiful	D	11. Beautiful

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Table of Appendix H

Wrong Spelling	SET	Right Spelling
1. Parkes	A	1. Parks
2. Outen	R	2. Unknown
3. Set	S	3. Sit
4. Friends	R	4. Friends
5. Parkes	A	5. Parks
6. Cafetria	D	6. Cafeteria

Table of Appendix I

Wrong Spelling	SET	Right Spelling
1. Her	R	1. Park
2. Chidren	D	2. Children
3. Ther	R	3. There
4. Gems	D	4. Games
5. Shoping	D	5. Shopping

Table of Appendix J

Wrong Spelling	SET	Right Spelling
1. Satch	R	1. Such
2. Satch	R	2. Such
3. Prayerhell	S	Prayer hall
4. Satch	R	4. Such
5. Larg	D	5. Large

4. Statistical Data Analysis:

Four spelling strategies have been adopted to categorize the errors made by participants namely *addition, deletion, substitution and reversal*. All these types of errors are mentioned in Table No-3. Total spelling errors are 150 i.e. 100% of total mistakes in above mentioned four categories. Addition, Deletion, Substitution and Reversal consist 19 errors i.e. 12.66%, 51errors i.e. 34%, 44 errors i.e. 29.33% and 36 errors i.e. 24% out of 150 errors respectively. Above data has been shown in pie chart also (Figure 1).

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Table 3: Table Shows Statistical Analysis of Participants 1-30.

Participants/TOA	Addition	Deletion	Substitution	Reversal	Total mistakes
1	2	2	1	0	5
2	0	6	4	0	10
3	0	0	1	1	2
4	0	1	2	1	4
5	0	2	3	2	7
6	0	1	3	1	5
7	1	3	3	4	11
8	2	1	1	2	6
9	0	3	0	2	5
10	0	1	1	3	5
11	2	1	0	1	4
12	0	2	1	0	3
13	1	3	2	1	7
14	1	2	0	1	4
15	1	4	3	1	9
16	1	1	2	2	6
17	0	0	0	0	0
18	0	0	0	0	0
19	1	0	2	2	5
20	3	2	2	1	8
21	1	4	3	2	10
22	0	0	0	0	0
23	0	0	2	1	3
24	1	1	1	0	3
25	0	0	0	0	0
26	0	3	3	1	7
27	1	4	3	4	12
28	1	3	0	1	5
29	0	1	1	2	4
30	0	0	0	0	0
	19	51	44	36	150

Findings:

In short, as statistical data in *Table No.* 3 shows clearly that *deletion* is a main cause of concern i.e. most students delete a word, a vowel, a consonant, a syllable or a suffix or more from the target word. Second most practiced type of error is *substitution* i.e. the student substitutes a word by another real or invented word, substitutes a vowel by one or more vowels, substitutes a consonant by one or more consonants or substitutes a syllable or a suffix by another. Percentagewise, Reversal constitutes the third major area of error i.e. the student reverses the order of two target words, two vowels, two consonants or a vowel and a consonant in the target word. *Addition* error appears minimal area of concern as compare to above three where the student adds a vowel, a consonant, a syllable or a word that is not part of the target word.

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% of Errors

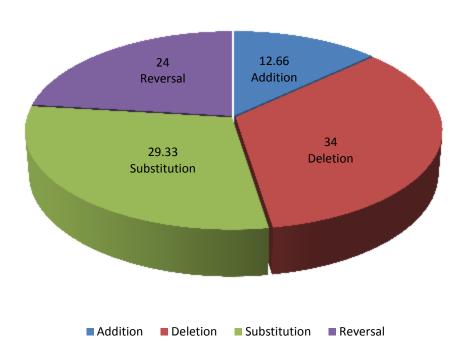


Figure 1: Pie chart showing percentage of errors in spelling among 30 participants.

F. CONCLUSION

It is already said and the fact that spelling is not merely a representation of writing skill/phonetic sound combination of letters, moreover it is a bridge between writing words and their creative command to spell words through the judgement of phonetic sound order of words. It seems that Language programs of schools in particular and universities in general do not provide enough opportunity for writing practice i.e. writing home assignments, oral dictation or copying the text by hand etc. English language curriculum in universities does not offer any special program or contact hours for the study of spellings. The study of spellings should have contact hours in colleges. Since many Saudi college students are poor spellers, a spelling course can be developed and integrated into the teaching of listening, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary and dictionary skills courses. The aims of such a course are to provide students with

