Investigating Spelling Errors Committed by EFL Students at the University of Tripoli

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to categorize the most frequent types of spelling errors made by EFL 8th-semester students at the University of Tripoli, and investigate the underlying causes. A quantitative research method was used by collecting composition data from 30 EFL students, with a majority of 26 students exhibiting spelling difficulties. Cook's classification of spelling errors, which includes omission, insertion, substitution, and transposition errors, was used to categorize the errors. The most common errors were found to be omission (41%), followed by insertion (25%), substitution (22%), and transposition (12%). Pronunciation difficulties and the influence of the learners' native language were identified as the primary factors contributing to these errors. The former led to the omission of letters that are not pronounced in the native language, while the latter caused insertion and substitution errors. On the other hand, transposition errors were mainly attributed to the students' carelessness. Recommendations were given for further studies.

Key words: Spelling errors, foreign language, Second language

الملخص

الغرض من هذا البحث هو تصنيف الأنواع الأكثر شيوعًا من الأخطاء الإملائية التي يرتكبها طلاب الفصل الدراسي الثامن في جامعة طرابلس ، والتحقيق في الأسباب الكامنة وراءها. تم استخدام طريقة البحث الكمي من خلال جمع بيانات من 30 طالبًا من طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، مع وجود 26 طالبًا يعانون من صعوبات إملائية. تم استخدام تصنيف Cook للأخطاء الإملائية ، والذي يتضمن أخطاء الحذف والإدخال والاستبدال والتبديل ، لتصنيف الأخطاء. كانت

نتائج هذة الدراسة كالاتي : أن الأخطاء الأكثر شيوعًا هي الحذف (41٪) ، يليه الإدراج (25٪) ، والاستبدال (22٪) ، والتبديل (12٪). وقد كانت صعوبات النطق وتأثير اللغة الأم للمتعلمين كعوامل أساسية تساهم في هذه الأخطاء و إلى حذف الحروف غير المنطوقة في اللغة الأم ، كذلك تُعزى أخطاء الإدراج والاستبدال و أخطاء التحويل بشكل أساسي إلى إهمال الطلاب. أخيرا أعطيت توصيات لمزيد من الدراسات.

1.1 Introduction

Language is a set of spoken, physical, or written symbols that people use to communicate or express ideas and emotions. The vast majority of nations choose to learn English as their first foreign language since it is the most widely utilized language in the world. When learning a language, it is essential to work with the four core skills of language, which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as the language sub-skills. Spelling is considered a language sub-skill that falls under writing. Spelling is defined as "forming words with the correct letters in the correct order" (Cambridge Dictionary). It is an essential aspect of communication and language proficiency. Every learner of the English language must acquire this key literacy skill, as it is one of the most important skills for academic achievement and language production. Prawira et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of spelling by asserting that spelling serves as a crucial foundation for mastering reading and writing since "spelling is a critical and complex skill that supports the ability to write and read". Therefore, spelling is a fundamental aspect of effective written communication that plays a crucial role in conveying meaning accurately. Spelling can be challenging for EFL learners due to the differences between spellings in their native language and English, which can lead to errors in written communication (Dich & Pedersen, 2013).

1.2 Background of the Study

Spelling errors have long been recognized as a common phenomenon among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, affecting numerous aspects of their language acquisition and proficiency. English spelling is widely acknowledged as a complex and challenging aspect, even for native speakers, because the intricate orthographic system, characterized by

inconsistent phoneme-letter correspondence, poses difficulties for accurate spelling in English (Frost et al., 1987). However, Alsaawi (2015) claims that Arab learners struggle with English spelling more than any other non-native speakers. On the other hand, A study made by Farfar (2023) to investigate the most frequent L2 writing errors committed by Libyan university students majoring in English found that spelling errors constituted the third highest number of errors among thirteen types of errors made in writing. These spelling errors could be due to lack of training in teaching spelling, influence from the learners' native language, or complexity within the English language, among other factors (Albesher, 2018). EFL learners' spelling errors may impact their overall written communication competence, which could result in them being misunderstood or penalized.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Although English spelling is considered a difficult aspect of learning, good spelling skills are fundamental for communication in academic and professional settings. However, despite extensive teaching and practice, EFL university students continue to make spelling errors, which can negatively impact their academic performance and communication. Thus, it is essential to identify the types and causes of spelling errors made by EFL students for educators and learners. So that this study aims to:

➢ To classify the most frequent types of spelling errors made by EFL 8th semester students at the University of Tripoli.
➢ To determine the underlying causes of spelling errors among EFL students.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study has significant implications for language teaching, learning, and assessment. By identifying the most common types of misspellings and their sources, educators can develop effective strategies to help EFL learners at the University of Tripoli improve their spelling proficiency, which, in turn, can enhance their writing and reading skills as well as maximize their academic and professional potential.

