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A Comparative Analysis of Spelling Performance between Iraqi-Speaking and English-Speaking Children in Kindergartens

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ABSTRACT: Spelling is the ability to produce in written or oral form the correct arrangement of letters. It is an important language arts skill, and it has been incorporated into the primary educational programs since preschool begins formally. The purposes of this study was to compare spelling performance between Iraqi-Speaking and English-Speaking children in kindergartens. The case study of the study were 23 kindergartners in Iraq and Turkey. Their numbers according were as follows: 43 Kurdish Iraqi-speaking children, 20 Arabian Iraqi-speaking children, and 49 European English-speaking children. They were asked to write the following eight words: "punishment," "cement," "pop," "vacation," "motion," "vale," "umbrella" and "ocean." The developmental levels were found to be similar, but there were some differences between the English-speaking and Iraqi-speaking children, especially with respect to the first phoneme-grapheme correspondences they made.

KEYWORDS: Spelling performance, phoneme-grapheme, Iraqi-speaking children, English-speaking children

1. Introduction

Learning how to read and write can be one of the biggest challenges for any second language learner. Kessler, Pollo, Treiman, and Cardoso-Martins (2013) believe that spelling is one of the most important components of writing at a single-word level. It is one of those subjects that few teachers like to teach, and there is little agreement about the best way to teach it. However, most instructors, they states, would agree that a certain amount of practice is required in any total spelling program.

Spelling is defined by Heron, Okyere, and Miller (1991) as "the ability to produce in written or oral form the correct arrangement of letters. It is an important language arts skill, and it has been incorporated into the primary educational programs since preschool begins formally" (p. 3).

Spelling is often only briefly discussed in language courses and, though separate and distinct in the curriculum, it is a subject which receives little attention. teachers do not really teach spelling as much as they test it and the weekly cycle is so pre-established in educational practice that even pre service teachers can describe the weekly pretest -posttest approach (Putman, 2017).

Spelling has witnessed interesting stances and perspectives during the history of second language learning and there has been a controversy over its importance in the field. Belloc (2006) is a more recent example of a hostile stance toward spelling, who goes so far as to say that English, of all languages, ought to be most indifferent to spelling, since the sense of its words and phrases hardly ever depends upon spelling. He refers to spelling as a great breeder of hatred among the nations and of

divisions, misapprehensions, wars. In spite of these rare extreme oppositions, the bulk of earlier research, some of which are mentioned below, attributes a great degree of importance to spelling as a crucial component of the language learning process.

Amiri and Salehi (2017) believe that spelling is one of the important tool skills in communication, and it is an essential component of a total language arts curriculum. According to these researchers, children who receive effective spelling instruction are more likely to focus on clarity, logic, and the substance of their writing during written language exercises, not just on the arrangement of words. In contrast, poor spellers may have negative experiences in written expression, and their communication skills may have an unfavorable impression (Tops, Callens, Van Cauwenberghe, Adriaens, & Brysbaert, 2013).

DeStefano (1978) points to the fact that society usually considers poor spellers as "uneducated or careless", while the individual who spells correctly is perceived to be educated. For Gentry and Gillet (1993) the purpose of learning to spell is to make learners' writings easier, more fluent, more expensive, and more easily read and comprehended by others. Thus, they believe, spelling instruction should be included in the writing programs and active daily writing for real purposes and real audience is necessary for spelling development in all grades.

Gentry (2000) believes that too much that is known about how to teach spelling isn't put into practice. He regards spelling as a subject which we teach more poorly than any other subject and about which we harbor more myths. There is a lot of research concerning effective spelling instruction, and many of the traditional approaches have consistently shown themselves to be of questionable effectiveness for helping students become proficient spellers, but in spite of volumes of research teaching spelling is still a matter of intuition and the same traditional strategies and lessons are used.

This research indicates that young children do not learn to spell by associating sounds and letters that are taught one after another. Accordingly, many kindergarten and first-grade teachers have changed from teaching formal phonics to supporting children's natural growth as writers.

The findings of the present study may have major implications for ELT teachers, especially in Iraq country, given its potential to reveal their unawareness of the differences in spellings. Specifically, English teachers at Schools and private language institutes can become more aware of this issue and, consequently, would raise their students' awareness of it in language classrooms

2. Literature

Many researchers in America (Critten, Sheriston, & Mann, 2016; Martins, Albuquerque, Salvador, & Silva, 2013) have shown repeatedly that young children "invent" spelling by going through several levels before constructing the conventional system. While there is considerable knowledge about "invented" spelling, very little is known about children's earlier development from scribbling to "invent" spelling. The most systematic research available on this transition is that of Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982), which was replicated with larger samples by Ferreiro and Gomez Palacio (1982). Working in Argentina with Spanish-speaking 4- to 6-year-olds, Ferreiro and Teberosky based their research on the theory of Jean Piaget. According to Piaget, children begin to construct their knowledge about astronomy, meteorology, botany, and geology long before they go to school (Piaget, 1967).

Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) hypothesized that preschool children must likewise have many ideas about how words are written. As part of this multifaceted research, they asked four to six-year-olds to write words that were familiar to them in written form (e.g., their own name and the name of a family member) and other words that were unfamiliar (e.g., toad, duck, and bear). In subsequent analysis, the children's responses were conceptualized within five levels of development. At level 1, children wrote strings. A characteristic of these strings is that they all look alike to the adult observer. To children at

level 1, however, similarities among written words do not matter. What matters to them is their intent to write different words.

