RESEARCH ARTICLE

COLLEGIATE STUDENTS' WRITING: AN ORTHOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to identify the orthographical errors prevalent in the writing of undergraduate students from rural colleges in Madurai district. L2 learners are no exceptional to orthographical deviations and their writing remains the main source for orthographical studies. Learning to spell words correctly requires conscious effects. Often the inaccurate mastery of the target language system lead them to produce unacceptable orthographical forms. This study is focused to identify the orthographical deviations and their sources. The study concludes with offering remedial measures for pedagogical application.

Keywords: L2 Learner, error analysis, orthography

INTRODUCTION

The English writing system is quite unphonetic and known for the discrepancy between speech and writing. In English orthographic system, a single sound is represented by different letters or combinations of letters. Therefore a conscious and continued effort is essentials to produce orthographically accurate words. Even the occurrence of a few orthographical errors may have an adverse bearing on the writing. Writing becomes tedious and laboured when thought flow is constrained by excessive attention to spelling. Poor spellers restrict their word choices to the trite and mundane and produce, uninspiring materials that put the readers off. According to Allcock (2002, p.6), spelling is critical for the three important reasons: 1. Skill with written language is critical in the information-based society; 2. Many assessment procedures in primary, secondary and tertiary education rely on students' written language skills; 3. Although spelling proficiency is not synonymous with verbal ability or intelligence, it may influence how ability is measured. Croft (1983, p.8) comments, accurate spelling is necessary for effective writing. Ability to spell accurately in writing is essential as the examiners assess the performance of the students based on their written communication skills.

Research Design

Error analysis, as an application of linguistics, focuses on the errors learners make and consists of a comparison between the errors made in the Target Language (TL) and that TL itself. Researchers such as Fries (1945) and Lado (1957) claimed that by analyzing contrasts between native and target language, the grey areas in learners' use of language may be identified. According to Lado, learners tend to transfer the forms and meanings of L1 to the target language (p.2). Learner's error provides a window into the learner's linguistic

knowledge. Systematically analyzing errors made by language learners makes it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching (Corder, 1974). The present investigation has adopted the model proposed by Gass & Selinker (1994, p.67) which identifies six steps to be followed in conducting an error analysis: Collecting data, Identifying errors, Classifying errors, Quantifying errors, Analyzing source of error, and Remediating for errors. According to James (1998, p.95), an error analysis model should be "well developed, highly elaborated, and self-explanatory" and perhaps Ferries model fulfills these requirements.

Participants

Fifty six learners who are mastering their graduation in various arts and science colleges in rural areas of Madurai, Tamil Nadu have been subjected to identify the orthographical deviations in their written communications. An analysis of these learners' profile reveals that they share the same socio-economic and homogeneous linguistic background and use Tamil as a common language. They possess at least nine years of exposure to English language before taking up the undergraduate course at tertiary level.

Instruments

The learners were asked to write a composition on 'my memorable day' in not less than two hundred words. Sufficient time was provided to write the composition. Composition writing was selected as a tool since it pursuits the respondents to transform the ideas into a complete text format thus unearthing the orthographical deviations which in turn provide the researchers with an insight into what reinforcement can be formulated to remediate the orthographic deviations.