1.7 Scope of the Study

The scope is to investigate the spelling errors made by English-major university students to identify the different types of spelling errors committed and determine the factors that contribute to the occurrence of spelling errors. It will also cover the frequency of spelling errors.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The English Spelling System

The English spelling system is a set of rules and conventions that govern how words are written and spelled in the English Language.

The spelling system plays a crucial role in a language since it serves as a standardizer and also helps to bring unity and coherence to English. It is a fundamental tool for creating a historical timeline of language development. On a social and personal level, proper spelling enhances effective communication by reducing ambiguities regarding meaning, vocabulary, and sentence structure. This, in turn, improves understanding between readers and writers. Individuals with poor spelling skills may be viewed as having lower levels of education, culture, and training, and such assessments can have implications for their academic, professional, and job-related opportunities (Dacosta & Fransheska, 2021).

2.2 Categories of Spelling Errors

Spelling errors are categorized into four types: omission, substitution, insertion, and transposition. Omission refers to deleting a letter; substitution involves replacing a letter with a different one; insertion means adding an extra letter; and transposition involves reversing the positions of letters (Cook, 1997).

2.3 The Significance of Accurate Spelling

Accurate spelling is an essential component of effective communication since the reader can easily understand the intended meaning without any confusion or misinterpretation.

Correct spelling is necessary for effective writing, reading comprehension, and communication in any language. Lack of proficiency in spelling can have a negative impact on language development, leading to greater difficulty in mastering more complex grammatical and linguistic structures (Allaith & Joshi, 2011). Thus, improving spelling performance among EFL

students is seen as a way to enhance language efficiency. According to Pan et al. (2021), misspelled words can distort meaning and impact communication. Failure to learn correct spelling may lead to lower grades, difficulties in workplace communication, and social embarrassment. It has been noted that while technology has made spelling easier and more accessible to many, it has also reduced the emphasis placed on spelling in formal education.

2.4 Factors Contributing to Spelling Errors

A recent study by Eldanfour (2022) has analyzed the causes behind the spelling errors made by Libyan students who major in English at Misurata University. The results indicated that the spelling errors often occur due to the learners' tendency to transfer their linguistic knowledge from Arabic to formulate English sentences. Additionally, Spelling mistakes were found to be a common manifestation of the learners' limited knowledge of English spelling rules. The majority of these errors were attributed to poor understanding and application of the specific spelling conventions in English.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To address the research objectives, this study employed a quantitative research method that involved the collection of students' composition data. In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, a combination of primary and secondary sources were utilized. The primary sources consisted of data collected directly from participants through pieces of writing, while the secondary sources included existing data and information obtained from published literature and reports.

3.2 Participants

The study participants included 30 EFL students majoring in English during the spring semester of 2023 at the University of Tripoli. The group consisted of 15 males and 15 females. All participants were native Arabic speakers and in their final semester of university. They were selected on the basis of their readiness to participate in the study.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

In the study, each participant was allocated 15 minutes and provided with a choice of three topics (The importance of the English language,

technology, and friendship), from which they were asked to select one and write a paragraph about it (see Appendix A). Throughout the writing process, participants were given instructions not to utilize any spell-checking or dictionary tools.

3.4 Data Processing and Analysis

As a quantitative study, descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the data. In addition, the paragraphs were evaluated based on the types and frequency of spelling errors made. To determine any spelling errors made by the participants, each paragraph was thoroughly read three times. To maintain the highest level of accuracy, the written pieces were subsequently evaluated by a qualified composition teacher, who assessed the precision of the marked misspelled words. This approach ensures a comprehensive evaluation and interpretation of the data gathered, leading to reliable and accurate results.

4.0 DATA ANALYSIS

The study investigated the types, frequency, and causes of spelling errors made by EFL 8th semester students at the University of Tripoli. To reiterate, the study sought to achieve two specific objectives:

1- To classify the most frequent types of spelling errors made by EFL 8th semester students at the University of Tripoli.

2- To determine the underlying causes of spelling errors among EFL students.

4.1 Data Analysis

After conducting a thorough analysis of the collected data, the frequency of spelling errors made by the informants has been determined. Moreover, several types of spelling errors were identified, which were then classified into four main groups: substitution, omission, insertion, and transposition, based on Cook's (1997) classification of spelling errors. This categorization provides a structured framework for comprehending the common patterns and trends observed in the students' spelling errors. Furthermore, the causes underlying these spelling errors were determined.

