Spelling Errors Made by Syrian Students of English

طالبة الماجستير: نرمين إبراهيم ـ قسم اللغة الإنكليزية ــ كلية الآداب ــ جامعة البعث

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Abstract

English is considered an international language and the need for learning it is becoming more important day after day. However, English is a difficult language to be learned. One of the difficulties that foreign learners of English face is spelling. For Arab learners of English, spelling represents a real challenge, particularly with regard to the spelling of vowel letters. This paper investigates spelling errors made by students of English at Tartous University. To achieve the goals of the study, I carried out a dictation test to fifty students of English at that university. The results reveal that there are two main reasons behind these students' errors. The first reason is the inconsistency between the English vowel sounds and the letters that represent them. The second reason is the big difference between English and Arabic in so far as vowels are concerned and that in Arabic, contrary to English, there is consistency between vowel sounds and the letters that represent them which leads to mother tongue interference. Another reason as to why students made spelling errors is the inadequate use of English.

Keywords: spelling, vowels, errors, English orthography, mother tongue interference.

أخطاء التهجئة التي يرتكبها طلبة اللغة الإنكليزية السوريون

الملخص

تُعتبر اللغة الإنكليزية لغةً دولية والحاجة لتعلمها يزداد أهميةً يوماً بعد يوم، غير أنّ الإنكليزية لغة من الصعب تعلمها. إحدى الصعوبات التي يواجهها متعلمو اللغة الإنكليزية هي تهجئة الكلمات بشكل دقيق. بالنسبة لمتعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية من العرب فإنّ التهجئة تمثل تحدياً حقيقيا خاصةً فيما يتعلق بتهجئة الكلمات ذات الأصوات المتحركة. لذلك يدرس هذا البحث أخطاء التهجئة التي يرتكبها طلبة قسم اللغة الإنكليزية في جامعة طرطوس عند تهجئة الأصوات المتحركة ولتحقيق أهداف البحث تم القيام باختبار إملاء لخمسين طالبا وطالبة من طلبة اللغة الإنكليزية في تلك الجامعة. تظهر النتائج بأن هناك سببين رئيسيين وراء أخطاء هؤلاء الطلبة. السبب الأول هو عدم وجود توافق بين الأصوات المتحركة والأحرف التي تمثلها والسبب الثاني هو وجود اختلاف كبير بين الإنكليزية والعربية في أصواتهم المتحركة وبأنه في اللغة العربية – على عكس اللغة الـإنكليزية – يوجد تطابق بين الأصوات المتحركة والأحرف التي تمثلها وهذا ما يؤدي إلى التداخل اللغوي. ثمة سبب آخر لأخطاء التهجئة وهو عدم الإستخدام الكافي للغة الإنكليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التهجئة، الأصوات المتحركة، أخطاء، اللغة الـإنكليزية، التداخل اللغوي.

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign or a second language is not an easy task because acquiring it requires learning its basic skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Rass (2015) states that writing skill is an important skill that refers to the ability to convey one's ideas, attitudes, feelings, etc. Writing well is a big challenge for both native and non-native speakers of a language as several factors must be taken into consideration, such as purpose, audience, content, organization, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and capitalization. Muslim (2014) further declares that this task is even more difficult for learners of English as a foreign language. One of the issues that makes writing in English particularly difficult is spelling.

Cook (1999) asserts that non-native speakers of English, in contrast to native speakers, might not be aware of the actual spelling system of English and, as a result, might use the wrong letter. He goes on to state that spelling errors are the most prevalent kind of errors made by English language learners in their written work. In fact, several factors affect learners' performance in spelling and contribute to their spelling errors, including the erratic nature of English orthography (spelling system) and mother tongue interference.

Due to (Alber & Walshe, 2004), English alphabet consists of 26 letters which represent 44 phonemes. This indicates that, in accordance with the Orthographic Depth Hypothesis, English has a

deep orthography and that the relationship between its phonemes and graphemes is inconsistent. This hypothesis states that learning to spell and read in shallow orthographies, where the relation between phonemes and graphemes is consistent, is easier than in deep orthographies, in which the relation between sounds and letters is irregular (Katz and Frost, 1992). Thus, the irregular and complex nature of English orthography, or, to put it another way, the lack of connection between English sounds and letters, is therefore one factor contributing to the spelling problems encountered by non-native English speakers.

