



IMPACT OF GREAT VOWEL SHIFT ON ARAB LEARNERS' USE OF ENGLISH SPELLING



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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to investigate the impact of great vowel shift in the writing process of the Arab students for whom English is a foreign language. It attempts to find out how to motivate students to overcome obstacles faced by them. It discusses a few spelling issues suggesting how the knowing of a language is different from knowing its style of writing. Based on documentation survey, researcher concluded that studies in the Arab world have though examined the mistakes committed by Arab students when they write, but merely a few studies have talked about motivating Arab students to learn the language rather than look for errors that learners commit. While investigating the impact of great vowel shift on Arab learners' use of English spelling, this study concludes that the essence of communication is in acquiring the semantics of a language and not knowing its form. This study recommends adopting latest teaching methods to activate self-trust and inner motivation between the teacher and the students and simultaneously enliven an outer motivation too.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by attempting to find a practical solution for spelling mistakes committed by Arab students in their writing. The study also concludes that the essence of communication is acquiring the knowledge of a language rather than pointing out students' errors.

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language faced a strange phenomenon in the 15th century called Great Vowel Shift which resulted in huge differences in the utterance form and later affected the writing process. Great Vowel Shift (GVS) has received a wide coverage in the domain of historical phonology of the English language. Researchers (e.g., Waller (2002)) have observed that written form in the English language is rather challenging for not being phonetic and for lacking sound-letter correspondence. The speakers of the English language therefore attempt to pronounce words in this language without knowing their spelling.

The major cause of committing spelling mistakes by Arab students while writing in English is their own language, Arabic, which has a phonetic spelling that consistently follows sound patterns with very few exceptions. As Smith (1987) says, "Arabic orthography is a cursive system, running from right to left. Only consonants and long vowels are written. There is no upper and lower case distinction" (p. 146). In addition to direction and capitalization, Arabic does not have hyphenation; connection of letters is rule-governed. Doubling of letters is indicated by a diacritic mark above the letter. Short vowels (/ə/, /i/, /u/) are pronounced but not always

represented graphically. Several examples are cited about variances between Arabic and English writing systems in Taouka and Coltheart (2004). Thus, Arab learners commit both interlingual and intralingual errors in their writing form. The former are due to the differences between English and Arabic styles and the latter are due to the irregularity of the English spelling.

Arab learners however are considered to be much better than other learners of the English language. They face problems in English spelling due to following reasons: first, there is a big difference between their first language, i.e. Arabic and the English language; second, writing in the Arabic language is based on a phonetic system where the written form and the verbal form have an absolute relationship, but English has variations between the pronounced sound of words and their verbal description.

Tavosanis (2007) has classified differences between spelling patterns of the two languages. According to him, Arabic learners while speaking the English language share the intralingual difficulties such as irregularity of English spelling with learners of another linguistic background, including, of course, native speakers of English. However, Arab learners, like other EFL learners, have their own interlingual problems caused by the variances between the spelling systems of English when compared with that of their first language, Arabic.

One of the most common mistakes made by Arab learners of English language is the use of vowels in their writing, though there are no specific rules that are applicable owing to variation of English vowels which exceed more than twenty. In contrast, Arabic has only three vowels and it has strict rules. Such major differences result in complex issues while practicing English writing system for Arab learners.

2. AIM OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to examine various tenets of Arab learners' motivation towards learning the English language. It also seeks to find a real solution to the problem of committing spelling mistakes by Arab learners. Prior studies have attempted to discern reasons for such spelling inaccuracies in the Arab learners' use of the English language, particularly in their writing, but none of them succeeded in identifying any good reasons or draw any conclusions to resolve this issue. Hence, this research fills up this gap, by adding a new dimension of applying technical strategies in learning a language rather than groping to find out the cause of mistakes committed by the Arab learners.

This study also attempts to understand the generic view adopted by several Arab learners that the written form or knowledge of spellings is not mandatory to acquire the learning of the English language. In the end, it suggests how to motivate the Arab learners to overcome the obstacles faced by them in learning the English language.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior researchers have confirmed the idea of the importance of spelling in acquiring writing skills of a language. Bazerman and Neale (1991) asserted the significance of spelling by stating that spelling is one of the key fundamentals of learning any writing style because "writing ties our relations with others and organizes our perceptions of the world". Similarly, Khuwaileh and Shoumali (2000) asserted that literacy is not understood only by reading and writing correctly, but by identifying how spelling must appear in a text.

