

# **L1 (ARABIC) INTERFERENCE IN LEARNING L2 (ENGLISH): AN ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH SPELLING USED BY ARABIC SPEAKERS AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL - A CASE STUDY**

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this study is spelling mistakes done by undergraduate students while using letters b, p, e. The basic aim of this study is to analyse these spelling mistakes and observe how mother tongue (Arabic) interferes in the learning of second language (English) in terms of spellings. A list of more than 50 misspelt words was collected from students' written exams. It was observed that 'b' is replaced with 'p' in monosyllabic words if it appears in the beginning before 'o'. If 'p' is in the beginning of the words before consonant 'r' in polysyllabic words, it is replaced with 'b'. In another situation when 'p' is placed after 'm' in the middle of words, it is replaced with 'b'. The case of substitution of 'p' with 'b' and vice versa is observed mostly in nouns. Omission and addition of 'e' in the final position occur because students may not find such example in their mother tongue and also they do not find spelling rules for 'e' at the final position of words in English.

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**Keywords:** L<sub>1</sub> (Arabic) Interference in Learning L<sub>2</sub> (English), Mother Tongue, Second Language or Target Language

## **Introduction**

The phenomenon of learning different languages distinguishes the communication of human beings from animals. Knowledge of more than one language is required to survive in the modern age. It is an admitted fact that English has emerged as an International Language of the world. Many nations of the world are striving for learning it as a second language.

Learning a new language is not a simple task. When we learn a new language, many interesting horizons of research and knowledge arise. The first language interference is one of them. We also name this occurrence as mother tongue interference. L<sub>1</sub> has some other titles as well, like primary and

native language. Similarly, L2 is termed as ‘foreign language’. When a new language is acquired, the first language is used as a tool and medium to learn it and L1 influences the learning of L2. In this situation L1 interference is quite a normal phenomenon. L1 interference can evolve in any area of the target language such as grammar, spellings, pronunciation, syntax, vocabulary, accent and so on.

In the presented research paper L1 is Arabic and L2 is English. The focus is made on spellings and the way they are affected by the interference of L1 in the acquisition of L2. There are many alphabets of English which do not have their equivalent in Arabic. Students try to substitute them with the English alphabet which is closer in pronunciation in Arabic. They, particularly the learning community do some unusual mistakes in English spelling.

The aim of this research is to review some linguistic terms and literature related to Language Interference. At later stage, data is collected from the written material produced by students studying English as a foreign language at undergraduate level. These data are analysed and then pattern and sequence of spelling mistakes are checked.

### **Literature Review**

There are 28 letters in Arabic language; all are consonants apart from the first letter. Last two letters can act as both consonants and vowels. The pronunciation and spellings of Arabic varies from country to country. Like all Semitic languages Arabic is read and written from right to left, on a horizontal line.

English belongs to Germanic languages, a language family, that is a direct descendent of Endo-European language family. English has 26 alphabets/letters and 44 sounds. There are 20 vowel sounds and 24 consonant sounds.

In this study Arabic is native or primary language and English is the target language.

Before proceeding further, the discussion of some key terms of this research paper will provide better understanding of the topic in hand.

### **Mother Tongue**

We use this term to refer to the first language of a child. Normally, a child is exposed to a language immediately after his/her birth. A child starts learning a language that has been surrounding him/her since his/her birth. With the passage of time this learning of language goes on cognitively and time comes when he/she can speak, read and write that language perfectly. So, mother tongue is the first language of a child which he/she has learnt first and uses it for communicating of his/her needs and desires. Mother tongue is also termed as the native or primary language. It is the basics of one's

recognition and origin. It's the language which occupies one's thought process and conscience.

### **Second Language**

An online dictionary defines the second language as “a language other than the mother tongue that a person or community uses for public communication, especially in trade, higher education and administration” (*The Free Dictionary by Farlex*). Another definition of the second language in the same dictionary is “a non-native language officially recognised and adopted in a multilingual country as a means of public communication.” The second language is also called the target language.

