Use it or Lose it: Vocabulary Growth in the EFL Writing Classroom

Salma Al-Humaidi (Corresponding author)

Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

E-mail: salmahumaidi@gmail.com

Mohammed Al-Hadlaq

King Saud University, Saudi Arabia

E-mail: malhadlaq@gmail.com

Abstract

Do students avoid using the words they are unsure of spelling correctly in their writing? Does the use and/or avoidance of newly learned words in writing affect later recall of those words? In this paper, the authors propose that learners' vocabulary growth is hampered by teachers' emphasis on correct spelling and that tolerance of spelling errors is needed to create a positive learning environment in the writing classroom where students can freely and productively use all of their linguistic resources with no fear of being punished. This proposal is based on the assumption that learners are likely to hide their inability to spell words correctly when composing a text, causing these words to remain in their passive vocabulary which in turn would lead to the possibility of them being lost.

Keywords: Spelling, Vocabulary, Writing, EFL

1. Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is essential to the linguistic development of L2 learners. Healy et al. (1998) argue that "An important component of improving foreign language acquisition is improving the efficiency and effectiveness of acquiring new vocabulary" (p. 10). Studies on vocabulary have been conducted to gain more insight into vocabulary teaching and learning. Among the areas investigated are: intentional and incidental vocabulary learning, vocabulary retention, and vocabulary learning through diverse activities or tasks. A research summary of these areas can be found in Nam (2010).

Most new words are learned through reading. But how effective is reading in aiding the long-term retention of newly encountered words? According to a number of vocabulary learning studies (e.g. Ellis, 1994; Paribakht & Wesche, 2000, among others), it has been shown that reading alone does not adequately facilitate the long-term retention of these unfamiliar words regardless of the methods learners use to discern their meanings, whether by using inferring, looking words up in the dictionary, or providing students with glosses.

Nation (2001) identifies three important psychological conditions for effective vocabulary learning: noticing, retrieval, and generation. Noticing can happen in various situations, such as direct instruction, negotiation, need of comprehension or production, searching for the meaning, guessing from context, etc. During noticing, the word is taken out of its message context for a certain period of time to be studied as a single item, a process referred to as de-contextualization. Retrieval of the word can be both receptive and productive. Receptive retrieval takes place during listening or reading and involves matching the sound or the written form of the word to the meaning stored in the learner's memory. In productive retrieval, by contrast, meanings that the learner intends to express need to be given forms. The third psychological condition, i.e. generation, is defined as the meeting or using of words in new contexts that are different from the ones where they have been previously met (Nation, ibid). Generation can be receptive when the item is met in reading or listening, and productive when the word is used in an original context when speaking or writing. There are, however, different degrees of generation; the highest point of generation is when the context is quite different from the previous context (s) where the word has been encountered.

The above discussion indicates that writing is an important skill for reinforcing the retention of newly learned vocabulary. It does not only provide opportunities for practicing already learned words, but also provides opportunities for new ways of using these words. As a result, learners' fluency is expected to be strengthened, as posited by the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1995). According to the Output Hypothesis, the language generated by learners enhances their fluency by increasing their control over forms already partially acquired. This indicates that through productive use of the language, learners will be able to improve their command of the forms and meanings of words.

2. Complexity of the English Spelling

Having shown the importance of using newly learned words productively, we now turn to discuss one of the factors that hinder learners from using the recently acquired words in

writing, namely spelling. Baleghizadeh & Dargahi (2011) assert that the basic problem among most learners is their ability to spell words accurately and this inhibits their ability to write (cited in Mohammadi & Gorjian, 2015). Moat (2006) states that poor spellers may limit what they write to words they can spell.

In the following, we will briefly explain how spelling could be a hurdle facing L2 learners and how it could negatively affect their vocabulary growth. According to a number of scholars (Mirressa & Dumessa, 2011; Kareema, 2013), English spelling is complex and requires years of study to master. Therefore, many students, especially Arab learners (Al-zuoud & Kabilan, 2013; Deacon, 2015) find it frustrating. This complexity of the English spelling is caused by its phonologically opaque writing system; that is, there is not always one-to-one phoneme-grapheme correspondence. The majority of English sounds have more than one orthographic representation: English has 26 letters to represent 44 phonemes. The phoneme /f/, for example, has three different graphemes: [f] as in 'feel', [gh] as in 'tough', and [ph] as in 'phone'. The case with the English vowels is even more complicated. The sound /aI/, for instance, could be written in different ways: [i – e] as in 'bite', [y] as in 'my', [igh] as in 'fight', [eigh] as in 'height', [i] as in 'find', [ie] as in 'pie', [ye] as in 'eye', [uy] as in 'buy', [ei] as in 'either', and [ae] as in 'maestro'. This sound-spelling inconsistency can be clearly seen in homophones (e.g., mail-male, pray-prey, maid-made, etc.), the area where many spelling errors occur.

