

Spelling Errors of Iranian School-Level EFL Learners: Potential Sources

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With the purpose of examining the sources of spelling errors of Iranian school level EFL learners, the present researchers analyzed the dictation samples of 51 Iranian senior and junior high school male and female students majoring at an Iranian school in Baku, Azerbaijan. The content analysis of the data revealed three main sources (intralingual, interlingual, and unique) with seven patterns of errors. The frequency of intralingual errors far outnumbers that of interlingual errors. Unique errors were even less. Therefore, in-service training programs may include some instruction on raising the teachers' awareness of the different sources of errors to focus on during the teaching program.

Keywords: Sources of Errors; Interlingual; Intralingual; Unique Errors; English Spelling

Eliminating spelling errors has long been of prime concern invoking some publications on the issue, though insufficient quantitatively. In public view, as Cook (1997) and Fagerberg (2006) endorse, the use of correct spelling, sociologically speaking, has positive implications. Similarly, Shemesh and Waller (2000) refer to some techniques that might usefully be utilized by EFL teachers to foster the learners' understanding of English spelling.

Before elaborating on the different sources of errors, a reference to the differences between the terms "error" and

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“mistake” seems to be necessary. According to Richards, Platt and Platt (1992, p.184) “error” is any use of language in speaking or writing a language which is regarded by a native speaker of that language to be ill-formed or incorrect. By contrast, “mistakes” are attributed to temporary features of a person such as fatigue and stress. Likewise Corder (1981) asserts the same point by considering errors as systematic and ever-occurring, and mistakes as being unsystematic and irregular although distinguishing the two sets in actual practice is not so straightforward or easy.

Interlingual and Intralingual Errors

Interlingual errors are those that result from language transfer, i.e., caused by the learner's native language (L1). Contrastive Analysis (CA) attributed the occurrence of all errors to L1 interference (Lado, 1957). This position was later rejected and subsequently modified (Corder, 1967, 1976, 1981); it was believed that only some errors result from L1 interference, while others appeared as a result of complexities, generalizations, and incorrect learning within L2. CA was mostly suited for error identification, not error prediction (Ellis, 1985a). Corder's (1981) L1 transfer hypotheses, namely negative, positive and zero transfer, and Pavlenko and Scott's (2002) two way transfer could explain only a small set of errors. Consequently, the notion of transfer was later put in a cognitive perspective leading to the emergence of “contrastive pragmatics” that considered transfer as a communicative strategy employed by the learners (Ellis, 1985a).

CA in its traditional sense, however, came to have the fragmentary use of identifying and eradicating phonological errors. As such, “error analysis” emerged (Fisciak, 1981; James, 1981; Richards, 1974, Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) offering a more comprehensive and valid framework for studying errors; errors were categorized as being either of “interlingual” or “intralingual” in nature. CA was gradually complemented by EA in 1970's (Ellis, 1994). “CA needed to work hand in hand with EA” (Ellis, 1985a). Errors, not accounted for by CA, were termed as “developmental” errors. Rashid, Lian and Eliza (2003) mention, “While errors were once regarded with contempt and looked upon as something to be

avoided at all cost, they are now perceived to be significant in language teaching” (p.48). However, it should be added that , according to Corder (1967), Rashid et al.’s (2003) conception of errors only apply in natural language acquisition, and such a strong claim needs some modifications. Accordingly, different error correction strategies were persistently used in some experimental studies in order to eradicate errors (Mir Hassani & Khodadust, 1998) since developmental errors were viewed as windows through which we can monitor the developmental stages of learners’ developing competence. However, some errors are neither rooted in first language nor in the second language; they are learner-specific idiosyncratic errors (Dulay & Burt, 1974a, 1974b).

Oller’ s (1978) categorization of writing errors is as follows: In deletion, one or two letters from the original word is left out, for example, /mad/ instead of /made/. Transposition means misplacement of two or more letters, for example, /freind/ instead of /friend/. Substitution implies the substitution of similarly sounding letter, for example, /s/ instead of /c/ in “place”. In “transformation”, the original orthography is almost completely altered, for example, /noze/ rather than /knows/. Addition implies adding a new element to the original orthography, for example, /espeak/ instead of /speak/.