Data analysis and interpretations

An orthographic error may occur at any of the three main stages of writing a text. The figure below best illustrates the concept of writing a text.
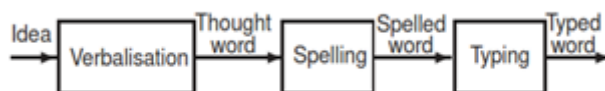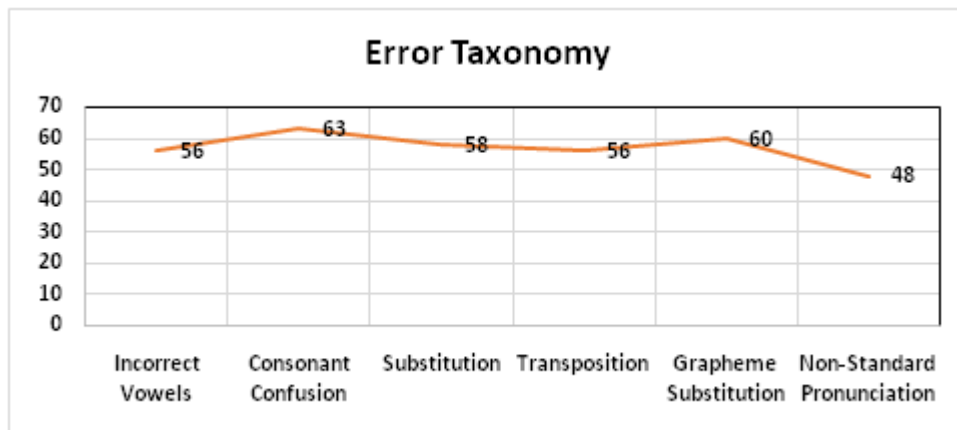

(Deorowicz 2005, p. 276)

Deorowicz and Ciura (2005) observe, in the first process, verbalization an idea crystallizes into a thought word. Usually it is simple, but sometimes may not be such, when the learner is unsure to use which of the negative prefixes to mention a negative form of a word. Of the three negative prefixes *im- (imperfect), in- (incorrect), un- (unnatural)*, one may create an orthographic error by choosing an improper prefix like *inperfect*. An error can also appear when they do not know the correct adjective derived from the adverbs for example *tragicly* instead of tragically. Spelling errors of this kind, called vocabulary incompetence, are typical for non-native language users. During the second stage, the thought word is converted into spelling. ESL learners commit errors, when they are not sure of the spelling and pronunciation and when they employ a different grapheme (letters representing a phoneme) for the phoneme in the word. This results in the production of errors such as *occurrance* instead of occurrence, '*fourty'* instead of forty, and '*grammer'* instead of grammar, '*temparery'* instead of temporary.

The table below quantifies the errors found in the writing of the learners. The learners produced errors mainly due to incorrect use of vowels, confusion of consonants sounds, substitution of two letters, transposition of two letters, grapheme substitution and non- standard pronunciation.

Hodges observes that spelling ability is a gradual process leading towards competence through consistent interaction with the orthographical writing and reading (1984, p.1). Usually, good spelling involves more than memorizing (p.2). Accurate spelling performance requires the processes of dividing the spoken word into its phonemic components and then selecting the graphemes to represent the phonemes. In English, the absence of coordination between pronunciation and spelling prevails. Learners try to represent a sound graphemically, converting sounds into correct spellings, and turn the graphemic representations into sounds, reading written language. This relationship between graphemes and phonemes is not easy to learn for the learners of English. A phoneme may have many possible spellings. This is one of the major causes of spelling

errors for the students. National Foundation for Educational Research (Brook et at, 1993) classified the common spelling mistakes noticed in the writing of the English students into five major categories: 1) insertion of extra letters, 2) omission of letters, 3) substitution of different letters, 4) transposition of two letters and 5) Grapheme substitution involving more than two letters but only a single cause.

Error Taxonomy

Incorrect Vowels 56, Consonant Confusion 63, Substitution 58, Transposition 56, Grapheme Substitution 60, Non-Standard Pronunciation 48

The problem of orthographical errors is not peculiar to L2 Tamil learners alone; it is universal, irrespective of the exposure to target language and comprehensible input. The presence of even a few orthographical errors may have an adverse bearing on the writing and consequently to the ideas. Baskaran, V (1996) examined the English orthographic problems of the undergraduate students in Tamilnadu suggests the dichotomy between pronunciation and spelling, prevalence of silent letters, lack of co-ordination between the phoneme and the grapheme are reasons for various causes of spelling errors. The present corpus of language has noticed spelling errors which are classified as follows.