This complexity of the spelling system will certainly pose difficulties to L2 learners, especially those who come from shallow orthographic backgrounds where the sounds of the language are consistently mapped with a specific symbol, like Arab learners[1]. Such learners need to put more effort to adjust to this new unfamiliar level of orthographic depth. During the learners' acquisition process of the English spelling system, negative phonological transfer is more likely to occur. Such a transfer takes place when there is no equivalent for the English phoneme in the learner's native language. Figueredo (2006) points out two situations for this form of transfer. The first is to replace the English phoneme with an L1 phoneme. Arab learners, for example, frequently replace the English sound /p/ that does not exist in Arabic with the sound /b/ which both languages have (Cook, 1997). Likewise, Japanese learners continually confuse the letters [l] and [r]. In the second situation, the students may leave out the English phoneme if a) it does not exist in their L1 (e.g., French ESL students may write *ouse* for (*house*) leaving out the phoneme /h/), or b) its position is uncommon in their L1 (e.g., Spanish learners of English may leave out the last phoneme in final consonant clusters as in *mine* (*mind*)).

3. Literature on L2 Learners' Spelling

Research on spelling has focused on different issues; however, none has investigated the relationship between spelling practice in the writing classroom and vocabulary acquisition. The literature on L2 spelling tried to find answers to the following questions: a) What are the types of spelling errors? (Al-zuoud & Kabilan, 2013; Alhaisoni, Al-zuoud & Gaudel, 2105;

---

[1] Arab learners, in the initial stages of learning Arabic, write and read Arabic script with diacritics. This continues until they reach a proficiency stage where the use of such signs is no longer needed for the encoding and decoding of language. Therefore, Arabic orthography is considered shallow.

Deacon, 2015), b) what are the strategies ESL learners use to overcome the spelling problems? (Baleghizadeh & Dargahi, 2011), c) What spelling knowledge is acquired? (Berkel, 2004), d) How does the performance of L2 learners differ from those of L1 speakers? (Cook, 1997), e) How does the L2 learners' spelling abilities develop? (Kwong & Varnhagen, 2005), and finally, f) What different methods do teachers use in responding to learners' spelling mistakes? (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Despite its central role, little attention is being paid to spelling in the L2 literature, in general, and in L2 writing studies, in particular. Unlike English L1 learners, L2 learners of English do not receive any formal instruction in the area of spelling; they are left to acquire this skill on their own (Berkel, 2004). This might be because the time available for formally learning a second language is far less than learning someone's first language. Bearing this in mind, L2 experts and instructors allocate the available time to teach more critical language components and skills, such as grammar, vocabulary, speaking, etc.) Yet, such learners are expected to produce correctly-spelled language.

4. Spelling in the L2 Classroom and Teachers' Feedback

It is commonly known that using traditional approaches to develop writing skills focus mainly on accuracy and ignores to a great extent the process of writing itself (Al-Haq & Al-Sobh, 2010; Whiteman, 1981). Whiteman (1981) specifically states that students are weak in writing because of teachers' focus on grammar, spelling, and punctuation rather than involving students in the learning process. This focus is also conveyed in curricular guidelines (Al-Haq & Al-Sobh, 2010).

Still other studies have shown that despite institutional guidelines to use indirect feedback (Ferris, 2006), or focus on global issues (e.g., content, organization) or use of selective feedback (Lee, 2008), teachers focus on mechanisms of the language. Lee (2008) identified some factors that influence teachers' feedback practices among which are their beliefs about the importance of grammatical accuracy. In an EFL Saudi context, Al-Shahrani (2013) found that teachers tend to use comprehensive feedback with more focus given to mechanisms in order to demonstrate to the authorities that they are hard working.

