

Spelling Errors Made by Arab Learners of English

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Abstract

Writing is a pivotal system that transfers spoken utterances from being heard to being seen and read. Literacy is appraised not only by reading and writing accurately, but also spelling words correctly. Pedagogically speaking, second language learners (L2) may struggle in their English writing more than first language speakers (L1) due to different reasons. Even among L2 learners, it is believed that Arab learners struggle with English spelling more than any other non-native speakers. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to review recent research and literature on the spelling errors made by Arab learners. In addition, a small experimental study of intermediate high school Saudi students aged 17-18 years old ($n = 26$) is implemented in a context that has not been explored yet. All participating students were tested before taking part in the study. The results of this study are consistent with previous research, which found that spelling errors made by Arab learners are associated with the impact of their L1. The most common spelling errors are consonant doubling, silent letters, final [e] and vowels in general. It is, thus, indispensable for Arab instructors and stakeholders to scrutinize this dilemma explicitly.

Keywords: Writing system, Spelling errors, First language, Second language, Arab learners

1. Introduction

Writing is a method that transfers spoken language from being heard to being seen and therefore read. In order to represent spoken language in a written script, a system must be invented and therefore precisely implemented. Thus, the English writing system is the one that native speakers and L2 learners should strictly follow. However, L2 learners may suffer in their English writing more than native speakers due to the impact of their L1. In particular, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the importance of spelling. There have been several studies in the literature reporting that Arab learners struggle with English spelling more than any other non-native speakers. For instance, double consonant letters, silent letters, final [e] and vowels are some of these difficulties encountered by Arab learners. Personally, I was an English learner and later an English teacher and I believe that English writing has some difficulties for Arab learners.

Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to review recent research and literature on the spelling errors made by Arab learners. In addition, a small experimental study of intermediate high school Saudi students aged 17-18 years old ($n = 26$) is implemented. To do so, this paper consists of seven sections including this introductory section. The second section reviews literature regarding this issue. The third section highlights the meaning of orthography. Later on, the importance of spelling will be presented in the fourth section. In the fifth section, the English spelling approaches will be presented. A description of most spelling errors made by Arab learners, accompanied by studies conducted regarding this issue, will be highlighted in the sixth section. Before concluding this paper, an implementation of a small-scale study with Saudi intermediate students regarding their spelling skill is discussed and analysed in the seventh section.

2. Literature Review

A writing system is a way to investigate how spoken words are transformed to a written script. Langer (2014) stated that spelling is a representation of language. There is a consensus among researchers that learning a new roman writing system is more difficult than learning it for the first time (Ibrahim, 1978). Learning a new writing system is not a tranquil task; however, it is vital and crucial. Bazerman (1991:3) asserts the importance of writing by indicating that “writing structures our relations with others and organises our perceptions of the world”. In particular, one of the main elements of learning any writing system is spelling.

Spelling is the way writers can express clearly their ideas (Cook, 1992). It has conclusively been shown that lack of spelling skill makes it challenging for both native speakers and L2 learners (Al-Jarf, 2010). Cook (1992:476) has compared adult L2 learners and adult and children native speakers by asking “the extent to which L2 users’ knowledge of sound/letter rules and of individual visual items reflects their different L1 systems of spelling and pronunciation”. He found that, on average, a fifteen-year-old native speaker’s spelling errors are similar in number to those of an adult L2 learner. He states that spelling is so important due to its “social overtones”. Others have argued that observing students’ spelling errors is the best way to understand the process of spelling developments (Varnhagen et al., 1997).

EFL learners with a non-roman writing system would make fewer spelling errors than EFL learners with another roman writing system (Haggan, 1991). According to Cook (1992:478-479), the most common types of spelling mistakes were: “insertion of a single letter, omission of a single letter, substitution of one letter by another, transposition of two consecutive letters, grapheme substitution, i.e. multiple related changes, other mistakes, such as local accent”. In addition, Khan (2011) states that the difference in sentence patterns between a student’s mother tongue and L2 leads them to commit many spelling errors such as silent letters. Also, it has been found that there is an impact of L1 phonology on English spelling for L2 learners (Allaith and Joshi, 2011).

Abu-Rabia & Sammour (2013) asserted that “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”. However, the latter point has been devastatingly critiqued by Tops et al. (2014:295) who argued that “the mapping between sounds and letters is not always regular or predictable”. Although spelling is a momentous element in writing, it has been scantily studied (Cook, 1992). As a result, this is an attempt to correlate the results of a small-scale study with literature and the author’s experience as an English teacher to highlight the challenges novice Arab learners of English encounter.