In fact, the erratic and difficult nature of English orthography (spelling system) goes back mainly to the history of the English language since English has borrowed many words from other languages and has preserved or reintroduced the spelling of the principal languages that contributed most to it, such as Old English, Old Norse, Old French and Latin (Upward & Davidson 2011). Actually, the Great Vowel Shift, the printing press, the spelling reform movement, and spelling latinization all had an impact on English spelling (Jurić, 2013). They led to this discrepancy between English phonemes and graphemes.

Arabic, on the other hand, has a shallow orthography since there is just one grapheme or diacritic for each phoneme (Awad, 2010). This and other linguistic differences between Arabic and English make Arab learners of English struggle with English spelling since Lado

(1957, cited in Rustipa, 2011) claims that differences between L1 and L2 make L2 acquisition more difficult.

2. Statement of the problem

Arab learners of English exhibit difficulties with English spelling, and spelling errors are among their most frequent errors (Al-Bereiki & Al-Mekhlafi, 2015). This makes them unable to effectively deliver their views and ideas and, consequently, impedes the communication process as the reader has to infer the writer's intended message.

Syrians, like the majority of Arab learners of English, lack contact with English in their daily lives. Even at schools and universities, where it is taught as a foreign language, the primary emphasis is on teaching listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, etc. Spelling instruction, on the other hand, is still given insufficient attention, and when it is taught, it is taught in primitive ways. This and other factors, such as development stages, L1 interference, the irregular nature of the English spelling system, lack of motivation, lack of confidence, etc., influence the performance of Syrian learners in spelling and contribute to the errors they commit.

It has been noted that fourth-year students of English, namely Syrian 4th year students of English at Tartous University, continue to make various types of spelling errors despite the fact that they are supposed to have acquired sufficient knowledge about English and

its spelling system. Therefore, this study is carried out to investigate their errors and the possible causes behind them.

3. Significance of the study

Making errors is unavoidable in the process of learning a foreign language. Analysing these errors can be a useful way of showing what learners have learnt and what they have not. Accordingly, this study aims at investigating spelling errors made by 4th year students of English at Tartous University.

It is significant for raising students' spelling proficiency since it examines their errors and the most likely reasons for them, assisting them in overcoming obstacles and developing their spelling abilities. This study is also beneficial to teachers and curriculum designers since it provides them with a significant and detailed background on the spelling challenges that students of English at Tartous University face and the errors they make. In addition, it might also be a useful resource for scholars who are investigating such issues.

4. Objectives of the study

Although spelling represents a challenge for learners of English; however, there is a dearth of research that investigates the difficulties that these learners face with spelling. Furthermore, very few studies, and maybe no study, sought to investigate vowel spelling difficulties and errors made by Syrian learners of English,

in general, and 4th year students of English at Tartous University, in specific. Based on this, this paper aims to:

1) Find out whether or not there are certain types of errors that are committed more than others while 4th year students of English at Tartous University while spell English vowels.

2) Investigate the reasons behind these errors.

3) Highlight the primary roles played by the complexity of English orthography and mother tongue interference in committing such errors.

5. Research questions

This paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1) Are there certain types of errors made more than others by fourth-year students of English at Tartous University while spelling English vowels?

2) What are the possible causes of these errors? To what extent do the irregular nature of the English spelling system and L1 impact students' spelling competence and contribute to their errors?

2. Literature review

This section draws a comparison between English and Arabic orthographies with regard to their vowels. This will help in

clarifying their nature and explains how the complexity of English orthography and mother tongue interference negatively affect Arab learners' performance in spelling and cause spelling errors. The section also presents the linguistic theories in light of which these errors were examined. In addition, some previous studies on vowel spelling errors are presented.