By specifically responding to learners' spelling errors, teachers hope to eradicate such errors and help learners overcome their deficiencies and become better spellers. But how useful is error correction in attaining that goal? In EFL contexts, the situation is worsened by the fact that teachers use direct methods for responding to learners' errors by presenting the correct form to them (Asiri, 1996) which is believed to have a minimal effect on language development (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Taking into consideration the complexity of the English spelling system described above, L2 teachers need to be patient and tolerant of students' spelling mistakes. Spelling, like other linguistic processes, should be viewed as a developmental cognitive process that requires the knowledge of orthographic rules and how they should be applied (Rankin et al., 1994). Such knowledge is a process that develops over time and depends upon considerable experience and interaction with meaningful reading and writing (Templeton and Morris, 2000, Rankin et

al., 1994). According to Berkel (2004), the spelling competence of L2 speakers of English is not the result of specific teaching and training. This applies to native speakers as well. Research has shown that young children are capable of constructing knowledge about the relationships between sounds and letters without explicit instruction (Templeton & Morris, ibid).

5. Avoidance Strategy

Most language teachers tend to be more tolerant of grammar and pronunciation mistakes than they are of spelling mistakes (Seef-Gabriel, 2003); hence, they view misspellings as a sign of negligence and/or lack of knowledge which should be severely punished. As a result, in their attempt to hide their poor spelling, students tend to avoid using words that would attract the red ink of the teacher (Nation, 2001; Haggan, 1991). They would rephrase and/or look for synonymous words or words with closer meanings to substitute for the difficult ones. They use limited vocabularies, favoring regularly spelled words and avoiding words that are hard to spell or more sophisticated vocabulary with more difficult spellings (Moseley & Nation, 2001). If they fail to do so, they might think of abandoning the idea they wanted to communicate in the first place and look for a new one.

According to Gupta's (1998) study which compared the hand-written compositions of a group of EFL learners to their typed ones (i.e. with the assistance of spellchecker), the essays composed using paper and pencil were characterized by simple vocabulary which was repeated throughout the essay. This finding supports Nation's (2001) claim that L2 learners, in their attempt to hide their poor spelling, use limited vocabulary, i.e. mostly words that are regularly used and spelled correctly already. Because L2 students do not make use of all their receptive vocabulary, the correct spelling of which they are unsure of, fearing the red marks on their papers, their choice of topics will evidently be limited. Moreover, their selection of topics will be confined to what they can spell, and not to what they want to communicate. Avoiding the use of hard-to-spell words will certainly deprive learners of the valuable opportunities to use these words in a productive manner, which will consequently impair their vocabulary growth.

Students who are taught that correct spelling is a critical component of good writing are likely to perceive themselves as poor writers if their spelling abilities are low. Alternatively, students who are acquiring spelling through functional writing activities might perceive spelling as one aspect of writing, but one that is less critical to the primary task of communicating. Therefore, students could be poor spellers and still view themselves as good writers (Rankin, et al. 1994). There is evidence that good writers are not always good spellers and good spellers are not always good writers.

6. Fluency and Higher Level Skills

Another serious drawback of heavily attending to spelling mistakes is the false impression that students might get about the weighting of spelling in writing (Rankin, et al., 1994) compared to more important higher-level skills, such as the generation, development and organization of ideas. The heavy emphasis on correct spelling in a L2 classroom would cause

poor spellers to perceive themselves as poor writers (as described above), where in some cases they might not be, and this will negatively affect their self-esteem. Students' concern with spelling accuracy might shift their attention away from their higher-level skills to lower-level issues (e.g., spelling and punctuation) that could be dealt with at a later stage. As a result, the learners' main concern will be shifted to turning in an essay free of spelling mistakes. To them, meaning-related issues will be considered less important than the mechanical aspects of writing which, in their views, need maximum care. Consequently, this false impression will ultimately affect their fluency (Graham et al., 2002) and the overall quality of their writing in terms of coherence and message clarity.

Fluency is strongly affected (Harrasi, 2012) as students will pause every time they want to write a difficult word to check its correctness and make a decision about using it or finding other options (i.e. abandoning the idea all together or rephrasing enough context to avoid using the word). This will have a negative impact on the higher-level skills of writing that students need to be engaged in. Berninger (1999 in Graham et al., 2002) stresses the importance of freeing students' minds during writing by not emphasizing the mechanical skills in order to allow their ideas to flow smoothly, and thus significantly improve the quality of their writing. As we know, fluency is important for speaking, so that the speaker may hold the floor, but it is true for writing also, especially in an educational context with time restrictions imposed (Kees de Glopper, 2002).