Empirical studies on spelling errors

A review of the research literature on spelling errors has indicated that some of them focused on the influence of L1 spelling rules in L2 spelling errors. Rodriguez and Brown’ s (1987) study, investigating the spelling errors, based on language transfer hypothesis, included 84 secondary school students learning Spanish as a second language. They found that performance in English spelling is a good predictor of performance in Spanish spelling. This is in contrast to the commonly held belief by scholars like Oller and Ziahosseini (1970); when L1 and L2 share the same Latin script, the learners are likely to make more spelling errors than the situation in which the scripts for L1 and L2 are different. Rodriguez and Brown (1987) also found that good

spellers favored visual and context related strategies; while bad spellers were good at decoding strategies. Ferroli (1991) investigated the effect of L1 literacy skills and L2 oral proficiency on students' ability to read and spell in L2. He examined students' incorrect L2 spellings to identify examples of positive and negative transfer of L1 spelling system. He found a positive role of L1 literacy skills and L2 oral proficiency in students' ability to read and spell in L2. Similarly Odisho's (1994) study indicated the effect of L1 orthography on learning L2 spelling. Motevallian (2009) in her descriptive account of the effect of linguistic and educational factors of learning English spelling by Iranian EFL learners, highlights the importance of the provision of "metalinguistic tasks like phonological and morphological training which can equip learners with the skills required for maximal spelling performance (p.4)".

The various errors committed by the Iranian EFL learners have attracted the attention of some Iranian EFL researchers. Nayyernia (2011) analyzed 30 erroneous sentences of some Iranian EFL learners with Persian as their mother tongue to find error patterns. Only 16.7 percent of the errors were interlingual errors. Mohammadi (1992) analyzed the errors collected from the final examinations samples of Iranian school level EFL learners, and upon analysis he concluded that the spelling errors are the most common. Ahmadian (1989) used CA findings in teaching consonants. He hypothesized that similar sounds in L1 are not stumbling blocks of learning, but in cases where the consonants or consonant clusters were different between the two languages such as when English words had some phonemes like / / in "three" and

/ / in "there", which are absent in Farsi, the Farsi EFL learners faced serious problems. He went on to propose direct conscious instruction to circumvent the problem. Ghaffar Samar and Seyyed Rezayi (2006) analyzed 40 pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners' errors in writing and found that only 30 percent of all errors were the result of negative L1 transfer. Keshavarz and Abdollahian (2007) made a cross-sectional study of composition errors. They explored the sources of errors in students' compositions, giving a

greater weight to interlingual errors. However, the results of different experiments (Tran-Chi-Chau, 1975; Ellis, 1985a, cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004) on different levels of EFL learners of English (Rashid et al., 2003) found that the number of intralingual errors far exceeded that of interlingual errors.

However, there still exists a lack of studies on the sources of spelling errors of Iranian EFL learners, generally, and Iranian school level English learners, particularly. The few studies on the issue, like Mirhassani's (1993), have mainly limited themselves to the descriptive account of the issue without touching upon the sources of errors and practical solutions for the problem. As such, the researchers tried to fill in the existing gap on the issue by focusing on the Iranian School level EFL learners' spelling errors and analyzing them to find all probable sources and offer solutions to eradicate them. The following research question was developed accordingly:

1. What are the sources of spelling errors committed by Iranian school level EFL learners?

Method

Participants

Fifty one Iranian male and female junior and senior high school students majoring at the Educational Complex of the Embassy of Islamic Republic of Iran in Baku, Azerbaijan participated in this study. Their age ranged from 12 to 17 years, and 47 students had Farsi as their L1 background; four of the subjects came from Azeri speaking families.