2.1 English orthography

English is a West Germanic language of the Indo-European language family. It uses the Roman (i.e, Latin) alphabet, and it is written from left to right. The English alphabet has 26 letters which have upper-case and lower-case forms. Out of these letters, as table (2) shows, twenty-one letters represent 24 separate consonants, whereas five letters, as table (1) shows, represent 20 vowels; 12 pure vowels and 8 diphthongs (Rao, 2018).

units of sound + the IPA symbols	simple code + key words	complex code grapheme or spelling + key words alternatives which are code for the sounds			
/ɑ/ /æ/	a **a**pple				
/e/ /ɛ/	e **e**gg	-ea h**ea**d	-ai s**ai**d ag**ai**n		
/i/ /ɪ/	i **i**nsect	-y c**y**mbals			
/o/ /ɒ/	o	*w*a	*qu*a	a*lt*	

		octopus	w**a**tch	qu**a**lify	s**a**lt		
/u/ /ʌ/	u **u**mbrella	o s**o**n	-ou t**ou**ch	-ough thor**ou****gh**fare			
short /oo/ /ʊ/	-oo b**oo**k	-oul sh**ou****ld**	-u p**u**sh				
/ə/	Schwa vowel						
/ar/ /ɑ:/	ar **ar**tist	a f**a**ther	al**m** p**a**lm	-al**f** h**al**f	-al**ves** c**al**ves		
/ee/ /i:/	ee **ee**l	ea **ea**t	e **e**mu	e-e concr**e**t**e**			
		-ey k**ey**	-ie ch**ie**f	i**ne** sard**in**es			
units of sound + the IPA symbols	simple code + key words	complex code grapheme or spelling + key words alternatives which are code for the sounds					
/or/ /ɔ:/ or /aw/ dependent upon regional or national accents	or f**or**k	oar **oar**s	-oor d**oor**	ore sn**ore**	-our f**our**		
		aw d**aw**n	au s**au**ce	-al ch**al**k	w**a**r w**ar**drobe	q*u*a*r* q**uar**ter	
		augh c**augh**t	ough th**oug****h**t				
long /oo/ /u:/	oo m**oo**n	-ue bl**ue**	u-e fl**u**t**e**	-ew cr**ew**	-ui fr**ui**t		
		-ou s**ou**p	- o m**o**ve	ough thr**oug****h**			

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/ur/or /er/ /ɜː/	er m**er**maid	ir b**ir**thday	ur n**ur**se	ear **ear**th	*w*or w**or**ld	
/igh/ /aɪ/	-igh n**igh**t	-ie t**ie**	i beh**i**nd	-y fl**y**	i-e b**i**k**e**	ei **ei**der duck
/ai/ /eɪ/	ai first **ai**d	-ay tr**ay**	a t**a**ble	-ae sund**ae**	a-e c**a**k**e**s	
		-ey pr**ey**	-ea br**ea**k	eigh **eigh**t	-aigh str**aigh**t	
/oi/ /ɔɪ/	oi **oi**ntment	oy t**oy**				
/eer/ /ɪə/	eer d**eer**	ear **ear**s	-ere adh**ere**	-ier cash**ie**r		
/air/ /ɛə /	air h**air**	-are h**are**	-ear b**ear**	-ere wh**ere**		
/oor/ /ʊə /	-oor p**oor**	-ure s**ure**				
/oa/ /əʊ/	oa **oa**k tree	ow b**ow**	o yo-y**o**	-oe ob**oe**	o-e r**o**p**e**	
		-ough d**ough**	-eau plat**ea**u			
/ou/ /aʊ/	ou **ou**ch !	ow **ow**l	-ough pl**ough**			

Table 1: English Alphabetic Code with the International Phonetic Alphabet

(Adapted from Debbie Hepplewhite, 2013)

Accordingly, the relation between English phonemes and graphemes cannot be regular (Baugh, 1959). In this respect, O'Grady et al. (1987) mention some problems related to English orthography with regard to the consistency between phonemes and graphemes. They state that:

1) Some letters do not represent any sound in a particular word.
2) A group of two or more letters can be used together to represent a sound.
3) A single letter can represent a cluster of two or more sounds.
4) The same letter represents different sounds in different words.
5) The same sound can be represented by different letters in different words.