The learners' ignorance to identify the correct vowels sounds forces them to commit spelling errors. Such confusion of the vowel sounds were found in the writing of the learners. The Tamil learners often used *'a'* in the place of *'i',* and *'e'* in the place of *'a'.*

   a) I will *definately* meet him tomorrow (definitely).
   b) Our relatives requested to *meat* on Monday (meet).
   c) We *celebreted* Pongal last year (Celebrated).

The confusion of consonants sounds were the other sort of errors found in the written scripts of the students.

   a) The students decided to *comming* on Friday (come).
   b) The *backround* colour of the picture was nice (background).

The transposition of letters, for example leaners' attempt to use *'ie'* instead of *'ei'* also forced the learner to land in incorrect spelling. A few examples from the students composition is noted bellow.

   a) My *freind* came to my house on Pongal (friend).
   b) I *recieved* 2000 rupees to buy a new dress (received).

The relationship between graphemes and phonemes is not easy to learn for the learners of English. The failure to understand the relationship between graphemes and phonemes causes spelling errors. These ignorance forces them to use *'becose'* instead of because, *'colled'* instead of called, *'Ticher'* instead of teacher, *'surveve'* in the place of survive.

There are plenty of words in English which are homophonous or sometimes partially similar; a syllable or two being similar. This auditory or visual similarity between words can confuse language learners. These errors thus occur because of some kind of analogy with the other words. The study the present corpus errors revealed that the learners were unable to differentiate the words like *whole and hole, know and no, their and there, where and were, and grate and great.* The followings are a few examples found in the composition.

   a) The family members *where* coming to home (were).
   b) We *were* a new dress on Pongal (wear).
   c) The students wished to visit the place *were* we went once (where).

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The difference in pronunciation of words is also a cause of spelling errors. The spelling influences on learners' pronunciation and in the same way the pronunciation can also affect the way learners spell words. Some of the errors in the corpus appeared to be errors resulting from non-standard pronunciation. These errors may have caused by incorrect input from the environment.

     a)   Our college invited a *sychologist* in the NSS Camp (psychologist)

     b)   My brother *brakes* his legs (break).

Successful English spelling performance involves the processes of segmenting the spoken word into its phonemic components and then selecting the appropriate graphemes to represent the phonemes. In addition, it entails learning a large number of letter combination rules (orthography) and many exceptions due to affixation, assimilation, and the inflow of new words (morphology) to the language (Varnhagen, McCallum, & Burstow, 1997). According Gentry (1982), the correct stage of spelling can be possibly reached when learners master the phonological, orthographic, and morphemic aspects of their written vocabulary.

Recommendation

Boder (1973) established that those who knew the spelling rules made fewer errors and that their errors were good phonetic approximation. Rote visual memorization is one of the possible conventional methods to master spelling. Learners need to be taught that many sounds have more than one possible spelling and they need to be sensitive to these variations. According to Joy Alcock (2002), three sets of knowledge are needed for a learner to become a proficient speller: 1) Orthographic knowledge; 2) Phonological knowledge and 3) Morphological knowledge. According to Perfetti (cited in Alcock, 2000, p.22) the two distinct areas of competence that learners need to acquire in order to improve their skills in spelling are 1) Knowledge of sound-letter correspondences, which represent the alphabetic basis of the language; 2) Storage of a large amount of word specific and morphological information regarding the actual spellings of words.

Conclusion

The study identified orthographical deviations due to the discrepancy between speech and writing. The learners' ignorance in comprehending that in English orthography certain consonant are double in working but they are pronounced as single sound. One of the other reasons for the occurrence of orthographical errors may be the fact "it is the one area of writing where English Teachers themselves will admit ineptness" (Shaughnessy, 1998, p.161). Even the good spellers who have relatively good command of language are prone to making errors in spelling. It may be usually by accident rather than by ignorance. Many of their unintentional slips of the pen are in homophonic forms, e.g. *hole* for *whole*, *where* for *were*, *their* for *there, no* for *know*. Poor spelling is an indication of low intelligence and poor spellers use a lot of high frequency words to avoid difficult and complex words. Literature suggested that such learners had the tendency to limit their written language in quantity with a view to minimizing their spelling errors.

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