3. Orthography

Orthography is a terminology utilized to indicate the conventional spelling system of a language. Languages are either deep or shallow orthographies. It has been identified that languages in which letters do not correspond directly to phonemes are orthographically deep, such as Arabic, English and Hebrew, while others in which letters correspond to phonemes are orthographically shallow, such as Finnish and Serbo-Croat (Cook, 2004).

It has also been stated that learners with deep orthographical languages mostly struggle with the phonological route and learners with shallow orthographical languages struggle with the visual route (Cook, 1992). Accordingly, knowing whether a particular language is deep or shallow is an important aspect for both teachers and students. Protopapas et al. (2013) claimed that “spelling errors may be strongly dependent on the language-specific orthographic system and on the individual level of competence”.

4. Importance of Spelling

Spelling is an imperative component for writing, in that spelling errors may lead to a misunderstanding of the written script (Khuwaileh and Al-Shoumali, 2000). Literacy is appraised not only by reading and writing accurately, but also spelling words correctly (Allaith and Joshi, 2011). Spelling mastery indicates the level of education while spelling errors reveal inaccuracy. Nevertheless, in order to master the English writing/spelling system, an association between English phonemes and written graphemes should be applied (Al-Jarf, 2010).

It has been suggested in literature that students should be taught word parts explicitly. Moreover, teachers believe that intensive reading is a solution for students that leads to better

spelling (Bowen, 2011). Though SLA learners struggle with English spelling, SLA research and studies are still not addressing this issue extensively (Cook, 1992). In detail, we should keep in mind that English spelling does not consist solely of letters that correspond to phonemes. It is more complex than that; the roles of silent letters in English spelling are many, the impact of grammar on morphology is crucial and correspondence rules of English are different for groups of words.

5. Approaches to English Spelling

Generally speaking, English, like any other language, has some basic rules of spelling. For instance, the rule of ‘i before e except after c’ such as ‘grief’; the ‘three letter rule’ governing structure words such as ‘to’ and content words such as ‘bee’; ‘the (th) rule’ such as ‘than – thank’; ‘rules for surnames’ such as adding (e) to ‘Forde’; and finally, doubling consonants such as doubling ‘navy’ to ‘navvy’.

English spelling has systematic approaches generated by renowned linguists, namely, Richard Venezky, Ken Albrow and Noam and Carol Chomsky. These approaches have been applied to English spelling by most linguists.

Venezky’s approach to English spelling aims to present the existing patterns in the current orthography, for example, by asking ‘how many spoken correspondences can you find for written <c>?’ He suggests four correspondences for it, that is, /tʃ/ ‘cello’, /tʃ/ ‘czar’, /s/ before <i/y/e> ‘cell’ and /k/ ‘come’ (Cook, 2004:61). However, Venezky’s system concentrates on the correspondence from writing to sound. His system is based on the 20,000 most frequent words. He described seven principles of English orthography (Cook, 2004:61). He stated that the solution of the units of spelling is through functional units, whether relational or markers.

Albrow’s approach to English spelling aims to describe the English writing system to teachers. For example, by asking “is the unit of English the letter, the word, combinations of letters or something else?” (Cook, 2004:68), he stated that orthographic symbols are the unit of English writing, not the word, whether basic <c> ‘café’, complex <ch> ‘chop’ or discontinuous <i_e> ‘hive’.

Noam and Carol Chomsky’s approach to spelling - ‘lexical representation’ - is considered as one of the most influential approaches. It aims to “describe how the human mind bridges the gap between the actual sounds of speech and the complex abstract meanings of sentences” (Cook, 2004:76). They stated that English learners need what children have, that is, phonological rules of English.

These three approaches have been applied by linguists regarding English spelling as they are considered the most powerful systematic approaches.

6. Arab Learners’ Spelling Errors in English

As this paper focuses on spelling errors made by Arab learners of English, it is worth saying that the Arabic language has an impact on English spelling. First of all, we can acknowledge that the direction of the writing system has a significant impact on new learners as the English writing system starts from left to right while Arabic starts from right to left.

Personally, I still remember how difficult it was for me as an English teacher to make students get used to this issue, starting from opening their notebooks and writing in their sheets in the opposite direction.