2.2 Arabic orthography

Arabic is one of the Semitic languages which are characterized by having a limited vocalic system but a rich consonantal system (Watson, 2007). Modern Standard Arabic consists of 28 letters. These letters represent twenty-five consonants and three long vowels (Coulmas, 1999). The three long vowels are /a:/ (as in /ba:b/ "باب" meaning "door"), /u:/ (as in /ʕu:d/ "عود" meaning "lute") and

/i:/ (as in /fi:l/ "فيل" meaning "elephant"). Their short counterparts; /a/, /u/ and /i/, respectively, are represented by the diacritics /fathah/ (as in /rasama/ "رَسَمَ" meaning "he drew"), /dammah/ (as in /fusta:n/ "فُسْتَانْ" meaning "dress") and /kasrah/ (as in /timθa:l/ "تِمْثَالْ" meaning "statue"), respectively (Kopczyński & Meliani, 1993). Besides these six monophthongs, MSA has two diphthongs. These two diphthongs are /aw/ (as in /nawm/ "نَوم" meaning "sleep") and /ay/ (as in /bayt/ "بَيت" meaning "home") (Dickins, Heselwood & Watson, 1996). Hence, it is obvious that in Arabic, contrary to English, there is one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and graphemes.

2.3 Orthographic Depth Hypothesis

Katz & Frost (1992) claim that the depth of an orthography indicates the degree of consistency between its sounds and letters. It depends on how easy it is to pronounce a word based on its spelling. According to them, it is easier to spell and read in shallow/transparent orthographies, in which the relation between phonemes and graphemes is consistent, than in deep/opaque orthographies, where the relation between sounds and letters is irregular. Frost et al. (2005) and Seymour et al. (2003) claim that English orthography is considered deep due to the discrepancy between its phonemes and graphemes. Arabic orthography, on the other hand, has a one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and graphemes since each phoneme is represented by one grapheme or diacritic (Awad, 2010).

2.4 Mother Tongue Influence

Many studies show that we do not learn anything completely from scratch because we always depend on our previous knowledge when we learn anything new. We make a comparison between what we are learning and what we already know. Mother tongue interference also known as first language transfer, refers to the phenomenon of depending on L1 when learning a foreign language. According to Odlin (1989, p. 27) "transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired". This transfer is explained by the linguistic hypothesis known as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis as will be discussed in the next section.

2.5 Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

The pioneer of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis is Robert Lado. He drew up its theoretical foundations in his book *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957). In this book, Lado claimed that "those elements which are similar to the learner's native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult" (Rustipa, 2011). Based on this, comparing the systems of two languages helps predicting the problems that learners of a foreign language may face. Thus, teaching materials can be adapted to meet their needs and curriculum can be formulated and organized accordingly (Rustipa, 2011). Kharma and Hajjaj (1997, p. 56) assert that "the

greatest difficulty [for ALEs] arises from the difference between the seemingly irregular spelling system of English compared with the greater regularity of the predominantly phonetic script of Arabic". Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ružić (1983) point out that one of the reasons behind spelling errors made by Arab learners of English is the differences between English and Arabic in their orthographic representation of their vowels. Similarly, Aqel (1993) found that the differences between Arabic and English in their vowel inventory lead Arab learners of English to make spelling errors. Ryan and Meara (1991), on the other hand, argue that the fact that Arabic scripts are not always vowelized causes what they called vowel blindness. Arab learners of English pay less attention to vowels in general and to short vowels in specific as their language is a consonantal language. Consequently, it is natural that they commit such errors.

2.6 Error Analysis

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis has faced criticism for its concepts since it was founded. For instance, Odlin (1998) observes that not all differences between L1 and L2 cause difficulties in learning, and not all errors can be predicted by Contrastive Analysis. The shortcomings of Contrastive Analysis diminished its power and paved the way for the emergence of Error Analysis.

Error analysis was established in the 1960s by Stephen Pit Corder and colleagues. Due to Corder (1967, cited in Heydari & Bagheri,

2012), EA is "a procedure used by both researchers and teachers which involves collecting samples of learner language, identifying the errors in the sample, describing these errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness". The purpose of Error Analysis is to find what the learner knows and what he does not know, and to qualify and enable the teacher to provide the learner not only with the knowledge that his hypothesis was incorrect but also, more importantly, with the appropriate kind of information to help him develop a more accurate concept of a rule in the target language (Corder, 1967, cited in Heydari & Bagheri, 2012).

2.7 Previous studies on vowel spelling errors

Akman (2019) investigated English spelling errors made by Swedish high school students and their possible causes. Data were collected from essays written by Swedish junior and senior high school learners of English. After analysing the errors, the results revealed that omission errors were the most frequent followed by insertion, substitution and transposition errors, respectively. Furthermore, the results showed that vowels represented a real challenge for Swedish students as they committed a large number of errors while spelling English vowels. Their errors, were attributed to the irregularity of English spelling system and mother tongue interference, especially their vowel errors, due to the differences between Swedish and English in their vowels.