Some studies have explored different methods of supporting critical thinking skills (Khatib, Marefat & Ahmadai, 2012; Vurdien, 2011). In a recent study that focused on enhancing students' critical thinking skills in writing through keeping dialogue journals, the researchers instructed the participants not to focus on grammar or spelling mistakes, but instead to focus on their thoughts and feelings freely on paper. It was found that this approach improved students' critical thinking abilities as opposed to ordinary writing tasks (Khatib, Marefat & Ahmadai, 2012).

It can be clearly seen from the above discussion that heavy emphasis on spelling in the writing classroom could lead students to: 1) avoid using certain words, 2) believe that they are poor spellers and poor writers, and 3) shift their attention from higher-level writing skills to mechanical issues.

By allowing students to write freely, without the confines brought about by the penalization of spelling mistakes, teachers will be able to have a better understanding of the deficiencies in their students' spelling and will be able to have remedial sessions to eliminate them. Collecting words as they naturally exist in students' writings is problematic as students tend to avoid using words they are unsure of. In this case, it is tested what students know and not what they don't know (Haggan, 1991).

The lack of tolerance on the part of L2 teachers of learners' spelling mistakes could lead to having detrimental effects. One very important area of language development that might be severely affected is vocabulary growth, due to learners' avoidance of using words they are unsure of spelling correctly.

7. Pedagogical Implications

Some pedagogical implications include the following: a) significant amount of reading and writing is critical if students are to advance in spelling ability. This indicates that teachers should not put much emphasis on spelling in the writing classroom, b) long-term retention of new words can be reinforced through using those words productively in various contexts, c) generation help learners to deeply process new words and use them in contexts, d) direct methods for responding to learners' spelling errors by presenting the correct form to them is believed to have a minimal effect on language development, e) students should be helped by different methods during the writing process in order to overcome their spelling problems and focus on communicating their ideas freely in writing. Examples are using the computer to write and using the dictionary during writing to check for correct spelling. This will allow them to engage more productively in learning the spelling of the word through mentally processing that word and comparing the correct spelling they find to the spelling they have in mind.

References

Alhaisoni, E., Al-zuoud, K., & Gaudel, D. (2105). Analysis of Spelling errors of Saudi beginner learners of English enrolled in an intensive English language program. *English Language Teaching, 8*(3), 185-192.

Al-Haq, F., & Al-Sobh, M. (2010). The effect of a web-based instructional EFL program on enhancing the performance of Jordanian secondary students. *The JALT CALL Journal*, *6*(3), 189-2018.

Al-Shahrani, A. A. (2013). Investigation of written corrective feedback in an EFL context: beliefs of teachers, their real practices, and sudents' preferences. Master by coursework & shorter thesis, School of Languages and Linguistics, The University of Melbourne.

Al-zuoud, K., & Kabilan, M. (2013). Investigating EFL Jordanian students' spelling errors at tertiary level. *International Journal of Linguistics*, *5*(3), 164-176.

Asiri, I. (1996). University EFL Teachers' Written Feedback on Compositions and Students' Reactions. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Essex.

Baleghizadeh, S., & Dargahi, Z. (2011). The use of different spelling strategies among EFL young learners. *Porta Linguarum*, *15*, 151-159.

Berkel, A. (2004). Learning to spell in English as a second language. *IRAL*, *42*(3), 239-257.

Berninger, V. (1999). Coordinating transcription and text generation in working memory during composing: Automatic and constructive processes. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, *22,* 99-112.

Deacon, R. (2015). Arabic ESL Orthographic errors in English: Production difficulty in comparison to Korean ESL performance. *International Journal of Language and Applied Linguistics, 1*(2), 42-48.

Ellis, R. (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ferris, D. (2006). Does error feedback help student writers? New evidence on the short-term and long-term effectsof written error correction. In K.Hyland and F. Hyland (Eds.), *Feedback in second language writing: Contexts and issues*, (pp. 81-104). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Figueredo, L. (2006). Using the known to chat the unknown: A review of first-language influence on the development of English-as-a-second-language spelling skill. *Reading and Writing, 19,* 873-905.