Furthermore, there is no doubt that Arabic and English are different. Haggan (1991) states that conducting a study on Arabic speakers learning English is interesting for two reasons: firstly, that English and Arabic have totally different scripts; secondly, that Arabic has regular spelling according to its pronunciation while English does not. Hence, he conducted a study in Kuwait University comparing 64 first-year and 23 fourth-year undergraduate Arab students speaking English. He found that most of the spelling errors students made were because of their “mispronunciation, lack of awareness and regular spelling patterns”. Similarly to Bebout (1985), he categorized spelling errors made by Arab learners into eight categories:

1- Consonant doubling errors

He found that both groups made consonant doubling errors, for example (×swiming) for (swimming). According to my experience with Arab students, this type of spelling error is perhaps the most common of all.

2- Other consonant errors

Other spelling errors regarding consonant letters are, for example, writing [t] instead of [s] for /ʒ/ (e.g. conclution), writing [s] instead of [c] for /s/ (e.g. sentence) and writing [t] instead of [s] for /š/ (e.g. controvertial). Also, the absence of the /p/ phoneme in Arabic causes problems between /p/ and /b/, which is also a common spelling error committed by my students.

3- Errors involving schwa

Arab learners commonly make mistakes between [e] and [a]. For example, they write (×unfamilier) for (unfamiliar) or (×collages) for (colleges). This type of spelling error is also a phenomenon among my beginner students.

4- Errors involving silent [e]

Arab learners may add an unnecessary [e], especially to the end of the word (e.g. ×playe) for (play) and (×begane) for (began). My beginner students rarely overcome this issue.

5- Other vowel errors

Misspelling of /e/ and /u/ is another spelling error regarding the vowels (e.g. ×incloude) for (include) and (×will) for (well). In my experience, intermediate students struggle with this mistake.

6- Letter mis-ordering

Mis-ordering of [ei] or [ie] is another problem with Arab learners, e.g. (×cheif) for (chief). This type of spelling error could be identified in intermediate students' essays and written scripts as well.

7- Unanalysable

This means “assortment of highly idiosyncratic spellings”. For instance, writing (×neocliar) for (nuclear).

8- Homophones

Most Arab learners struggle with the spelling of both (there) and (their). The potential reason behind this is that both words have the same sound.

Moreover, Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali (2000) compared 150 Arab undergraduate students’ spelling proficiency in their mother tongue (Arabic) and English at Jordan University and found that the most common linguistic mistake in both Arabic and English was lack of cohesion and tense. This indicates that there is a correlation between students’ skill in English spelling and their L1 (Arabic).

Al-Jarf (2010) has attempted to collect spelling errors corpora of Saudi secondary and undergraduate students from their written essays, homework, notes and tests. She classified spelling errors into three types: “whole word errors, faulty graphemes and faulty phonemes”. She also classified spelling problems into two types: phonological and orthographical. For instance, when a student fails to hear the final syllable of (country) and hears only (×cont), it is considered a phonological problem in which students mishear the whole word or part of it. On the other hand, when s/he reduces the double consonant of (middle) to (×midle) it is considered an orthographical problem in which students misspell the words that have the same sound. She indicates, therefore, that EFL students make spelling errors because of either inter-lingual or intra-lingual errors. Inter-lingual errors are when students make spelling errors because of their native language transfer. Intra-lingual errors are when students make spelling errors because of defective learning of the L2.

In addition, Ryan and Meara (1991) have conducted a study regarding the hypothesis that Arabic learners of English struggle more than any other non-native speakers of English with English vowels. They found that Arabic speakers suffer in processing English words. This difficulty might be because Arabic writing does not represent short vowels or it may be a result of Arabic lexical structure and the orthography of Arabic.

Al-Jarf (2009) conducted a spelling test with 36 female Saudi undergraduate students by asking them to fill in 100 blanks according to a listening dialogue. She found that the majority of spelling errors were phonological (63%) and the others were orthographical problems (37%). She indicates that phonological problems were related to mishearing while orthographical problems were related to “vowel digraphs, double consonants, silent vowels and consonants and homophones”.

Furthermore, Doushaq (1986) conducted a study on 96 Jordanian undergraduate students divided into four groups, comparing their English and Arabic writing problems. The study revealed that students’ writing was poor in both L1 and L2, which indicates that there is a correlation between students’ ability in L1 that might affect their L2 proficiency.

Allaith and Joshi (2011) investigated the impact of the Arabic phonological system on the English spelling system. They found that the 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/.

Personally speaking, I still remember when my tutor was teaching us how to differentiate between [p] and [b] pronunciation by holding a paper and pronouncing each letter to show that [b] is voiced while [p] is voiceless. Indeed, it was more difficult to apply this distinction in writing.