Many studies in Second language Acquisition (SLA) have presented difficulties faced in learning English spelling. For example, Bowen (2011) asserts that SLA learners face serious problems with English spelling. Cook (1992) believes that it is because SLA research has not examined this issue adequately. In fact, theoretically speaking, English spelling does not comprise only letters that relate to phonemes. It is much more complicated than that; for instance, the roles of non-spoken letters in English spelling are numerous; the impact of grammar on word processing and phonology are critical; and communication rules of English are also diverse for every group of words and sounds.

Al-Jarf (2010) in another study tried to gather spelling errors corpora from the essays, homework, notes and quizzes of Saudi secondary and undergraduate students. This study concluded with three categories of spelling errors: “whole word errors, faulty graphemes and faulty phonemes”. This study also categorized writing problems into two forms: phonological and orthographical. For example, when a listener fails to catch the final syllable of a word (e.g. *country*) and hears only the first syllable (*cont*), it is measured as phonologically problematic in which students misunderstand the whole word or part of it. On the other hand, when learners decrease the double consonant of a word (e.g. *middle*) to (*×middle*) it is measured as an orthographical problem in which students commit a spelling mistake by confusing between words that have the same sound but different spellings. This proves that EFL learners commit spelling mistakes due to inter-lingual or intra-lingual reasons. Inter-lingual errors are committed due to their mother language interference while Intra-lingual errors occur because of defective learning of the L2.

Al-Jarf (2008) in a similar study studied phonological and orthographical reasons for spelling mistakes. For this study, a spelling task was allotted to a group of 36 undergraduate Saudi students asking them to fill up 100 gaps based on a listening exercise. Findings revealed that majority of spelling mistakes were phonological (63%) and the rest were orthographical (37%). The phonological issues were connected to misunderstanding with the words while orthographical problems were associated with “vowel digraphs, double consonants, silent vowels and consonants and homophones”.

Subhi and Yasin (2015) carried out a study on Iraqi students. The result revealed a high rate of spelling mistakes in their essay writing (31%) which was seen as a serious issue and required to revise the EFL teaching methods in Iraqi colleges and schools. The study made a few recommendations: first to revise the English syllabuses immediately because the portion of writing skills was inadequate as compared to that of other skills like reading and speaking. Secondly, the study also suggested that teachers in Iraqi schools and colleges must engage students in writing and speaking tasks such as dictation, guided and free writing and audiovisual writing in order to solve such issues. Third, Iraqi English teachers should adopt more practical measures to improve students’ English language skills particularly by organizing writing drills and activities that involved the use of vowels in multi-syllabic words and identifying mistakes that occur in the middle of words.

Cronnell (1979) in an earlier study had indicated that it was not necessary for EFL learners to learn the whole spelling system of a language. “For them, diagnostic testing may be most useful.” In line with Cronnell’s belief, detection and analysis of spelling errors may help EFL teachers achieve a learner-centered approach to teach spelling. Many researchers (Malatesha *et al.*, 2008-2009; Jones, 2009; Al-Mezeini, 2010) have reiterated in their general comments this phenomenon and laid importance on teaching of spellings with the view to detect mistakes. Some others (El-Hibir and Altaha, 1993) unnecessarily prepared a long list of suggestions that are not substantiated by a systematic and in-depth analysis of psycho-cognitive compensatory strategies underlying spelling errors. Such general comments and teacher centered lists of suggestions are usually based on an enumeration of surface manifestations (addition, omission, substitution, mis-ordering), and not on learning and communication strategies that students might employ when they commit errors. Consequently these studies have concluded a detailed strategy-based two-way analysis of spelling errors as a basis that underpins the techniques of teaching spelling. These studies have unanimously agreed that an exposure to the written language was essential for mastering spelling. Equally important was a controlled, guided and free handwritten production. Last, but not the least, the use of electronic devices in writing may also mitigate learning spelling and therefore should be discouraged especially if the learners are taught by EFL teachers.

