

A Communicative Approach to Spelling for Arab Students of English

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Abstract. With its emphasis on “fluency” over “accuracy,” the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has paid insufficient attention to spelling in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. However, error-analysis studies in the Arab World reveal that spelling is the most prevalent error in the English writing of Arab students. What I do in this paper is to discuss three types of activities for the Arab EFL classroom which retain a CLT “fluency” orientation in their approach to spelling but which promote “accuracy” in spelling: (a) reading activities, (2) inductive-reasoning activities, and (3) language-focussing activities.

Introduction

Should an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classroom stress fluency or accuracy [1]? Since the early 1970s, advocates of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) have emphasized the former, and consequently fluency and spontaneity have become the hallmarks of many aspects of the CLT ESOL writing program. Fast-writing, brainstorming, authentic writing, and dialogue journal writing have replaced such Grammar-Translation and Audio-Lingual techniques as dictation, copying, sentence-combining, and paragraph rearrangement.

The predication of CLT proponents toward fluency has led to “insufficient attention [being] paid to spelling in the EFL textbooks,” Abbott concludes [2, p. 119]. Spelling has become an appendage step in the writing process: “Too much concern with the spelling of individual words may inhibit [students’] fluency and expression of ideas,” so “correct spelling in composition should probably be a concern when editing written work,” Cronnell writes [3, p. 206]. Just as the teacher should not dwell on correcting spoken errors, since, according to Krashen [4], students will develop out of them, for almost all of the writing process spelling errors should be overlooked for the sake of spontaneity of writing. A consequence of this lack of con-

cern for error-making has been fossilization. What Higgs and Clifford write about grammar is applicable to spelling; they find that students who come from “communication-first” language programs exhibit fossilized incorrect grammatical patterns which are not remediable even in intensive language programs or additional incountry living experience, while those who come from “accuracy-first” programs are better able to remedy their grammatical errors [5, pp. 67, 74]. A beginning EFL student who has written the number word *two* as *tow* twenty or thirty times before his/her misspelling has been corrected is probably on the way toward fossilizing that spelling.

Review of Research

In the Arab World where I teach EFL (English as a Foreign Language), studies by Beck [6] and Al-Kasimi, Topan, and Khan [7] confirm what most EFL teachers of Arabic students already know: That spelling is the most prevalent error in their students' writing. This conclusion should come as no surprise because recent studies show the same tendency in the writing of native speakers of English (Di Stefano and Hagerty [8]; Dobie [9]; Ireland [10]; Ley [11]; Mihail [12]; Rivalland [13]; Stanbach [14]; Weisberg [15]; and Wong [16]). Is English an inherently difficult language to spell? No, according to Chomsky and Halle, who characterize the English spelling system as “a near optimal system for the lexical representation of English words” because it is based on the morphophonemic, not just the phonemic, structure of English [17, p. 49]. Hammerly notes that Chomsky and Halle's conclusion may be sound from a linguistic perspective, but from a pedagogical vantage point, the “statement is very, very far removed from the realities of language acquisition, literacy, and language use” [18, pp. 98-99]. Discussing the phonemic/graphemic correspondence, Mazurkiewicz points out that the 24 consonant patterns of English are represented by at least 176 different graphemes or grapheme combinations, and that the 14 vowels and diphthongs, by at least 265 different graphemes or grapheme combinations [19].

The system of English spelling particularly causes problems for ESOL students who are used to simply a phonemic structure where there is a precise correlation between pronunciation and spelling in their own languages, for instance Spanish or Turkish or Arabic [20, p. 284]. However, the Roman script of English does not appear to be the problem; Oller and Ziahosseiny found that non-native English students whose native languages use the Roman alphabet made *more* spelling errors in English than non-native English students whose native languages used a non-Roman alphabet, such as Arabic [21]. The probable reason for this is native-language orthographic interference: ESOL students who must learn the new Roman alphabet or writing system for English may be more attentive to how English spelling differs from their native orthography than those who have already used the Roman alphabet in their native languages which have a sound-to-spelling correspondence [3, p. 205]. (A

later study by Polak and Krashen found no difference in spelling performance between speakers of languages with Roman alphabets and speakers of languages with non-Roman alphabets, although their study did not set out to measure that distinction and the finding is reported incidentally) [22].