Ibrahim (1978) collected data from undergraduate Arab learners of English in the University of Jordan including examinations, homework and papers and found the following errors:

A. Errors made by Arab learners due to “the non-phonetic nature of English spelling” He argued that English spelling is not consistent, as has been stated. He supports his opinion by clarifying that most weak vowels that have the phonetic value [ə] might be represented in writing via any vowel symbol (e.g. ×beginner and ×husbund). Also, errors are made because of letters which are written but not pronounced and sounds which can be represented in different ways (e.g. ×electricity).

B. Errors made by Arab learners due to differences between Arabic and English sound systems. An example of these differences is that English has two different bilabial plosives [p] and [b] while Arabic has only one [b]. Therefore, Arab learners, for instance, may write (picture) as (×bicture) and (government) as (×covernment) as Standard Arabic does not have a [g] sound.

C. Some analogy errors made by Arab learners due to their perceptions towards some similar words. According to Ibrahim’s (1978) data, analogy errors can be divided into three types: phonetic, orthographic and grammatical. One sound spelled differently in writing is called phonetic analogy. For instance, (fought) and (caught) have the same sound but different spelling. When Arab learners find two words similar to each other, for instance (money) and (many), they may make orthographic errors such as (×maney) and (×mony). Another error made by Arab learners is due to grammatical analogy. For example, the past tense form usually ends in -ed. Hence learners may misspell words that do not end in -ed, for example (liked) and (×heard).

D. A grammatical analogy error made by Arab learners is to write (×savety) instead of (safety). Ibrahim (1978) assumes that learners make this error because of their analogy with similar words (e.g. brave - brevity), so they imitate this with (save - ×savety), also adding a suffix to some words without changing the stem (e.g. equal – equality). Hence, learners may imitate this action mistakenly with other words (e.g. speak - ×speach) instead of (speech).

E. Making transitional errors because of either overgeneralization or ignorance of some spelling errors. Most grammatical rules have their exceptional cases. Therefore, if students are not taught these exceptional cases, spelling errors will occur. For example, a grammatical rule says that if a suffix is added to a word ending with [e], the final [e] would be retained, but if the suffix begins with a vowel letter, then the final [e] should be deleted (e.g. complete -

completely and compare - comparing). If learners are not aware of this exception, they will generalize the rule, which will lead to them committing a spelling error such as (×completely) and (×compareing).

F. Another error type which Ibrahim (1978) found in his data is the influence of the differences between British and American spelling, especially when learners are exposed to both British and American texts. An example for this is the different spellings of (inflexional) and (inflectional). One of his students wrote (inflexional) by combining the two spellings in one.

According to my experience as an EFL teacher, curriculums in Saudi Arabia are not clear whether to use the British or American spelling/writing system. This ambiguity builds a barrier in front of students, which leads to serious problems regarding the differences between British and American words and therefore the mastery of spelling.

7. The Study

7.1 Subjects

In order to explore the issue of spelling errors made by Arab learners of English, a small-scale experimental study is implemented in a context that has not been explored yet. The study took place in Saudi Arabia, Qassim region, on 26 intermediate high school Saudi students aged 17-18 years old. The students were in their senior year. The school chosen is considered one of the highest quality institutions in teaching. Most of the students in this school have learnt English for a period of time outside Saudi Arabia (i.e. in the UK, USA, Australia or New Zealand), due to their parents' higher studies in these countries.

7.2 Materials

Bebout (1985:570) clearly stated that “studying the errors made on a list of spelling words is certainly an efficient method of investigating which words cause spellers the most difficulty”. Therefore, a spelling test that contains a list of the most common spelling errors made by L2 learners of English proposed by Vivian Cook has been adopted and implemented. It was thought that adopting a reliable and valid test would reveal accurate results.

7.3 Procedure

The test was conducted with students by their regular teacher. Students did not know about the test beforehand. Yet, the researcher ensured that the 25 words in the test were familiar to the students by asking their teacher to check the target words surreptitiously in a regular vocabulary class before the test. The students finished the test in less than 15 minutes.

7.4 Analysis

Generally speaking, out of 25 English words, the spelling errors made by students were ranged between 5 and 19 words. The most common spelling errors were consonant doubling, e.g. (×diferent – ×necessary) instead of (different - necessary), silent letters, e.g. (×goverment - ×knowledge) instead of (government - knowledge), errors involving a silent [e], e.g. (×develope) instead of (develop), misspelling of [ei] and [ie], e.g. (×thier) instead of (their) and schwa errors (i.e. [e] [a]). For instance, students wrote (×definate) for (definite)

and (×grammar) for (grammar).