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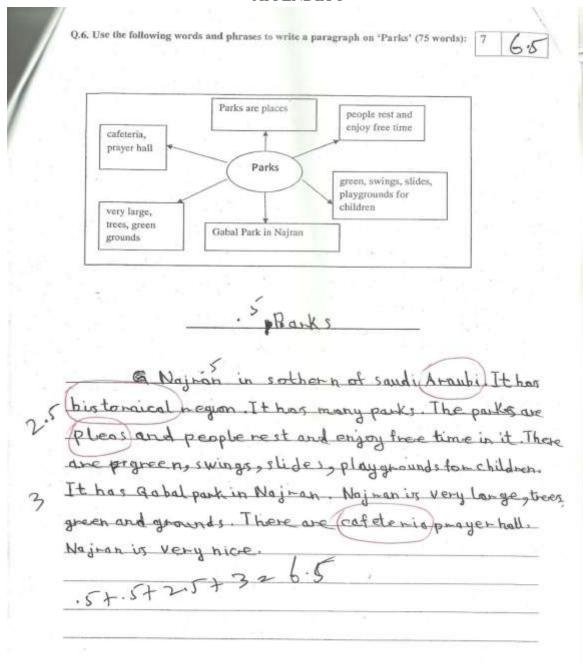
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the basics of English spelling and to help them associate the spoken sounds with the written forms. English language programs of the universities may have two ways to cope with this challenge i.e. either award contact hours or organize student centred rigorous workshops for the respective challenge. Finally, we conclude and recommend that the students should be given enough opportunity to write through different mediums; however this is a traditional one but suits and works well.