Gupta, R. (1998). Can spelling checkers help the novice writer? British *Journal of Educational Technology*, *2,* 255-266.

Haggan, M. (1991). Spelling errors in Arabic-speaking English majors: A comparison between remedial students and fourth year students. *System*, *19*, 45-61.

Healy, A., & Bourne, L. (eds.). (1998). *Foreign language learning: Psycholinguistic studies on training and retention.* Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hyland, K., & Hyland, F. (2006). Feedback on second language students' writing. *Language Teaching*, *39*, 83-101.

Kareema, M. (2013). English spelling and its difficult nature. *Proceedings of the Third International Symposium, SEUSL*: 6-7 July, 2013, Oluvil, Sri Lanka.

Khatib, M. Marefat, F., & Ahmadai, M. (2012). Enhancing critical thinking abilities in EFL classrooms: Through written and audiotaped dialogue journals. *Humanity and Social Sciences Journal, 7*(1), 33-45.

Kwong, T. E., & Varnhagen, C. K. (2005). Strategy development and learning to spell new words: generalization of a process. *Developmental Psychology*, *41*(1), 148.

Lee, I. (2008). Ten mismatches between teachers' beliefs and written feedback practice. *ELT Journal*, *63*(1), 13-22.

Mirressa, M., & Dumessa, M. (2011). Investigating factors contributing to grade nine students' spelling errors at Don Bosco High and Preparatory. *Journal of Lnaguage and Culture*, *2*(6), 103-115.

Mohammadi, M., & B. Gorjian (2015). The effect of contextualized spelling activities on improving high school learners' sound-symbol interactive writing errors. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World (IJLLALW)*, *8*(4), 196-210.

Nam, J. (2010). Linking Research and Practice: Effective strategies for teaching vocabulary in the ESL classroom. *TESL Canada Journal*, *28*(1), 127-135.

Nation, P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Paribakht, S. T*., & Wesche, M. *(2000*). Vocabulary enhancement activities and reading for meaning in second language vocabulary acquisition. *In J. Coady & T. N. Huckin *(Eds.)*, Second language vocabulary acquisition: A rationale for pedagogy* (pp. 174–200). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Rankin, J., Bruning, R., & Timme, V. (1994). The development of beliefs about spelling and their relationship to spelling performance. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *8,* 213-232.

Seef-Gabriel, B. (2003). Phonological processing: A platform for assisting second language learners with English spelling. *Child language Teaching and Therapy*, *19*(3), 291-310.

Swain, M. (1995). Three functions of output in second language learning. In G. Cook & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.), *Principle and practice in applied linguistics: Studies in honor of H. G. Widdowson* (pp. 125–144). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Templeton, S., & Morris, D. (2000). Reconceptualizing spelling development and instruction. In Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research: volume III.*

Vurdien, R. (2011). Enhancing writing skills through blogs in an EFL class. *EUROCALL 2011, The CALL Triangle: student, teacher, and institution,* 155-158.

Whiteman, M. (1981). Writing*: The nature, development and teaching of written communication.* Hillsdale, NJ. Lawrence, Erlbaum Associates.

Authors

Salma Al-Humaidi is an assistant professor since 2002 in Curriculum & Instruction Department (English Language Teaching Unit), College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman. She obtained her master degree in 1995 from Sultan Qaboos University and got her PhD from the USA, Indiana University, Bloomington, in 2002. She is currently working as an assistant professor of ELT at Sultan Qaboos University. She has published research papers on teaching practice, task-based learning, learner-centered methodology, and microteaching.

Mohammed Al-Hadlaq is an assistant professor since 2003 in English Language and Translation Department, College of Languages and Translation, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

He got his master degree in 1996 from the University of Essex, England and his PhD degree in 2003 from Ball State University, USA. His area of specialty is applied linguistics and he is interested in vocabulary acquisition, spelling, and translation.

*Salma Al- Humaidi (Corresponding author)

College of Education, Curriculum & Instruction Department.

Sultan Qaboos University, P.O. Box 32, P.C. 123, Al-Khoudh, Oman

Email: salmahumaidi@gmail.com

Tel: 00968 97278572,

Fax: 00968 24413817