Table 1. The words most often spelled incorrectly among 26 students

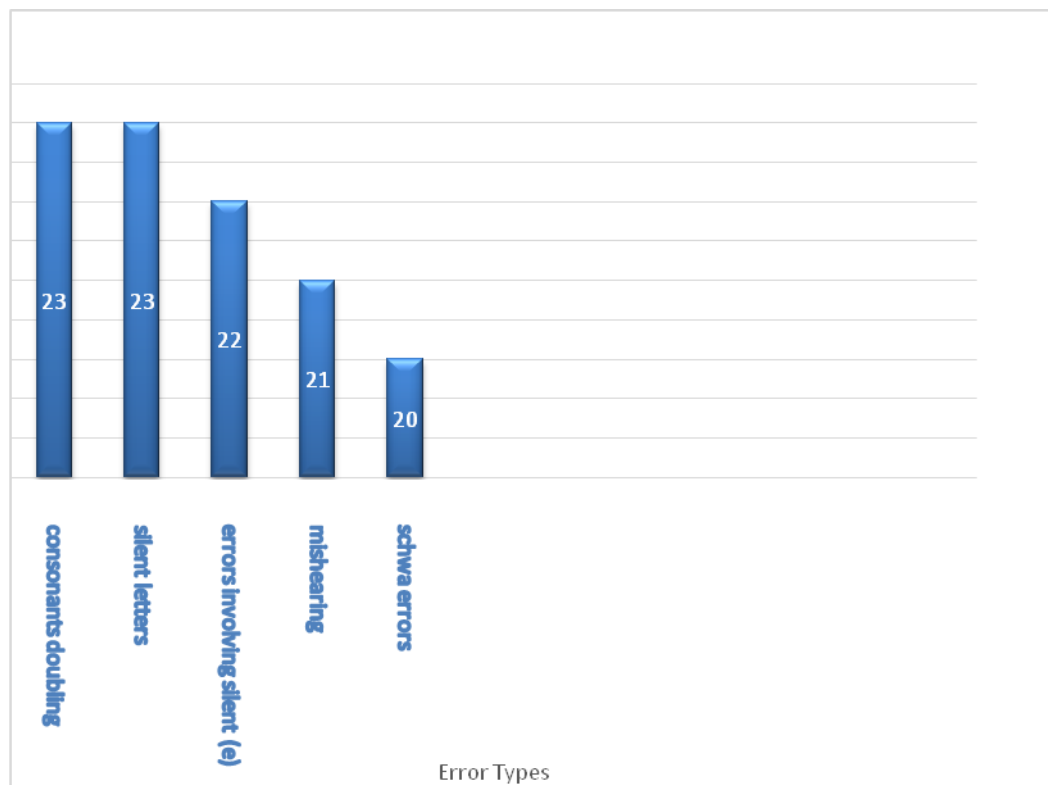
Target words	Error frequency	Error location
Sincerely	23	Sincerelly
Kindergarten	23	Kindergarden
Grammar	22	Grammer
Their house is	21	Thier house is
Definite	20	Definate
Integrate	20	Intigrate
Government	19	Gover..ment
Develop	18	Develope
Accommodation	18	Ac..om..odation
Career	18	Carier - Cariere
Necessary	17	Neces..ary
Professional	17	Proffessional

It is apparent from table 1 that consonant doubling errors are the most dominant obstacle which Arab learners struggle with. For example, out of 26 students, 23 misspelled (sincerely), 18 misspelled (accommodation), 17 misspelled (necessary) and 17 misspelled (professional). The potential reason behind this error is that Arabic does not have doubling consonants. Mishearing between [t] and [d] may cause a problem with Arab learners. Twenty-three students out of 26 misspelled (kindergarten) to (×kindergarden).

Twenty-two students misspelled (grammar) to (×grammar). Similarly, 20 students misspelled (definite) to (×definate) and (integrate) to (×intigrate). Eighteen students misspelled (career) to (×carier/cariere). This indicates that vowels are considered a difficulty with Arab learners.

Mis-ordering letters (e.g. *ie/ei*) are commonly misspelled. Twenty-one students mis-ordered the word (their) to (×thier). Moreover, Arab learners struggle with silent letters. For instance, (government) was misspelled by 19 students to (×goverment). Another problem Arab learners commonly encounter is final vowels, especially with [e]. Eighteen students misspelled (develop) to (×develope). This indicates that the final [e] causes complications for Arab learners.