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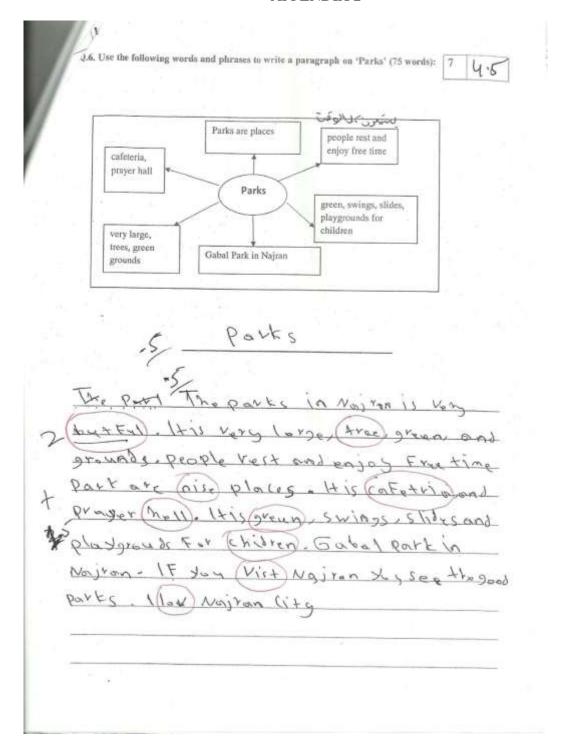
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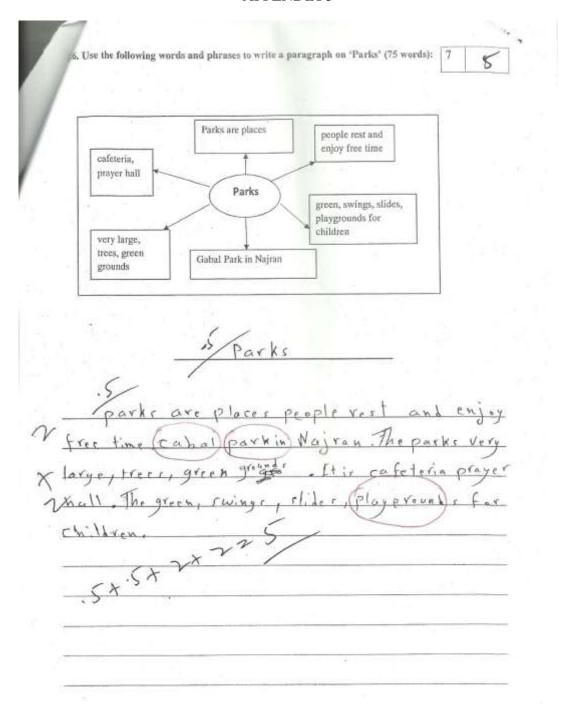
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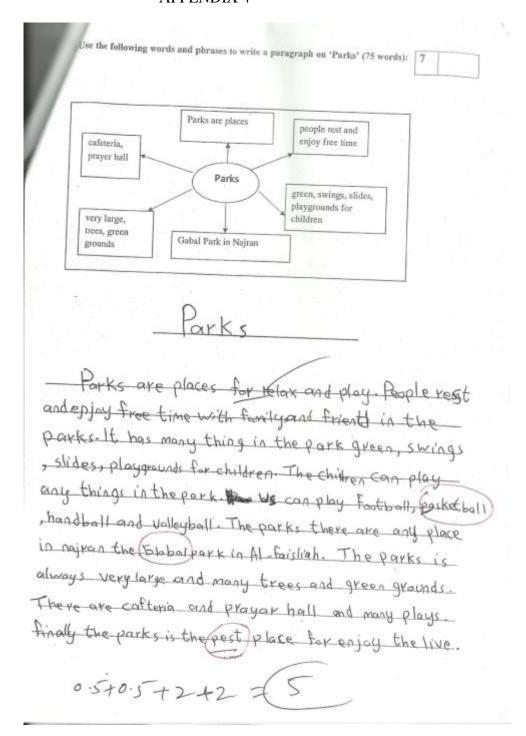
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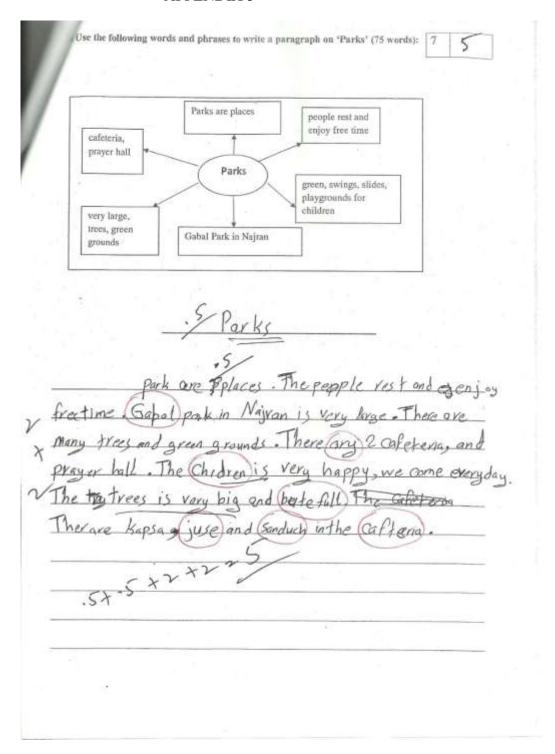
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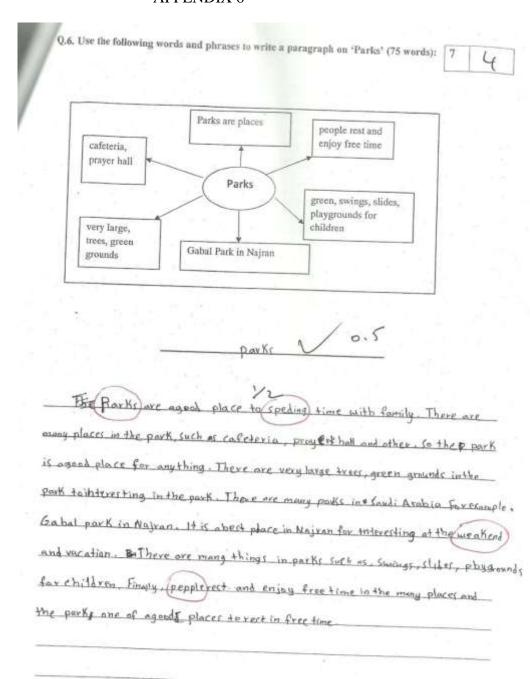