### **Language Interference**

Language interference occurs when a speaker or a writer applies knowledge of his/her native language to a second language. Language interference is also known as language transfer, linguistic interference, L1 inference and crossmeaning (*The Free Dictionary by Farlex*).

Language interference can be positive or negative. It is positive when relevant units or structures of both languages are same and result in correct production of the target language. On the other hand, it is negative when different units or structures of both languages interfere in the learning of the second language. One overlaps with the other and the linguistic interference occurs in polyglot individuals.

In this study spelling mistakes of the learners are focused and the use of the letter ‘b’ instead of ‘p’ is observed repetitively. Students write ‘webt’ instead of ‘wept’ and quite surprisingly there is another case when students use ‘p’ instead of ‘b’. For example, they write ‘describe’ as ‘descripe’. There is a long list of such mistakes when students use ‘b’ instead of ‘p’ and vice versa. This may indicate that L1 does not have /p/ sound and students try to replace it with /b/, that is, it appears to be the nearest sound in the target language. In the data analysis more than 50 words have been selected which are spelt wrongly by the learners. The observation is based upon the replacement of ‘p’ and ‘b’ which may occur before vowel or consonant letters. Another category of spelling mistakes have been scrutinized in terms of parts of speech, especially verb, adjective or noun. It is also detected that learners drop final ‘e’; for instance, they write ‘theme’ as ‘them’.

### **Research Methodology and Analysis**

The data for this study are collected from students' exam papers and a list of over 50 words were composed for analysing spelling mistakes. This list was further divided into two categories: polysyllabic and monosyllabic words for convenience in analysis. It was observed repeatedly that students do spelling mistakes while using letters *b*, *p* and *e*.

## Replacing 'p' with 'b'

The spelling mistakes related to 'p' and 'b' are listed in the following lines with respect to monosyllabic and polysyllabic words.

### Polysyllabic Words

In polysyllabic words, if a word starts with 'p', it is replaced with 'b' before consonants and mostly before the consonant 'r'. If a word begins with 'p' and it is placed before vowel sounds, 'b' is spelled instead of 'p'. There is another noticeable phenomenon that when 'p' comes after 'm', it is substituted with 'b' in words like *impediment, companion, champion, and examples*. On the other hand, it is also observed that when 'b' comes after 'm', it is superseded by 'p' which is a reverse case.

Words	Spelled by students	Words	Spelled by students
Problem	Broblem	Ambitious	Ampitious
Protect	Brotect	Absent	Apsent
Protagonist	Brotagonist	Examples	Exambles
Punishing	Bunishing	Beautiful	Peautiful
Rabbit	Rappit	Breeze	Preeze
People	beoble	Upset	Ubset
Palace	Balace	Habit	Hapit
Pencil	Bencil	Description	Describtion
Person	Berson	Describe	Describe
Impediment	Imbediment	Object	Opject
Celebrate	Celeprate	Repeated	Rebeated
Companion	Combanion	Remember	Rememper
Champion	Chambion	Shakespeare	Shakesbeare

### Monosyllabic Words

It is observed on careful examination of spellings as written by students that if 'b' appears in the beginning of words, they invariably use 'p' in monosyllabic words. These mistakes are repeated before/after consonants and vowels but there is more inclination of using before/after vowels, especially before 'o'.

Words	Spelled by students	Words	Spelled by students
Play	Blay	Been	Peen
Poor	Boor	Bag	Pag
Push	Bush	Beat	Peat
Birth	Pirth	But	Put
Black	Plack	Hope	Hobe
By	Py	Wept	Webt
Brave	Prave	Jump	Jumb
Bear	Pear	Job	Jop
Book	Pook	Obey	Opey

### Dropping 'e'

It is marked that often 'e' is omitted if it is at the end of the words before consonants, but this tendency is mostly visible in monosyllabic words.