Another study carried out on Omani students indicated similar results (Al-Bereiki and Al-Mekhlafi, 2016). The study examined 91 grade ten teachers in North Batinah and South Batinah governorates in Oman. A survey was designed and distributed to identify the causes of English spelling errors and their remedies. The result of the study revealed highly rated causes of errors faced by tutors, namely, the difficult English spelling style, mixture of

letter(s) in English words; lack of reading proficiency; students' inaccuracy of understanding the sounds that occur in English but not in Arabic; lastly, the fact that sound-letter correspondence in English is not complete. The most common suggestions offered as remedy for spelling mistakes offered by grade ten tutors were, namely, breaking long words into smaller parts; drawing students' attention to silent letters in words; keeping personal notes for stimulating words; assigning tasks that stimulate both sound-to-letter phonic spelling and spelling of irregular words; lastly, noting down the most common spelling mistakes and motivate students for attempting to spell difficult words properly.

Allaith and Joshi (2011) examined the influence of the Arabic phonological system on the English spelling style. They observed that "Arabic phonological system has an impact on the English spelling system, which corresponds to different studies that examined the same issue but with different L1s. It also shows that Arabic students get especially confused with phonemes that do not exist in Arabic, such as (/p/ & /v/), as they are similar to existing phonemes in Arabic such as (/b/→/ب/ & /f/→/ف/)." The study also found that students struggle to differentiate between /b/ and /p/, and between /f/ and /v/.

Alsaawi (2015) also found that English spelling has not been measured carefully in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia. It must be examined more extensively for students to overcome their spelling deficiency. Even with the emergence of new technologies to help learners reduce the mistakes made in writing, it seems still difficult as pointed out by Ankandh (2011); Chiappe *et al.* (2007) and Fender (2008). Jones (2009) for instance, showed that homophones such as *rain, rein, reign* would be difficult to understand if they were spelled the same way. A homograph such as *wind* (/wind/ - /waind/) can help in vocabulary learning since they are two words in one form. No doubt, sound-letter correspondence facilitates reading.

Sharma (2015) clarified that productive skills (speaking and writing) require more practice whereas, listening and reading categorized as receptive skills are simpler to obtain. After conducting a study by interviewing Saudi students at Jazan university of Saudi Arabia and examining their works, the author specified that the Saudi EFL students faced more problems in accomplishing receptive skills than the productive skills because English as a foreign language was not used in daily communications.

Sharma (2015) also opined that educators need to be energetic and updated to teach language skills to students. He examined the participants on several aspects by engaging them in a teaching-learning process in order to find out the real cause of the problems encountered by students in acquiring speaking and writing skills at Jazan University. . These problems were critically examined, evaluated and conclusions drawn to propose the most suitable measures to be adopted by language instructors in order to overcome the problems of students and improve their productive skills.

Sharma (2016) in an empirical study observes that language instructors need to consider issues like absence of motivation, mother tongue interference, social and cultural concepts, assorted learner's linguistic awareness, perception of linguistic schemes, medium of instruction and their own personal perception about Saudi students while formulating their course learning objectives and lesson plans of writing courses. Tutors at Jazan University and at any other institution of Arab community have to go for extra mile to address these issues that cause writing-errors by preparing remedial materials, and planning suitable teaching strategies to simplify the learning process of improving their English writing skills.

Previous studies have thus tried to figure out the English spelling problems faced by Arab learners but no studies have observed historically how the English language has been subjected to changes in terms of spellings and the way the English letters are pronounced. Nowadays it is the unphonetic spelling which is canonized and preserved. Henry (1915) at very early stage of this debate had rightly stated that it was far more vital to understand what meaning a written word must rapidly and surely suggest rather than in what sound it should be precisely expressed.

Widdowson (1991) considers that knowing a language (cognitive learning) can motivate pupils to better learning. But the study warned that cognitive learning may sometimes get distracted due to the teaching and learning methods and might result in a non-motivating consequence. It is important that students should reach a point when they find that learning is the most expressive and that what they acquire shall increase their level of motivation.

Studies like Haggan (1991) and Fender (2008) have drawn attention to the doubling mistakes such as (the coda consonant in monosyllabic words intercepted with single-graph short vowels that are doubled when suffixed with {-ing}, {-ed} etc... (e.g., *hop, hopped hopping*) However, it is also argued that there is no recognized rationale for the writer to understand how vowel blindness causes errors. Vowel blindness is purely expected to cause short-vowel errors, and thus its outcome has not been obviously articulated. It is uncertain why vowel blindness may cause more graph-choices than graph-omission errors.