4.2 Results and Discussion
4.2.1 Frequency of Errors
The findings of the research highlighted the distribution of spelling errors among EFL 8th semester students at the University of Tripoli. The investigation reveals that out of the 30 paragraphs analyzed, only a minority of four students managed to write without committing any spelling errors. There are several possible reasons for this result, which will be explained later. The results are displayed in **Figure 4.1**.
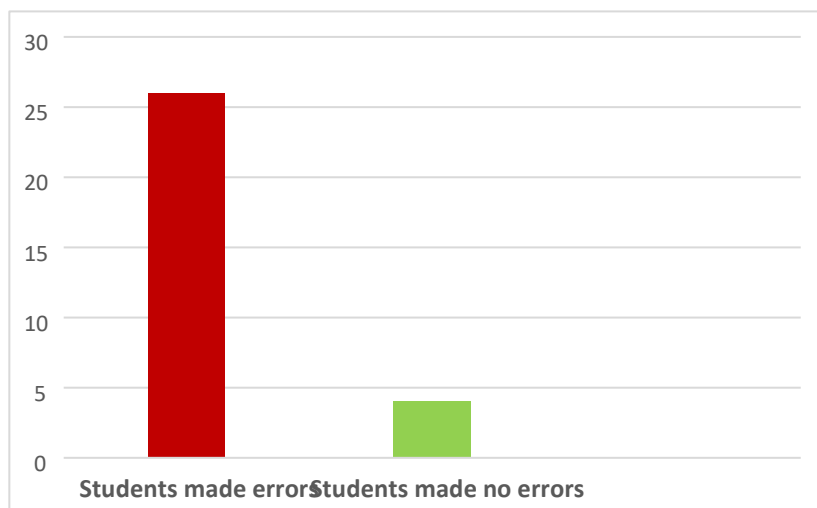
Figure 4.1: Distribution of spelling errors

4.2.2 Types of Spelling Errors
Cook's (1997) classification of spelling errors categorizes the errors into four types:

1. Omission Errors: These errors occur when one or more letters or sounds are missing from a word. For example, writing "genrate" instead of "generate".
2. Insertion Errors: Insertion errors happen when an extra letter or sound is added to a word. For instance, writing "useing" instead of "using".

3. Substitution Errors: Substitution errors occur when one letter or sound is replaced by another in a word. For example, writing "frensh" instead of "french".

4. Transposition Errors: Transposition errors involve the rearrangement of letters or sounds within a word. For instance, writing "probelm" instead of "problem".

Table 4.1: Proportions of different categories of errors

Category of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Omission	33	41%
Insertion	20	25%
Substitution	18	22%
Transposition	10	12%
Total	81	100%

As illustrated above in **Table 4.1**, from the 26 paragraphs, a total of 81 spelling errors were made. Omission errors were the most prevalent, accounting for 33 out of 81 errors, which represents 41% of all errors. The second most frequent category was insertion, which constituted 25% of errors with 20 errors. However, substitution errors represented 22% of the total errors with 18 errors, while transposition errors made up approximately 12% of the errors, consisting of only 10 errors. To enhance clarity, a visual representation of the most frequently occurring errors is depicted below in **Figure 4.2**.
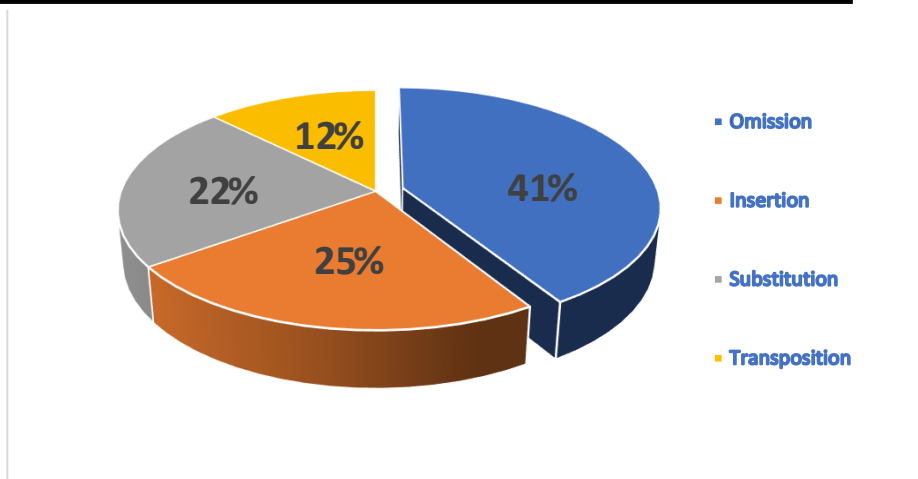
Figure 4.2: Types of spelling errors