Instruments

Following Kibbel and Miles (1994), who recommended the use of already familiar words in dictation tests, and Feez (2001), who stresses the match between the learners' language proficiency and the content of dictation test, using Iranian English textbooks for grade two and three of Guidance school (junior high school) and grade one and two of high school (senior high school), we

prepared four dictation passages; the readability level of high school dictation texts in FOG Index equaled the average readability level of their regular textbooks. However, since the dictation texts and sentences were real samples taken from the learners' regular textbooks, their difficulty level was thought to match the students' level of language proficiency.

Design

Descriptive statistics was used to describe and analyze the data. In line with the three main sources of spelling errors obtained from the data, namely intralingual, interlingual and unique, errors were identified based on the categorization of writing errors offered by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982). Absolute frequencies and mean scores were the main descriptive statistics for data analysis.

Procedures

Following Oller (1978), the dictation passages were presented at three phases: The first and the third time the passages were read at a normal speed of delivery, but the second time, they were delivered in meaningful segments with pauses. To ensure systematic paper correction, the papers were corrected for instances of errors of deletion, substitution, transposition (misordering), transformation, and addition, following the classification offered by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) and Oller (1978).

Results

In order to answer the research question, namely, What are spelling errors sources committed by school-level Iranian EFL learners?, we came up with the following error types: intralingual, interlingual, and unique errors. The descriptive statistics for the mentioned types of errors was then analyzed and discussed. The resulting data yielded errors falling into one of the following patterns in each source of errors.

A. Intralingual Errors

Intralingual errors are the product of complexities within L2, inadequate learning, incorrect generalizations of lexico-grammatical, phonological, and semantic rules within L2, all of which result from misguided L2 learning (Corder, 1981). The data for the study revealed the following patterns for intralingual errors:

1) Letters written in English orthography but not pronounced

There are many instances of 'silent letters' in English in

Table 1.

Incorrect Rendition of Words in Pattern A.1

Incorrect Form	Correct Form	Incorrect Form	Correct Form	Incorrect Form	Correct Form
hicuping	hiccupping	gest	guest	clim-claim	climb
puzl	puzzle	plac-pleic	place	nose	knows
lit	light	our	hour	frend	friend
lern	learn	bilt	built	wach	watch
dres	dress	giv	give	mit-mait	might
ticher	teacher	sam	same	cag/caj	cage
dos	does	engin	engine	jungl	Jungle
wak	walk	atm	autumn	monky	monkey
wak	wake	shin	shine	langwij	language
scool	school	fir	fire	buchers	butchers
ets/its	eats	contry	country	For	four
shoping	shopping	bicycl	bicycle	ketl	kettle
sid	side	Pictur	picture	foren	foreign
factries	factories	blak	black	leter	letter
mad	made	frut	fruit	eit	eight
cud	could	col	coal	rip/raip	ripe
nit	night	bred	bread	bot	bought

which a letter is written, but not verbalized. In contrast there are few instances in Farsi possessing the feature in discussion. For

example, /v/ in ‘khavahar’ and ‘khavast’ which are verbalized as ‘khahar’ and ‘khast’ in speech. The following instances were found in the data falling in this category, as Table (1) displays:

2) Acoustically similar-sounding words and homophones in L2

Some instances in the study were either homophones in English or two real English words which acoustically sound similar to a novice learner, when pronounced by the instructor. The following instances were categorized as falling under this group, as Table (2) indicates:

Table 2.

Acoustically Similar-sounding Words and Homophones in Pattern A. 2

Incorrect Form	Correct Form	Incorrect Form	Correct Form	Incorrect Form	Correct Form
I	eye	were	where	their	there
litter	letter	ant	and	ate	eight
maid	made	nose	knows	right	write
knew	new	hear	here	two	to
law	low	close	clothes	saw	so
waste	waist	loved	loud	sea	see
west	waist	place	plays	our	hour
cold	called	road	rode	two	too
weed	with	side	said	tree	three