One approach to helping Arab students master English spelling involves error analysis. From his study of the written work of EFL students at the University of Jordan, Ibrahim categorizes five types of spelling errors: those based on: (1) the non-phonetic nature of English, (2) on the phonetic differences between Arabic and English, (3) on faulty analogy, (4) on the inconsistent spelling in English word derivations, and (5) on transitional ignorance or overgeneralization of an English spelling rule [23]. Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic add another, the difference in the orthographic representation of the common vowel sounds in Arabic and English [24]. Al-Kasimi, Topan, and Khan add still another, hypersensitive substitution (over-compensation) [7]. These studies suggest that for Arab students of English spelling errors result from interference from Arabic, inherent difficulties in the English spelling system, and normal developmental/transitional factors.

As valuable as such categorizations are, the EFL teacher of Arab students is still confronted with the problem of how to remedy such types of errors. That both native users and non-native users of English have severe problems with spelling suggests that the problem is not only systematic (inherent in the spelling system), but pedagogical (how the spelling system is taught). An EFL teacher may point out to Arab students that since Arabic has no *p*, the students must be attentive not to write *people* as *beoble* or *beople* or *peoble*. Rules of English spelling may be given to the students, detailing where they replace, add, or drop letters in English spelling, Leech and Svartvik write [25]. However, such approaches promote language learning, not language acquisition, a dichotomy promulgated by Krashen to distinguish between monitored or conscious processes and unconscious processes involved in achieving communicative competence [4]. A similar distinction is made by other CLT-oriented language theorists. Littlewood distinguishes between lower-level language operations which “unfold automatically” and higher-level operations which are “composed consciously” [26, p. 75]. Ellis writes of primary processes (those using automatic rules in unplanned discourse) and secondary processes (those using analyzed rules in planned discourse) [27].

The distinction in all three cases is between conscious, monitored, rule-analyzing *learning* and unconscious, unmonitored, automatic-rule-manifesting *acquisition*. A concern for spelling would seemingly be at the level of learning. In fact, Krashen and Terrell write that in written work, as opposed to spoken English, all three prerequisites for the use of the monitor are present: “the student must know the rule, be focussed on correctness and have time to apply the rule” [28, p. 152].

Goal of This Study

My point is that in Communicative Language Teaching spelling errors are still traditionally viewed as a learning problem, not an acquisitional problem; the emphases are still on monitoring and memorizing, deductive-reasoning activities, rule-based strategies, and test-study-test procedures. What I propose to do in the remainder of this paper is to discuss three broad types of activities for the Arab EFL classroom which retain a CLT “fluency” orientation in their approach to spelling, but which promote “accuracy” in spelling: (1) reading activities, (2) inductive-reasoning activities, and (3) language-focussing activities.

The Role of Reading

While spelling is often perceived as an aspect of writing, an extensive reading program may be one of the best ways to improve student’s spelling. Such a conclusion has not always been obvious. The traditional view of the effect of reading on improved spelling is stated by Williams in his article on the “Teaching of Spelling” in *The Encyclopedia of Education*. He writes that it is “absurd” to argue “that students learn to spell from their reading. Few people are really observant about spelling.” The fallacy of this argument, Williams continues, “can be verified by giving a test to a class of college students and watching them misspell words spelled correctly for them on the examination sheet” [29, p. 389].

Williams’ statement is written from a *learning* perspective. His example about students who misspell words spelled correctly on a test paper suggests this, because the example does not take into account the affective filter hypothesis, a major concern for Second Language Acquisition proponents [4]. According to the hypothesis, affective factors, such as the learner’s motivation, self-confidence, or anxiety state, determine how successfully language input becomes language intake and language output, Richard-Amato writes [30, p. 25]. A test situation raises the affective filter because it is a high-anxiety situation. (A similar situation would be one where an Arabic speaker who is very fluent in English may under a stressful situation revert to his native phonemic system and say, “I have *peen* there!”, instead of “I have *been* there!”) At such times a person may make a mistake, which is not really an error and which is not indicative of the person’s performance skill in the language, according to Corder [31]. Williams’ example is probably not an instance of a spelling error, but of a mistake caused by a high-anxiety, raised-affective-filter situation.

That “few people are really observant about spelling” while reading, as Williams writes, implies correctly that people read, not proofread, a book or an article. To suggest, however, that since few people are consciously “observant” of the spelling, unconscious spelling acquisition is not taking place may not be warranted. Experi-

mental studies by Gilbert in the 1930s indicate that readers can improve their spelling simply by exposure to words in texts [32]. This finding has been borne out by more recent studies which conclude that reading contributes to spelling competence (Ehri [33]; Goodman, Smith, Meredith and Goodman [34]; Polak and Krashen [22]; and Smith [35]).