4.2.3 Causes of Spelling Errors

I. Omission Errors

One common cause of omission errors is pronunciation difficulties. When EFL learners struggle with the pronunciation of English words, they may also have trouble spelling them correctly (Alsaudi, 2020). In other words, learners may omit letters that are not pronounced or are pronounced differently in their native language. For instance, in this study, some participants struggled with correctly spelling words with silent letters because, in Arabic, words are typically pronounced as they are written. For example, "nown" instead of "known". Also, many students faced difficulties with writing short vowels since Arabic is an abjad script, meaning it typically does not include the short vowels in its written form. This caused difficulties for students when writing certain words, such as "contry" instead of "country" and "intrest" instead of "interest".

II. Insertion Errors

One of the primary causes of insertion errors is the influence of the learners' native language, which can cause interference in their spelling (Imtiaz et al., 2023). For instance, Arab learners sometimes apply the spelling rules of their mother tongue to English words. In Arabic, there are specific rules for doubling consonants or adding certain letters at the end of words. Several students in this research mis-doubled some consonants; for example, they wrote "untill" instead of "until" and "civillization" instead of "civilization". Additionally, some added extra letters at the end of a few words, resulting in incorrect pluralization, such as writing "importants" instead of "important" and "businessess" instead of "businesses".

III. Substitution Errors

As with insertion errors, EFL learners often make substitution errors due to the influence of their first language. Different languages have different phonetic and orthographic systems, which can lead to confusion when learning English spelling rules (Al-Jarf, 2010). For example, in this particular investigation, multiple learners substituted "v" for "f" because Arabic does not have the /V/ sound. This led to writing "very" as "fery". Plus, they substituted "b" for "p" since Arabic does not have a distinct /p/ sound, so they wrote "jop" instead of "job". Moreover, homophones can be a major cause of this type of error, as they are spelled differently from the way they are pronounced. Therefore, some wrote "their" instead of "there" and "it's" instead of "its".

IV. Transposition Errors

The occurrence of transposition errors in spelling can often be attributed to students' lack of care (Othman, 2017). When students are not attentive or focused while writing, they may overlook or mix up the correct order of letters in words. For instance, several students engaged in the study made a small number of transposition errors, such as mistakenly writing 'form' instead of 'from' and 'commnuication' instead of 'communication'. Nevertheless, the researcher observed that when students rush or try to complete assignments quickly, they are prone to making errors in their work.

5.0 Conclusion

This research has established that accurate spelling plays a crucial role in effective communication as it conveys the intended meaning without causing confusion. The study aimed to explore various types of spelling errors made by EFL students and to gain insight into their underlying causes. The findings reveal that the majority of EFL undergraduate students at the University of Tripoli struggle with spelling errors, with only a minority achieving error-free spelling. Among the identified types of spelling errors, omission errors were the most prevalent, followed by insertion, substitution, and transposition errors. These errors can be attributed to difficulties in pronunciation, interference from the students' native languages, confusion with spelling rules, and the influence of homophones. Additionally, students may rush through their writing. By addressing the specific error patterns identified in this research, lecturers can play a crucial role in assisting Libyan students to enhance their spelling skills, ultimately contributing to improve spelling accuracy and overall proficiency.

5.1 Recommendations

In view of its findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

- Students should utilize pronunciation guides, online resources, or language learning apps that offer extensive exercises for improving their pronunciation skills.

- Teachers may provide explicit instruction on the differences in spelling rules between the students' native language and the target language.
- Students should understand the meanings of English homophones and their correct usage in context.
- Lastly, students should devote sufficient time to proofreading and reviewing their work for spelling errors.

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APPENDIX A:

A sample of students' paragraphs

Male ☐   Female ☑

Write a paragraph on one of these topics:
- The importance of English language
- Technology
- Friendship

As it is well know by now learning a second language is no longer just a skill, rather a nessasity. in particular English even for those who have no plans to travel. learning English is something that will allow you to brawes a great deal of information from reach resources as most information in all feilds is published in English, and often time translation is highly unrelaible as some information might get lost during the process. Not mensioning the more job oppertunities 1 mastering a language will offer you. people aiming to get higher paying Jobs are always adviced to add at least English to thier soft Skills.

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O = 1
S = 3
I = 2
T = 3

⑨