Figure 1. Most common spelling error types



The results of this study are in line with previous studies such as Haggan (1991) and Bebout (1985), who categorized the spelling errors into eight types. The present study confirms some of these types (see fig.1 above). It seems that spelling errors that Arab learners make are linked to the impact of their first language. Thus, it is essential for Arab instructors and stakeholders to consider this dilemma explicitly. Teachers should help students “acquire knowledge about the sound-letter relationships” (Cordewener et al., 2015:107). The writing system in general and spelling errors in particular are highly advised to be taught and practiced extensively in classrooms. In addition to examining and addressing this issue, further research on how to overcome this plight is strongly recommended. The present study would have been more interesting if it had included a large, randomly selected sample of students in Qassim region.

8. Conclusion

This paper has explained the central importance of spelling. It has given an account of and the reasons for the widespread prevalence of spelling errors. The English writing system is considered a problematic issue for Arab learners. Due to their native language (Arabic), Arab learners of English struggle with double consonant letters, silent letters, final [e] and vowels in general. The results of the study implemented were similar to previous studies in literature. This indicates that the spelling errors Arab learners make are consistent and that the Arabic language has a vital impact on these errors.

To sum up, English spelling has not been taken into account in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it should be scrutinized more extensively in order for students to overcome

their spelling deficiency.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Spelling Test

Student Name			
Age		17-18	
Student Level		Intermediate	
English Class Level		Intermediate	
Could you please test your spelling skill with this short quiz?			
(Cook, V)			
No.	A	B	C
1	<input type="checkbox"/> choize	<input type="checkbox"/> choice	<input type="checkbox"/> choise
2	<input type="checkbox"/> sincerely	<input type="checkbox"/> sincerly	<input type="checkbox"/> sincerelly
3	<input type="checkbox"/> thier house is ...	<input type="checkbox"/> there house is ...	<input type="checkbox"/> their house is ...
4	<input type="checkbox"/> really	<input type="checkbox"/> realy	<input type="checkbox"/> reelly
5	<input type="checkbox"/> develope	<input type="checkbox"/> divelop	<input type="checkbox"/> develop
6	<input type="checkbox"/> kindergarten	<input type="checkbox"/> kindegarten	<input type="checkbox"/> kindergarden
7	<input type="checkbox"/> becuse	<input type="checkbox"/> becase	<input type="checkbox"/> because
8	<input type="checkbox"/> diffrint	<input type="checkbox"/> different	<input type="checkbox"/> diferent
9	<input type="checkbox"/> goverment	<input type="checkbox"/> goverment	<input type="checkbox"/> government

10	<input type="checkbox"/> busines affairs	<input type="checkbox"/> busyness affairs	<input type="checkbox"/> business affairs
11	<input type="checkbox"/> knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/> noledge	<input type="checkbox"/> nollidge
12	<input type="checkbox"/> profesional	<input type="checkbox"/> professional	<input type="checkbox"/> proffessional
13	<input type="checkbox"/> wold	<input type="checkbox"/> wou'd	<input type="checkbox"/> would
14	<input type="checkbox"/> necessary	<input type="checkbox"/> neccessary	<input type="checkbox"/> necesary
15	<input type="checkbox"/> definate	<input type="checkbox"/> difinite	<input type="checkbox"/> definite
16	<input type="checkbox"/> address	<input type="checkbox"/> adress	<input type="checkbox"/> adresse
17	<input type="checkbox"/> cariere	<input type="checkbox"/> carier	<input type="checkbox"/> career
18	<input type="checkbox"/> accommodation	<input type="checkbox"/> accomodation	<input type="checkbox"/> acomodation
19	<input type="checkbox"/> particuler	<input type="checkbox"/> particular	<input type="checkbox"/> partikular
20	<input type="checkbox"/> intergrate	<input type="checkbox"/> integrate	<input type="checkbox"/> intigrate
21	<input type="checkbox"/> grammar	<input type="checkbox"/> grammer	<input type="checkbox"/> gramar
22	<input type="checkbox"/> describe	<input type="checkbox"/> describe	<input type="checkbox"/> discribe
23	<input type="checkbox"/> begining	<input type="checkbox"/> beginning	<input type="checkbox"/> biginning
24	<input type="checkbox"/> interesting	<input type="checkbox"/> intristing	<input type="checkbox"/> intresting
25	<input type="checkbox"/> the book wich..	<input type="checkbox"/> the book which..	<input type="checkbox"/> the book witch

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