The issue of the effect of reading on spelling has a broader bearing on EFL methodology in the Arab world. The debate over whether the EFL curriculum in the Arab world should have a literature emphasis or a linguistics emphasis [36] could probably be better focussed on the issue of the effect of reading as input, regardless of whether the program has a literary or linguistic orientation. Studies indicate that in addition to spelling improvement, extensive reading provides the kind of language input that allows students to acquire significant amounts of language without direct study of grammar, vocabulary, or discourse, Collie and Slater write [37]. It leads to improvement in many areas of language, including reading ability, vocabulary development, grammar awareness, and writing style, according to Krashen [38] and Smith [35; 39]. Not just from a spelling perspective, what I feel is needed for Arab EFL students is a methodology which stresses extensive reading of a broad range of authentic material, such as magazines, newspapers, etc., instead of intensive close-reading analysis of a few literary or linguistic texts. Extensive reading may not result in perfect spelling [22]. However, it will probably work unconsciously to improve students' spelling performance.

Inductive-reasoning Activities

Fotos and Ellis make a distinction between conscious language work and consciousness-raising language work. In conscious teaching of grammar, they point out, the teacher presents a rule and then provides "the learners with opportunities to use the target structure, first in controlled production, and subsequently in free or communicative practice" [40, p. 609]. In consciousness-raising teaching, the students discover the grammatical rule themselves. This is usually referred to as "discovery learning," Savignon writes, or *inductive learning*, where learners are encouraged to work out rules or generalizations for themselves [41, p. 190]. Dobie writes that more and more effective spelling teachers in a native-English environment are abjuring their positions as rule-givers and are encouraging their students to pursue their spelling work inductively [9]. Spelling rules are not given, but students work with data which will allow them to formulate their own spelling rules; that is, they are given the task of formulating the rules of spelling which they need.

The "task-based approach" to language acquisition has received much attention lately, basically from applied linguists (Dickens and Woods [42]; Fotos and Ellis [40]; Long [43]; Pica, Hollidays, Lewin, and Morgenthaler [44]; and Tarvin and Arishi

[45]). Its proponents posit that since the approach allows students themselves to negotiate language meaning, acquisition will be better promoted than in a teacher-directed classroom. Thus the principal pedagogical implications of the task-based approach are to deemphasize the role of the ESOL teacher as the only one in the classroom as being capable of being the language rule-giver and to accentuate the role of ESOL students as being capable of becoming rule-formulators on their own. This classroom reorientation, of course, necessarily affects other pedagogical components, such as classroom objectives and techniques. (However, it must be cautioned that because of the newness of the approach there have been few in-class experiments to determine its effectiveness. See Fotos and Ellis for a detailed review of research [40].)

A task-based activity follows a four-stage progression, Tarvin and Arishi write [45]. This sequence can be followed in inductively studying an aspect of spelling:

1. *Establishment of Need and Desire.* A failure of cognitive code-learning, where a rule is explained by the teacher before students practice it, is that it does not sufficiently establish a need to learn a language rule. This failure to consider need is also a characteristic of some CLT task-based activities. For instance, one such exemplary "integrated CLT activity" listed by Richard-Amato begins with a mini-lecture requiring note-taking, followed by a quiz, then by a homework reading assignment correlated to the lecture [30, p. 184]. Because of these dictating preludes to this task-based activity, students may feel they have been presumptuously "set up." An activity truly beginning with need would be one where a teacher notices that a large number of his/her students are having a problem, such as for beginning students the spelling of *ie/ei* words. The teacher should indicate to the students that s/he has noticed this problem and add that there is a rule which might help the students. If they respond, "Please give us the rule," then there is confirmation that there is a desire and need to know the rule.

2. *Providing the Rule-Forming Data.* At this point the teacher should tell the students that s/he has confidence that through working with each other they can figure the rule out for themselves. For the *ie/ei* activity, a handout with 10-15 words spelled with *ie/ei* might be distributed, omitting for beginning-level students words where *ei* has a long *a* sound. The instructions: "Divide into groups of four and study these words to see if you can see a pattern which will allow you to formulate an *ie/ei* rule. You are to work within your group and not seek help from a neighboring group. However, you may ask me questions."