Al-Sobhi *et al.* (2017) conducted a study about English spelling and found that English spelling was always seen by researchers and teachers as a challenging task particularly for learners whose first language is not English. Therefore, Arab ESL learners commit obvious errors when they write English words. This study also attempted to identify the causes and types of spelling errors committed by Arab learners. One of the most promising points that their results indicate that students' spelling errors were mainly due to the nature of the English spelling system, as the Arab learners are not aware of English spelling rules; secondly, these errors are caused by the interference of their first language, Arabic.

Almatarneh *et al.* (2018) confirmed these findings and added that students face more problems in academic writing. Their study also drew attention to other problems such as lack of vocabulary storage, lack of ideas and sentence rules, for which the study suggests to seek support from their institution by attending workshop on language skills and academic writing.

Krug (2017) stated that the "significant variability in the field of word stress patterns was partial in favor of one or the other pattern along the lines of either Germanic or Romance stress rules. For another, syllables not carrying the word accent were increasingly reduced, giving English the stress-timed rhythm that characterizes it today". This is a clear evidence of the causes of Great Vowel Shift which had its impact on foreign learners, particularly the Arab learners, where the spelling of the written form is generated from the spoken form. The Arab learners fail to overcome obstacles since their Arabic language is direct and has strict rules of vowels.

A recent study by Reed and Levis (2019) has elaborated the process of language pronunciation changes by taking a historical viewpoint, addressing the traditional aspects that require full description of rules of English pronunciation in order to focus on practical research applicable in classrooms.

The above review has made clear that no attention has been given to finding real cause of spelling errors by Arab learners, particularly what impact the Great Vowel Shift has made on their use of the English language. Moreover, there is also a dearth of studies on motivational principles to learn a foreign language. This study aims to fill this research gap and investigate to what extent the variety of the two languages, English and Arabic, is responsible for these spelling errors.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research study attempted to understand through a documentation survey the current status of English spelling problems faced by Arab learners. It was an attempt to study whether mistakes are committed due to the sound and spelling patterns of the English words. The study also aimed to understand the Great Vowel Shift and its role in escalating the problem, attempting to ascertain the role that motivation can play in understanding this Great Vowel Shift and devise methods for Arab students to improve upon their use of English words by correcting spelling errors. During the course of this study, a few issues connected to the development of the English language were also clarified.

The Great Vowel Shift and the modification in the English sound system have drawn attention directly to the issues related to English spelling and mistakes commonly committed by the Saudi students. Historically speaking, before the Shift, knowing the spelling of words was considered as a universal method and did not differ when the long vowels changed, though the English spelling kept changing in a most unphonetic manner. As a result, in a few cases, for example, there were no specific rules to be followed by the learners of English language. Even the native speakers should believe in this idea that EFL/ESL learners should consider learning a language a big waste of time if spent on only a single skill.

The following example provides solid evidence that it does not matter how words are spelt when written down, as long as its reading and understanding is clear to both the writer and the reader: *“it deosn’t mtttaer waht oredr the lttters in a wrod are, the obny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat lttteres are at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a tatol mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by it slef but the wrod as a wlohe”*. This can be a good example to motivate the beginners of the English language and can help them to simplify the process of learning English writing skills by not putting too much focus on writing skills.

An important factor to be considered in acquiring any language and getting rid of all the complexities is motivation, developed through a calm attitude and behavior in the class. In order to develop motivation, it is often suggested that tutors should reflect a sense of trust, a peaceful atmosphere in the classroom and a feeling of being concerned in order to reduce students’ anxiety and generate interest in learning the English language. Truly speaking, motivation in EFL acquisition is required to be as innovative as in any other language. Similarly, it requires a basic educational aptitude to understand a particular culture or community so that teaching of EFL should also offer a universal message.