1. Monosyllabic	Words	2. Polysyllabic	Words
Words	Spelled by students	Words	Spelled by students
Crime	Crim	Imagine	Imagin
Wrote	Wrot		
Where	Wher		
Snake	Snak		

### Adding 'e'

In polysyllabic words 'e' is added at the final position after consonants.

1. Monosyllabic	Words	2. Polysyllabic	Words
Words	Spelled by students	Words	Spelled by students
Talk	Talke	Metaphor	Metaphore
		Again	Againe
		Everybody	Everybodye
		Visit	Visite

There is no clear reason stated for addition and omission of 'e' after consonants at final position in the English language. The students tend to do this mistake possibly because they do not find such example and they are confused in writing 'e' in the final position and vice versa. So at some places they add 'e' to be on safer side. It is confusing for them because mostly 'e' is silent at the final position and in English language we do not find spelling rules for 'e' if it is placed at the final position.

The above discussion is made regarding syllables. It is seen that the replacement of 'b' and 'p' occurs both in polysyllabic and monosyllabic words. 'p' is replaced with 'b' if it appears before the consonant 'r' in polysyllabic words but in monosyllabic words this is not the case. There is the tendency of replacing 'p' with 'b' before/after the vowels, especially before 'o'.

If these spelling mistakes are analysed in terms of parts of speech, we notice that the replacement of 'p' and 'b' mostly occurs in nouns. Such mistakes are few in adjectives, verbs, prepositions and adverbs. Perhaps, this is the case because more nouns are used when compared to other parts of speech. Thus, we notice more spelling mistakes in nouns.

### Conclusion

After the careful analysis it can be concluded that the replacement of 'b' with 'p' and vice versa occurs because of the mother tongue interference. Students do not find 'p' in their mother tongue and they try to substitute it with the nearest letter in pronunciation in their mother tongue. As far as

omission and addition of ‘e’ is concerned, it happens because we do not find rules for ‘e’ in English spellings if it is places in the final position of a word.

The existence of L1 is not the only factor responsible for these spelling mistakes. There are some other barriers which do not allow students to learn spelling by heart. Nowadays, the use of technology is encouraged to prepare written assignments. Almost every student has a laptop or a computer. Presenting a hand written assignment is considered old fashioned and not up to the mark. There are many programs available for auto-spelling correction. This is the prime factor for misspelt words. There is another obstacle in learning spelling which affects spellings significantly, that is, in this era worksheets are available online for the practice of language skills and nothing is prepared and done manually. Learners are given MCQs where there is no practice of writing. Only true/false or choose the correct answer type questions are given. All these factors make the learners negligent towards spelling mistakes and they hardly take their writing skills seriously. In general, students’ writing skills are put to test only during the exams and then, spelling and grammar are the main areas focused, apart from the contents. The other reason of incorrect spelling, which is related to the usage of technology, is the imperative usage of chatting over cell phones and social media like facebook, twitter and other chatting messengers. During chatting only communication is focused and mostly informal language is used. It also lessens the chance of learning spelling.

Though this research has been done on a small scale, it can provide foundations for future studies and may be a drop in the ocean of bilingualism. On the basis of the results and conclusion drawn from this study, some recommendations can prove fruitful in improving the spellings of the Second Language (English) learners.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations based on the above research can help students to overcome MTI in learning L2.

1. Students should be provided with superfluous practice of /p/ and /b/ while teaching them phonetics and phonology.
2. They should be encouraged to submit their hand written assignments instead of typed ones for writing skills courses.
3. Many puzzle games and software are introduced with spellings as their main component. Learners should be taught using these spelling related games. This will help them to improve spellings.
4. New smart phones technology can also prove helpful in this regard. Many groups can be created among learners and they can be asked to communicate in target language. Language learning applications in

smart phones can benefit learners in multiple ways; learning grammar, spelling, syntax and so on.

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