3. *Hypothesis-Formulating.* Most beginning students will not know the word "hypothesis," but the questions they ask each other and the teacher will probably show they know how to hypothesize. In the *ie/ei* activity, one of the first responses by students might be the protest that they do not know the meaning of some of the words

on the list. A good answer is, "Oh, then you would like to do a word-study activity? I thought you wanted to work on an *ie/ei* rule." If the students' rejoinder is, "We want to get the rule. It will help us writing," what would seem to have manifested itself is a reconfirmation by the students of the relevance of the task. Actually a piece of usable information has been given. If the meanings of the words were essential to the formulation of the rule, the meanings would have had to be provided. On reflection, most students thus discard their first hypothesis: That the rule of spelling is related to the meaning of the words. Elimination of tentative suppositions is one of the first steps in a problem-solving task. Comparison and contrast, resulting in other hypotheses relating to the length of a word, the number of syllables, the pronunciation, etc., might follow.

4. *Reaching Point of Eureka.* The task is brought to its completion when the discovery is made. For the *ie/ei* activity, it will probably come in a hypothesizing question about whether the letters abutting the *ie/ei* are important. With this piece of information, most of the groups will be able to write the simple version of the *ie/ei* rule. Savignon in her grammar-oriented task-based activity states that following discovery she gives an explicit statement of the rule [41, p. 190]. Tarvin and Arishi think it preferable after the discovery to "ask students questions about the bases of their hypotheses and even compliment a student on the logic behind a hypothesis that turned out to be false" [45, p. 19].

"Common words are almost always misspelled in the same way," Elsbree and Bracher write. The trouble spot is not the entire word, but a particular letter or combination of letters [46, p. 512]. Working in small groups, students should be allowed to discover these trouble spots on their own. Using inductive reasoning activities in teaching spelling has many longterm benefits for students. An affective benefit is that there is a sense of achievement which will bolster a student's confidence; hopefully there will be an individual carrying-over of this confidence to future target-language activities. A second benefit is that the activity promotes critical thinking involving such negotiating processes as sorting, comparison/contrast, and abstraction/generalization. Finally, such an activity establishes a four-step metacognitive learning-strategy pattern based on need, data for solving a problem, hypotheses-formulation, and discovery. Metacognition makes a person aware of a cognitive process by encouraging a person to monitor the cognitive process, plan strategies, and evaluate the success of efforts to understand. Carrell, Pharis, and Liberto state [47]. Many characteristics of the English spelling system (dropping the final silent *e*, doubling final consonant, the *-y* ending, etc.) can be taught effectively using this rule-formulating task-based inductive approach.

Language-Focussing Activities

Language arts includes exercises which focus attention on formal accuracy [41, p. 191]. These include crossword puzzles, dictation passages, spelling bees, and lan-

guage arts games. Such activities are designed to be so entertaining to students that they forget the activities are being used as pedagogical tools to teach them the language. Such language-focus activities tend to lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely [30].

The most prominent language-arts or word-focus spelling activity is the spelling bee, where students compete with each other in the oral spelling of words dictated by the teacher. Duff questions whether spelling ability should be gauged by dictation and the response to dictation, both of which involve the aural/oral processes: "In the natural course of events, spelling arises out of the writing process; samples derived from this situation may differ qualitatively from those derived from a dictation" [48, p. 163]. This point was made sixty years ago by Orleans and Thompson who conclude that the oral spelling of words is not the medium in which students need to manifest spelling proficiency [49; 50].

A word-focus spelling activity which I have found preferable to an oral-dictation spelling bee entails students' working with a composite paragraph which contains numerous types of spelling errors which I have found in my Arabic EFL students' papers. I distribute copies of this paragraph to students divided into triads or groups of four and let the groups compete to see which one can find all of the spelling errors in the allotted time. Unlike the spelling bee, since the competition is at the group level, anxiety is reduced at the personal level. Each group is provided with a dictionary, but of course the group loses time if its members have to look up too many words. By being able to apply the rules of spelling (final silent *e*, doubling final consonant words ending in *y*, and *ei/ie*, and the areas where the English phonetic system interferes with the Arabic phonetic system), the students can complete the exercise faster, thus showing that the rules have become automatic, that is, that they have been acquired.