Hameed (2016, cited in Othman, 2018) investigated English spelling errors made by Saudi university students. The participants in this study were 26 Saudi students of English. They were tested using a dictation test of fifty-words. The results revealed that vowels and silent letters were the most frequent errors. With regard to the type, errors were classified according to Cook's (1999) classification of errors. Substitution errors were the most frequent followed by omission, transposition and insertion errors, respectively. It was found that mother tongue interference was a major cause of these errors.

Al-Busaidi & Al-Saqqaf (2015) investigated spelling difficulties that Arab university students encounter in spelling English vowels. Ninety-four students participated in the spelling test and the dictation test that were given by the researchers to achieve the goals of their study. The results showed that certain types of errors were committed more than others as the participants had more difficulty spelling words where there is no correspondence between phonemes and graphemes. The results also showed that short vowels were easier in spelling than both long vowel sounds and diphthongs. This is due to the fact that short vowels have fewer realizations than long vowels and diphthongs. Long vowel sounds and diphthongs appeared to be equal in terms of difficulty. It was found that the irregularity of English spelling system and mother tongue interference are two main causes of the students' errors.

3. Methodology

3.1 The test material

Researchers use different methods to achieve the objectives of their research. With regard to the current study, the most suitable tool to accomplish it and fulfill its goals is a dictation test. The items were known to the participants as they learned and practiced them at school and college. However, some items were more difficult than others since words with simple codes are expected to be easier to spell than words with complex codes. Simple and complex codes of short and long vowels and diphthongs were included in the test.

3.2 The test sample

The test targets fifty fourth-year students of English at Tartous University regardless of their gender as it is not an objective of the current study. Choosing fourth-year students to be the participants in this study goes back to the belief that although these students have had more experience with the language than other undergraduate students and they are more likely to have had more practice in spelling and more likely to have developed better spelling skills and a better understanding of the rules of spelling, they still commit spelling errors, especially when they spell English vowels. So, it is important to examine their errors in an attempt to help them overcome the difficulties they face especially that they will soon join teaching and other fields of work. The testees were asked to listen to a record in the voice of a native speaker and to

write down what they hear on paper sheets that were previously distributed to them.

4. Analysis and discussion of the results

4.1 Test analysis

During the test, there were various spelling errors within the words which contain the target letters. However, to meet the main objective of this study, only errors related to the test items are analysed.

Table (2) displays the two categories in this test. It includes the number of words in each category, the total number of spellings, the percentages of correct spellings made by my participants and those

test categories	number of given items	percentage of correct spellings	percentage of errors	total number of spellings
1- vowels with complex code	10	276 56%	213 44%	489
2- vowels with simple code	10	311 65%	166 35%	477

of incorrect ones. **Table 2: Performance of the participants in the test**

4.1.1 Vowels with complex code

Vowels with complex code, with a percentage of errors of (44%), were more difficult in spelling than vowels with simple code, with a percentage of errors of (35%). This category consists of 10 English vowels within 10 words: *'lux**u**rious'*, *'consc**iou**s'*, *'discr**e**te'*, *'coll**ea**gue', '**e**ncourage', 'ph**y**sical', '**a**ttempts', 'd**ou**gh', 'pr**o**pose'*, and *'**a**lthough'*. English vowels have proved to be challenging for Arab learners because English has much more vowels than Arabic. To add, this category contains vowel sounds represented by 'unpredictable' letters or, as suggested by Hepplewhite (2013), complex codes. These two reasons lead participants to misspell many items. As table (3) displays, four items contained errors between 60% and 78%. They are: the second 'u' in '*lux**u**rious'*, 'iou' in '*consc**iou**s',* the first 'e' in '*discr**e**te'* , and 'ea' in '*coll**ea**gue'*. For instance, the sequence 'iou' in *'conscious'* was replaced by 'e' and 'ie' which is more suitable for representing /ə/ which is usually spelled as one letter. Moreover, the simple code of the long vowel /i:/ is 'ee' according to Hepplewhite (2013), whereas in *'discrete'* it is represented by only one 'e'. This is why many students misspelled /i:/ as 'ee' in this word. Similarly, the vowel /i:/ in *'colleague'* is written as 'ea' which is a complex code. However, students misspelled it and wrote it as another complex symbol which is 'e'.