Findings reveal that Saudi learners are normally confident and interested to learn the English language. An important consideration, when it comes to teaching English writing and to make it stimulating, is the variety of methods employed by the language instructor. The class observations also give an opportunity to understand how learners employ different methods in acquiring spelling skills. It was found significant that the learners must be motivated to understand and distinguish while they spell words in a particular way. They should be given an opportunity to express their cognitive knowledge of Spellings, This finding is consistent with the results of studies like Widdowson (1991) which state that learning is most expressive when it is through cognitive methods as they help learners to increase their level of motivation.

A major source of motivation towards learning English writing that surfaced in this study was to help students get rid of the phobia that acquiring English speaking skills was complex and difficult. It was felt that learners need to be driven by innate enthusiasm to learn new things because they feel an inner excitement or motivation to learn. On the other hand, learners who are guided by an outer inspiration can be motivated by offering incentives or rewards. An outer incentive or a reward can also help the individual learner to evade some bad experiences that might have been felt in learning the language.

Another factor that was observed during this study was the need to maintain good relations between teachers and learners. Good relations between the teacher and the students reduce the anxiety of students and learners get more motivated towards learning. It was also observed that a good teacher-student relationship can also be very effective when the students try to improve and learn more. A good teacher-student relationship also develops trust and respect for the teacher which helps in a stronger and healthier communication

Another fact revealed in this study was an affinity often drawn by Arabic learners with the internal structure of their own language, Arabic that caused more difficulty in mastering the English Spellings. Such an affinity or a bonding with their own language may play a major role in causing English spelling errors. Arabic roots are acknowledged by a consonantal design. The script is mostly characterized with different consonant clusters that comprise a specific root pattern (eg., *k-t-b* = something to do with books/writing). The Arabic learners are aware of such root patterns and this affinity causes a lot of duplication for them by limiting the visual alteration of a specific

root. This possibly also allows the Arabic learners to attach orthographic form of the English words to their meaning. Likewise, the word length might also contribute to spelling misunderstanding. Words in Arabic tend to be short: “less than six character long” (Randall and Meara, 1988) which suggests that the number of letters stored for word production in Arabic is more limited than in English.

In order to overcome these problems, the Arabic learners must adopt various remedial learning and communication techniques to improve their language recognition with no exception to mastering only spellings. The most commonly used cognitive strategies are interlingual and intralingual transfer as pointed out in previous studies. With a view to achieve student centered learning, teachers must relate these techniques with innovative learning and communication strategies so that the Arab students get motivated to learn and practice English. Since students commit interlingual errors, they also need to be aware of the interlingual transfer strategy as a possible source of improving upon their errors. This can be accomplished by making brief and simple contrastive comparisons of problematic phonemes with their corresponding graphemes, consonant clusters and loan words.

Learning a language is more than opening your eyes and brain to a different culture, or achieving self-satisfaction. Many learners are not motivated to learn a new language due to the traditional and redundant teaching methods which fails to generate any interest in learners. Besides, learners should be free to practice skills they feel are important for them. A teacher must only act as a facilitator, a guide and a motivator who could just deliver information through teaching.

5. CONCLUSION

Spelling is considered to be a most problematic area in English vowels particularly after the advent of the Great Vowel Shift. The critical debate that surrounds the Great Vowel Shift can be summed up in a single argument that why English vowel symbols no longer resemble the sounds they represent. Such phenomena affect the written forms of learners of second language who are not specialized and therefore get confused when it comes to acquiring writing skills..

The theoretical aspect of this study provides useful insights into learning and teaching techniques, learners' motivation and building a good learning environment through initiatives like teacher-student relationship in order to build trust and confidence. Many factors affect learning process such as students' attitude, behavior and their ability to gain information. Learners should be allowed to freely act according to their need and learning requirement. They can be guided how to acquire language, enlightening them how to be socially active by integrating a schema in their daily communication.

For the above-mentioned reasons in this study, teachers should also be equipped with master strategies in order to understand human nature, use good communication skills to make the motivation work in the classroom. Learners' behavior towards learning based on their previous knowledge as well as their inner capacity and skills should be utilized to deal with different learning challenges. Motivation involves a variety of aspects such as teacher-student interaction, culture adoption, building a learning environment and nurturing a positive attitude towards learning a foreign language. A positive learning environment leads to energetic learning in the class room whereby learners can feel more responsible and active. In short, motivation is the result of breaking the boundaries between teachers and students' in terms of education.

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