Crossword puzzles and prediction games which concentrate on one type of spelling error are also effective. For my Arabic EFL students I have devised a crossword puzzle which is replete with *p/b* and *f/v* words because the phonetic interference between Arabic and English involving these phonemes carries over into the graphemic. For advanced EFL classes, I have also found homophonic (*meet/meat*, *see/sea*, *principal/principle*, *maid/made*, *sun/son*, *capitol/capital*, etc.) crossword puzzles or "sight word" (words such as *one two*, *sword*, *victuals*, *colonel*, etc. where there is little relationship between the phonemic and the graphemic) crossword puzzles valuable for students. EFL students also tend to like "prediction" or guessing games [51]. These are valuable from a CLT perspective because they have the three features which make an activity communicative: information gap, choice, and feedback [52]. These can easily be adopted to concentrate on spelling. One which I have used is to give the students, divided into groups of five, 25 nouns and verbs (such as *wonder*, *muscle*, *sign*, *expend*, *mistake*, *beauty*, etc.) and have them discuss what they

think the spelling of the adjective form of each word will be. After allowing for discussion and the guesses to be made, I give each group a dictionary to check how accurate their predictions were. (This activity involves, and most spelling-oriented activities should involve, student practice in using a dictionary to find the spelling of unpredictably-spelled words.) I have found this noun-adjective spelling activity raises students' consciousness about the suffixal variety of the English language.

Richard-Amato discusses how a scrabble board can be drawn on the chalkboard and turned into an effective word-focus game where students can show their spelling proficiency. However, she avoids one commonly used word-focus game, "scrambled words," where students are given words with the letters scrambled and are supposed to unscramble them to form the intended word. She writes, "Although native speakers might find this fun, second language students tend to find such games frustrating. To most of them, the language may appear to be 'scrambled' to begin with, so it seems senseless to cause them additional anxiety" [30, pp. 153-54]. Language-arts or word-focus activities are best used sparingly, even though they provide variety to the language classroom and promote group interaction [41]. So used, they are valuable for promoting spelling acquisition because they allow EFL students to negotiate the workings of English at the word level.

Conclusion

Cronnell writes that "misspelling marks a person as, at best, illiterate, if not outright 'ignorant'" [3, p. 202]. While in its formative years, CLT manifested a commitment to fluency (spontaneous conversation, free writing, brainstorming), lately there has been a reassertion of the need for accuracy [1]. EFL students desire language activities which will help them to become not just fluent in English, but fluent in accurate English. Particularly those students learning English for professional or academic purposes or those seeking assimilation into the target society perceive accurate English as necessary to acquire native-like or near-native-like proficiency; if a student's goal is such social integration, language accuracy is "important," if not "absolutely essential," Celce-Murcia and Hilles conclude [53, p. 7]. Students know the social and professional consequences of their spelling proficiency, that it can label them as "literate" or "illiterate."

Recent questionnaire studies have confirmed this student-perceived importance of language accuracy. Leitner's survey of German college students' attitudes toward formal instruction in grammar concludes that students believe that teachers cannot avoid its teaching [54]. Little and Sanders report on a survey to gauge the perception of students towards various teaching techniques in both ESL (three U.S. campuses) and EFL (one in Uruguay) environments. Results showed that the five activities found to be valuable to students were (1) correction of pronunciation; (2) oral correction of grammar; (3) pronunciation practice in class; (4) oral grammar practice in sen-

tences; and (5) memorizing vocabulary activities. Activities having a communicative orientation were not highly valued [55]. Di Pietro's survey found that students entering his communicative scenario-based classes from traditional audiolingual ones expressed the fear that they were not progressing because they were not given explicit grammar drills and exercises [56]. What I have suggested in this paper are some orientations the EFL classroom in an Arabic-dominant environment can take to maintain a fluent communicative competence base while stressing the accuracy which any consideration of spelling must demand. My main point is that it is possible for the CLT classroom to go beyond spelling learning (or the lack of it) and achieve a classroom atmosphere of spelling acquisition.

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الطريقة التواصلية وتدريب تهجئة للطلاب العرب الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية

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ملخص البحث. من خلال تركيز طريقة التدريس التواصلية على الفصاحة fluency على حساب الدقة -accuracy فإنها لم توف عملية التهجئة في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية الاهتمام الكافي، وقد كشف العديد من الدراسات المتعلقة بتحليل الأخطاء في العالم العربي أن أخطاء التهجئة تعتبر شائعة بين الطلاب العرب عند كتابتهم باللغة الإنجليزية.

وفي هذا البحث تطرقت لمناقشة ثلاثة أنواع من الأنشطة تلائم الطلاب العرب الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ويستطيع من خلالها تدريس اللغة التواصلية أن يحافظ على الفصاحة أثناء تدريس التهجئة وكذا الدقة في التهجئة ذاتها. وهذه الأنشطة هي:

- ١ - الأنشطة المتعلقة بالقراءة.
- ٢ - أنشطة التفكير الاستقرائي.
- ٣ - الأنشطة التي تركز على اللغة.