category of vowels with complex code	percentage of students who spelled it correctly		percentage of students who spelled it incorrectly		number of students who did not spell the word	most frequent errors
lux**u**rious	10	20%	**37**	**74%**	3	replacing 'u' by 'e' and 'i'
consc**iou**s	20	40%	**30**	**60%**	0	replacing 'iou' by 'e' and 'ie'
discr**e**te	11	22%	**39**	**78%**	0	replacing 'e' by 'ee' and 'ea'
coll**ea**gue	14	28%	**35**	**70%**	1	replacing 'ea' by 'e'
encourag**e**	34	68%	**16**	**32%**	0	replacing 'e' by 'i'
ph**y**sical	37	74%	**13**	**26%**	0	replacing 'y' by 'i'
attempts	46	92%	**2**	**4%**	2	replacing 'a' by 'i'
D**ou**gh	22	44%	**24**	**48%**	4	replacing 'ou' by 'aw'
pr**o**pose	36	72%	**14**	**28%**	0	replacing 'o' by 'e' and 'u'
although	46	92%	**3**	**6%**	1	replacing 'a' by 'o'

Table 3: Performance of the participants in the vowels with

complex code category

This category contains other four items which were misspelled by
26% -48% of the participants. They are: 'y' in *'physical'*, the first 'e'
in *'encourage'*, 'ou' in *'dough'*, and the first 'o' in *'propose'*. In the

case of *'physical'* and *'encourage'*, students tend to change complex codes by simple ones. Hence, they wrote 'i' instead of 'y' and 'e' because 'i' is the simple representation of the sound /ɪ/. As for *'dough'*, many students replaced 'ou' by 'aw'; i.e., they moved from a complex code to another complex code. This is maybe because the diphthong /əʊ/ is represented more by 'aw' than by 'ou' as in 'saw', 'raw', 'draw', etc. Concerning *'propose'*, the first 'e' stands for schwa which has no specific symbol; this is why it appears with different errors. Some participants misspelled it as 'e' and others as 'u' instead of 'o'.

On the other hand, the least problematic items in this category were /ə/ in *'attempts'* and 'a' in *'although'*. The former was spelled correctly by 92% of the students. This schwa should be written as 'a'. In fact, the schwa sound resembles the Arabic short sound /a/, and this /a/ in turn resembles the English /æ/ which is usually spelled as 'a'. This helps the participants recognise the correct spelling of this schwa. To add, the participants are familiar with the word *'attempts'* more than the other words in this category. Similarly, 'a' in *'although'* has the same percentage of correct spellings. Even though this 'a' stands for 'unusual' sound: /ɔː/, most participants succeeded in spelling it. This is because *'although'* is a function word which means that it is used frequently and this made spelling it easy for the participants.

4.1.2 Vowels with simple code

This category seems to be relatively less problematic for the participants than the previously-mentioned category. Hence, we can find items such as 'a' in *'wax'* with zero errors as it was spelled correctly by all participants. Similarly, the majority of the students could guess the correct spelling of the vowels 'i' in *'discrete'*, 'e' and 'i' in *'wrestling'*, and 'o' in *'conscious'*. Throughout the test, it has been proved that simple coding is always easier to learn and predict.

However, there are still some vowels with simple code that were misspelled by a number of students. For instance, 58% of participants did not spell the first 'u' in *'luxurious'*. In fact, the letter 'u' is tricky in this word as it stands for the vowel -/ʌ/- in the first syllable and the vowel -/ʊ/- in the second syllable. Likewise, almost half participants made errors while spelling the target vowels in the words: *'attempts'*, *'electrician'*, and *'cockroach'*. This may be because these words have more letters than *'wax'*, *'discrete'*, and *'wrestling'*. In other words, longer words can be more problematic than shorter words within the same group. Table (4) shows the results within this category.