3) A letter in English orthography is pronounced differently in different words

In English, for example, the letter ‘a’ in ‘father’, ‘apple’ and ‘later’ doesn’t have a fixed pronunciation and is articulated in three completely different ways. A novice Iranian School-level EFL learner, whose knowledge of English orthography and phonetics is not yet fully developed and doesn’t have a substantial knowledge

of vocabulary at his disposal, finds it difficult to make a decision when choosing between, for example, /ei/ and /a/ when hearing the word, 'later'. As such, they transcribe the word in the way sounding most natural to the ear, replacing the letter /a/ for /o/ in the word 'problem', for example. Most of the words incorrectly transcribed in this way never occur as instances in English vocabulary at all, and they may have occurred because of the learners' uncertainty when pronouncing letters like /a/ and /o/ in words such as 'many' and 'lose' from our data. The data from the present study revealed the following cases of errors as Table (3) displays.

Table 3.

Incorrect Rendition of Words for Pattern A. 3

Incorrect word	Correct Word	Incorrect Word	Correct Word	Incorrect Word	Correct Word
eige	age	dey	day	meny	many
luz	lose	fan	fun	wemen	women
mary	merry	mey	may	readi	ready
naver	never	keij	cage	pleic	place
thamb	thumb	egein	again	peck	pick
meid	made	weist	waist	bax	box
afreid	afraid	match	much	pleit	plate
vans	once	seim	same	teible	table
sher	share	wrk	work	letter	later
reiz	raise	skeire	scare	pteito	potato
prablen	problem	werld	world	av	of
strit	street	faran	foreign	jangl	jungle
footbol	football	cetl	kettle	woter	water
futbol	football	pley	play	eir	air
leave	live	littr	letter	meid/maid	made
beiker	baker	wey	way	anien	onion

B. Interlingual Errors

1) Phonemes absent in L1 or represented differently from L2

The Iranian learners have serious problems in pronouncing /θ /, / ð /, and /w/. They generally pronounce them as /t/, /d/ or /z/, and /v/, respectively. This pattern is one of the most common error patterns in both the oral production and spelling of Iranian school-level EFL learners. The incorrect rendition of the original word may or may not be a real instance of English words. The following errors were traced back to this pattern of errors (Table 4).

Table 4.

Incorrect Rendition of Words for Pattern B.1

Incorrect Word	Correct Word	Incorrect Word	Correct word	Incorrect Word	Correct Word
day	they	sink	think	tree	three
sing	thing	tink	think	sink	think
vit	with	de	the	tursday	thursday
zis	this	weder	weather	tirty	thirty
vat	what	vid	with	tirty	thirteen
flower	flower	vash	wash	vednseday	wednesday
veder	weather	vent	went	vid	with
vork	work	vudn't	wouldn't	ven	when
Snovplov	snowplow	vood	wood	valk	walk
brovn	brown	vash	wash		

2) The absence of Phonemic distinctions for a single sound in Farsi

Some sounds in English have two separate similarly-sounding, yet meaning distinguishing, phonemic representations. For example /I/ in live and /i:/ in leave. The Iranian school-level EFL learner, being unaware of these meaning-distinguishing features and not having such instances in his, is not able to differentiate between, for example long /i:/ in /seat/ and short /I/ in /sit/ when hearing the words. As such, the learner replaces one

sound for the other, like the instance of errors in Table (5). Ellis (1985a) using an example from French and English refers to this issue as “divergent phenomena” by saying that, “one item in the first language becomes two items in the target language” (p.26). Needless to mention that attending to context might have helped the learner avoid this type of errors.

Table 5.

Incorrect Rendition of Words for Pattern B. 2

incorrect	correct	incorrect	correct	Incorrect	Correct
leave	live	sit	seat	It	eat

3) Articulatory differences in producing some phonemes in Farsi and English

The place of articulation for /t/ and /d/ is not the same in English and Persian. In English, /d/ and /t/ are articulated by putting the tip of the tongue on alveolar ridge and releasing the air with a little block. In Persian, the aforementioned sounds are produced by putting the tip of the tongue between upper and lower teeth and abrupt release of air for /d/ in ‘dast’ (hand) and with a little fricative release of air for /t/ in ‘tamiz’ (clean). The novice Iranian school-level EFL learner, who does not have a fixed idea of the place of articulation of /t/ and /d/ in English and is unaware of the difference in the place of the production of the mentioned phonemes, acoustically mistakes them for each other, resulting in the following instances of errors (Table 6):

Table 6.