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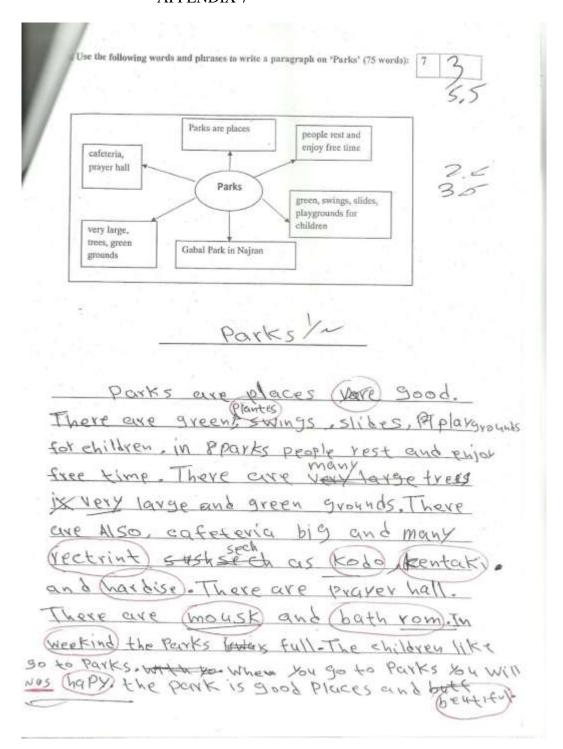
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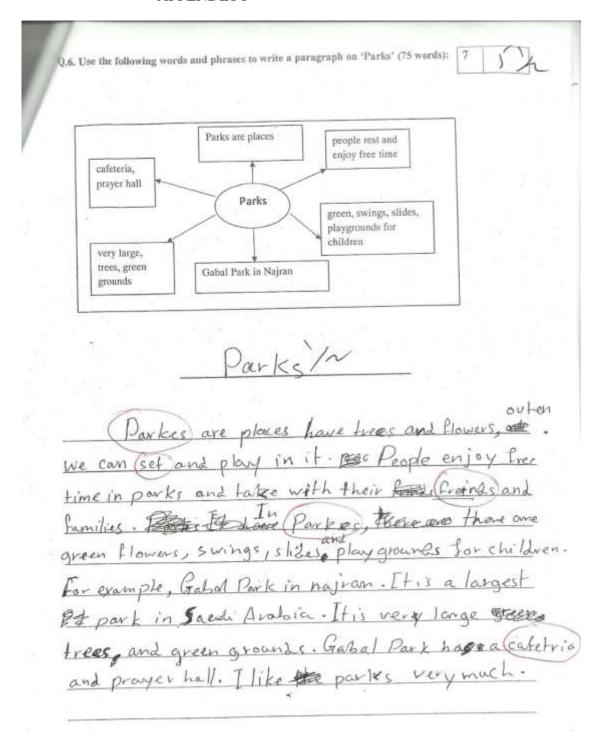
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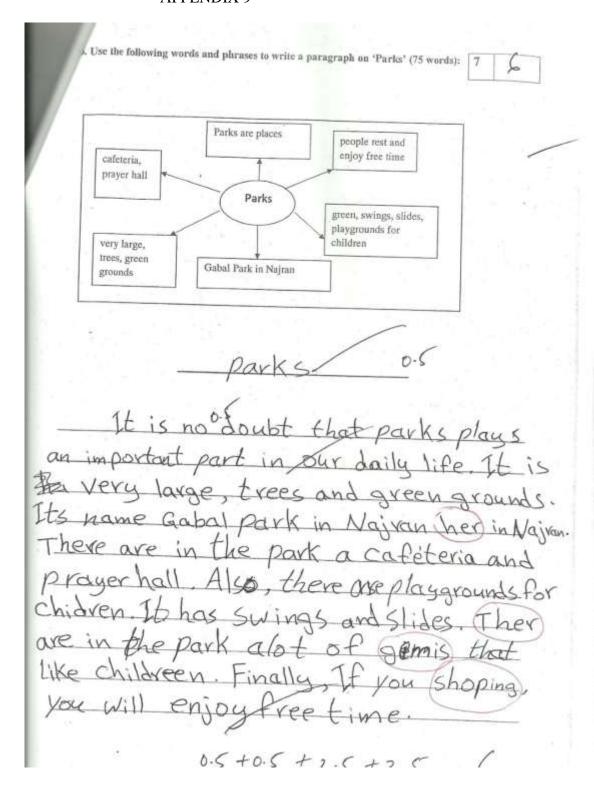
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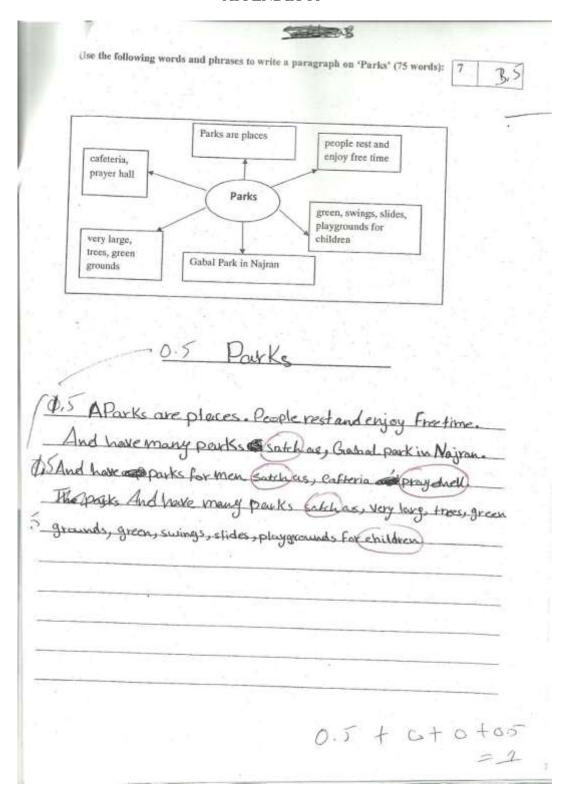
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