category of vowels with simple code	percentage of students who spelled it correctly		percentage of students who spelled it incorrectly		number of students who did not spell the word	most frequent errors
Wa**x**	50	100%	**0**		0	-
lu**x**urious	18	36%	**29**	**58%**	3	replacing 'u' by 'a' and 'o'
co**n**scious	36	72%	**14**	**28%**	0	replacing 'o' by 'a' and 'u'
atte**mpts**	22	44%	**26**	**52%**	2	replacing 'e' by 'a'
di**screte**	40	80%	**10**	**20%**	0	replacing 'i' by 'e'
ele**ctrician**	22	44%	**24**	**48%**	4	replacing 'e' by 'a'
co**ckr**o**ach**	27	54%	**20**	**40%**	3	replacing 'o' by 'a'
	21	42%	**26**	**52%**		replacing 'oa' by 'ou'
wre**stling**	39	78%	**7**	**14%**	4	replacing 'e' by 'i'
	36	72%	**10**	**20%**		replacing 'i' by 'y'

Table 4: Performance of the participants in the vowels with simple code category

4.2 Discussion of the test

The aim of the current test is to assess the performance of students of English when spelling English vowels. Fifty fourth-year students of English participated in the test. The participants made different errors while spelling English words. However, not all items were problematic for the participants; some items were spelled correctly

more than others during the test. Most of the students' errors were due to the complexity of the English spelling system and to some aspects that are not allowed in the participants' L1.

The first category in order of difficulty was the vowels with complex-code category. In fact, there are two reasons that make this category difficult. First, it contains vowels which are challenging for foreign students as the vowel /e/ in *'electrician'* does not exist SA. Moreover, these vowels are represented in a complex way, i.e. spelled as 'unusual' letters. The first 'e' in *'discrete'* and the second 'u' in *'luxurious'* got the least number of correct spellings.

Concerning the second category; vowels with simple codes, it proved to be easier for the participants than the previous category. This category included items of less contradiction with the participants' L1. Moreover, this category showed less complexity as it included sounds represented by simple codes. Hence, there was a 100% correct spelling in this category which is the 'a' in *'wax'*.

5. Conclusion

This paper has investigated spelling errors of English vowels made by students of English at Tartous University. The dictation test used for the purposes of conducting this research paper consisted of two categories, namely vowels with complex code and vowels with simple code. The first category consisted of ten vowels within ten words and the second category consisted of ten vowels within eight words. The words that were previously chosen were dictated to fifty

students. The results revealed that two main causes were behind most of the students' errors. The first cause was the complexity of English orthography since the percentage of spelling errors of vowels with complex code was 44 % while the percentage of spelling errors of vowels with simple code was 35%. For example, the vowels /æ/ represented by it simple code (grapheme) 'a' in the word *'wax'* was spelled correctly by all the testees while the sound /i:/ represented by its complex code /e/ in the word *'discr**e**te'* was misspelled by 39 (78%) of the testees. The second cause of the students' errors was mother tongue interference. For example, the /e/ vowel which is represented by its simple code 'e' in 'attempts' and 'el**e**ctrician' was spelled incorrectly by 26 (52%) and 24 (48%), respectively, of the participants. This is due to the fact that the Arabic sound system does not have this sound.

However, the test results showed that vowels with complex code within words that are used frequently were spelled correctly by the majority of participants. For example, even though the 'a' in *'although'* represents the 'unusual' sound: /ɔ:/, most of the testees succeeded in spelling it. This is due to its being a function word that students frequently used.

6. Pedagogical implications

Based on the results of the present study, the following suggestions are provided to help improve the students' performance in spelling and lessen the spelling errors they may make:

1) Students should be informed that the English spelling system differs to a great degree from the Arabic spelling system and that English, unlike Arabic, does not have a one-to-one correspondence between its phonemes and graphemes.

2) Students' phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic knowledge should be evaluated because the English spelling system represents not only its phonemes but also other linguistic information.

3) Students should practice spelling regularly to improve their spelling abilities.

4) Students should use the dictionary to check the spelling of words.

5) Teachers of English should give their students spelling tasks and feedback.

7. Recommendations for further research

In light of the current study, the following suggestions can be recommended for further research:

1) Similar studies could be conducted in Departments of English at other Syrian universities to find out if there is a significant variation in the spelling proficiency of English major students.

2) The same study should be done on first-year students of English at Tartous University to consider the effectiveness of the English Syrian curriculum for students of English and the teaching techniques and instructional methods.

3) Further studies could be carried out with concentration on other factors that contribute to students' spelling errors, such as gender differences, teaching methods, motivation, development stages, lack of linguistic knowledge, etc.

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