Incorrect Rendition of Words for Pattern B. 3

Incorrect	correct
ride	right
roat	road
veisd	waist
hiccuppt	hiccupped
lidle	little

C. Unique errors

There are a set of errors known as unique or ambiguous errors, i.e. their sources are not exactly known. Ellis (2008) following Dulay and Burt (1974b) uses the term “unique errors” (p.53) to refer to the set of errors that are idiosyncratic and learner-specific. Oller (1979) refers to an interesting example from his data from a dictation test. One of the test takers had transcribed “person in facts” for “pertinent facts”. The learners’ rather scanty vocabulary knowledge and unaware of contextual clues may be one of the tentative sources for this type of errors. However, a combination of sources may sometimes apply as well, rendering the identification of the main sources a thorny task for researchers. The data in this study revealed the following instances of errors categorized under this heading.

Table 7.

The Incorrect Rendition of Words for Unique Errors

Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect	Correct
whent	went	hiccoup	hiccup	nowz	nose
fieals	fields	imsef	himself	cole	coal
menks	monkeys	pikkor	picture	toul	tall
leafte	left	agine	against	sis	seas
		strite	street	aire	air

Table 8, below summarizes the frequency and percentage of errors for the main sources and patterns of errors. As table (8) indicates, the most frequent type of errors amounting to 65.93 is related to intralingual errors; Interlingual errors included 30.50 percent of errors. The third place goes to unique errors comprising a minimum of 3.56 percent.

Table 8.
Absolute, Mean and the Percentage of Errors for Each Source and Pattern

Error Source	Pattern	Absolute Frequency	Average Error	Percentage of Errors
Intralingual 65.93%	1	229	4.49	24
	2	253	4.96	26.51
	3	147	2.88	15.40
Interlingual 30.50 %	4	118	2.32	13.26
	5	97	1.90	10.13
	6	77	1.50	8.07
Unique 3.56 %	7	34	.66	3.56
Total	7	955	100%	

Similar-sounding words and homophones, in pattern A- 2, were the most frequent types of intralingual errors amounting to 26.51., while the second rank goes to pattern one of errors (A-3), those emanating from unpronounced but written morphemes in English; this type included 24 percent of the errors. The errors in pattern A-3 or the errors related to the phonemes with two different realizations comprised 15.40 percent of the errors. The three patterns of interlingual errors included 13.26, 10.13, and 8.07 percent of the errors, respectively.

Discussion

The results summarized in Table 8 show, despite the differences between English and Persian orthography, the majority of errors (about 66 percent) are intralingual in nature, while only 30.50 was calculated for interlingual errors running counter to the findings of Keshavarz and Abdollahian (2007). As the results of this study indicate, the most frequent sources of spelling errors of Iranian EFL junior and senior high school learners proved to be predominantly intralingual in nature. This is a confirmation to Rashid et al.'s (2003) findings, who indicated that most of the errors in their study, including spelling errors, were due to

overgeneralizations and simplifications. Similarly, Nayyernia (2011) analyzing erroneous sentences of some Iranian EFL learners with Persian as their mother tongue found that only 16.7 percent of the errors were interlingual errors. In line with these findings, Kessler (2009) endorses the same point quoting Caravolas (2004), as saying:” The English writing system is routinely criticized for falling far short of the alphabetic idea of one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and graphemes. He further mentions that, “almost all its phonemes have multiple spellings—sound-to-letter, or spelling inconsistency and almost all its letters have multiple pronunciations—letter-to-sound, or reading inconsistency” (p.19). Hanna, Hanna, Hodges and Rudorf (1966, cited in Kessler, 2009) indicated that only 73 % of all phonemes would be spelled correctly if the writer picked the most common spelling for each phoneme. Similarly, Ellis (2008) enumerates four causes of learner errors out of which only one of them is related to first language interference, the others being related to insufficient learning and practice and the application of generalized rules by the learner. This demands a need for more systematic, scientific, and up-to-date methods of teaching English at Iranian high schools, a merit which schools still fail to see.

There are other factors that can contribute to the spelling errors of language learners. Some errors are teacher induced errors, resulting from the teachers’ failure to perform in a native-like manner. For example, writing /Ispeak/ or /Esppeak/ for /speak/ may result from an epenthesis of /e/ or /I/ at the beginning of a word inappropriately produced by the teacher. This implies the need for greater attention to EFL training and teacher monitoring in Iranian high schools.

Another factor that affects the frequency of spelling errors is the learners’ inability to realize the differences between L1 and L2 sound systems. The learners’ inability in hearing and identifying all the sounds of the words they can hear seems to result in spelling errors. Greater focus on teaching the phonetic features of English, especially at the beginning levels seems to be a necessity, an issue largely neglected in Iran’s high-school level EFL education; in

fact, it is either postponed until the last years of high school education or totally ignored.

One of the interlingual sources of errors is the student's incorrect pronunciation of some sounds in English. It is due to the absence of some sounds in Persian that, contrarily, are available in English. Insufficient and inefficient instruction, practice, and feedback received in Iranian school level EFL instruction are the most probable root of the problems in this regard. Therefore, a contrastive analysis of English and Persian phonetic and orthographic systems may yield the points of divergence between the two languages, revealing the specific points of focus during teaching. The Phonemes in the first pattern of interlingual errors, as indicated in Table 4, were non-existent in Farsi; Iranian English learners tend to replace them with their most approximate equivalents in Farsi, namely /t/, /s/, /z/, and /d/ and /v/. Furthermore, /w/ is a bilabial round phoneme, fully absent in Farsi. Some explanation of the differential nature of the place and manner of articulation of problematic divergent sounds in the two languages and practice through different forms of exercises may be especially useful in teaching phonemes /w/, /θ/, /ɱ/. Being aware of the meaning distinguishing nature of sounds and phonemes in English, the learners should learn to listen carefully. The findings of CA may prove to be so much handy in this regard.

According to the statistics in Table 1, homophone confusion, one of the intralingual sources of errors, is another factor behind the spelling errors of Iranian school level EFL learners. As displayed in Table 8, 26.51 percent of all errors fall under this category. It is the result of failure to make distinctions between two existing lexical items that sound the same but not spelled the same. In most cases, the learner is fully aware of both forms, yet, due to the lack of lexico-grammatical function of the words, inadequate or insufficient contextual clues, or insufficient mastery in listening comprehension, he fails to distinguish between the two forms leading to an incorrect interchange of the phonemes in the problematic pair. Minimal pair practice may turn out to be quite useful in removing this type of problems.

Unique errors show no special pattern, reflecting that the learner has not had any previous exposure to the word either due to being absent or from lack of attention. These provide a feedback for the teacher to what has not been learnt, not to what has been learnt incorrectly, necessitating some attention by the teacher on those elements.

In conclusion, the findings of this study have implications for in-service training programs to include some instruction when training teachers about English spelling and to raise their awareness of the importance of their pronunciation and the resulting result of teacher-induced errors. More listening practice and greater exposure to English are tentative suggestions to circumvent some of the spelling problems of the EFL learners. It seems that a reorientation towards an explicit focus on form for preventing spelling errors is not unjustified. The burden is put on English language teachers, as well as syllabus designers and material developers to fill in the existing gap.

A last comment for the present article; the present study did not account for the effect of L1 background in mixed language background classes because only 4 subjects had Azeri L1 background; the remainder were from Farsi speaking families. Future research on the issue of spelling errors by Iranian school-level EFL learners may be able to enlighten the effect of L1 background on the types of spelling errors in heterogeneous language background classes and whether university-level Iranian EFL learners commit the same type of errors invites further research.

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