At the second level, the children's writing revealed new ideas about how words are written. The children wrote words with a minimum and a maximum number of characters, or a fixed quantity of at least three characters. For example, the words had a minimum of four and a maximum of five letters. The characters became more similar to conventional letters, and the children showed evidence of another important rule: Words have to look different if they are to be read. If their repertoire of letters was very limited, the children made the words look different by varying the order of the characters. It can be known the construction of a system created by the child, as there is no rule in the external world stating that a word has to have a minimum and a maximum number of letters.

At the third level, the level of the syllabic hypothesis, the child used one character to represent each syllable, but the character did not have to have a phonetic value. This level represents a major achievement because the child is showing for the first time the idea that written characters are related to sounds. Again, this is an internal construction of the child, as there is no rule in the environment stating that each character must stand for a syllable.

In another study, Ferreiro and Gomez Palacio (1982) found a second, more advanced type of writing within level 3. The child used each letter to represent not only a syllable but also the conventional vowel sound. Ferreiro and Gomez Palacio (1982) combined two levels (4 and 5) and called it the syllables-alphabetic level. The child at level 4 sometimes continued to use each letter to represent a syllable but also began to make phoneme-grapheme correspondences.

Ferreiro and Teberosky's work (1982) led us to wonder (a) whether or not English-speaking children go through the same developmental levels as the Iraqi-speaking children, and (b) whether English-speaking children, too, make their first letter sound correspondences through syllables. Based on the related literature the main question of the study will be raised as follow:

Is there any difference in spelling performance between Iraqi-speaking and English-speaking children in kindergartens?

3. Method

The case study of the study were 23 kindergartners in Iraq and Turkey. Their numbers according were as follows: 43 Kurdish Iraqi-speaking children, 20 Arabian Iraqi-speaking children, and 49 European English-speaking children.

They were asked to write the following eight words: "punishment," "cement," "pop," "vacation," "motion," "vale," "umbrella" and "ocean." This list consists of words that are familiar to most young children, and with the exception of "umbrella," do not appear in kindergarten instructional programs. It includes both monosyllabic and multisyllabic words; some words begin with consonants and others with vowels.

Each child was taken from the classroom and tested individually. After a brief conversation with the researcher, the child was given a blank sheet of paper and asked to write his or her name on it before being asked to write the eight words. Whenever necessary, questions were asked by the researcher to clarify the ideas underlying a production. The children's writing was analyzed by four researchers, who categorized the writing according to Ferreiro and Teberosky's (1982) criteria.

If at least four of the eight words met the criteria for a particular level, the writing was categorized at that level. For example, in one of the participant’s paper, six words (punishment, pop, vacation, veil, umbrella and ocean) met the criteria for inclusion at our level 2b. Level 2b is explained in the section that follows

4. Results

The similarities and differences between the English-speaking and Iraqi-speaking children are reported beginning with a level 0. In the Ferreiro and Teberosky study (1982), a few of the lower-class children refused to write; one child in this study's sample who refused to write also belonged to a lower-class group. Three of the children drew pictures when asked to write the words. For instance, when one child was asked to write ocean, she drew a circle with a boat in the middle. Since these children had not yet differentiated between drawing and writing (level 1), they were classified as level 0 (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Kindergartners' Levels of Spelling

	0	**1**	**2a**	**2b**	**3**	**4**	**X**
Number	4	12	28	20	32	7	9
Percentage	3/5%	11/5%	25%	18%	28%	6%	8%

Children's writing was categorized as level 1 when they wrote strings of conventional letters without a maximum number of letters. While the strings of various lengths were similar to those in Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982), the great majority of the children used conventional letter shapes, in contrast to children in the Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) study.

None of the subjects produced unconventional shapes and none of them produced similar or identical strings for different words. It was categorized that children's writing as belonging to level 2 if four or more of the eight words written consisted of a fixed quantity or a minimum and maximum number of graphemes. At level 2 the findings were thus again similar to Ferreiro and Teberosky's (1982). The English-speaking pupils had constructed the same rule as the Iraqi-speaking children and believed that a word must have a fixed number or a minimum and maximum number of characters, plus a variety of letters.

However, conventional letters already appeared in our level 1 as did the different appearance of the eight written words. Further, it was found many words that met not only the criteria for level 2 but also another criterion: the "correct" first letter in each word. It was found so many of these instances that the researcher subdivided level 2 into levels 2a and 2b. Level 2b is characterized by instances when the correct first letter is used in at least half of the eight words written.

Although a few of our English-speaking children produced writing for one or two words that could have been considered syllabic, there was no evidence that any children had developed a general syllabic rule. The researcher thus defined level 3 as consonantal because the children used only consonant letters for consonant sounds without writing any vowels. For example, many children wrote "pnmt" for "punishment," "cmt" for "cement" and "pp" for "pop". By contrast, the Iraqi-peaking children at level 3 wrote two squiggles for a two-syllable word and three squiggles for a three-syllable word. They sometimes wrote two vowels for a two-syllable word, and three vowels for a three-syllable word.

At level 4, the Iraqi-speaking and English- speaking children were again found to be similar. Level 4 in English also grows out of level 3. For example, in the study, children's writing of "pnmt" often became "punishmint" and "cmt" often became "cemint." While the "mint" in "punishment" and "cement" is not yet conventional, it is consistent from one word to the next. The same is true of the "shun" in "vacashun" and "moshun." These consistencies suggest the presence of an alphabetic system approaching conventional spelling.

Finally, it was observed a category X shown in Table 1. In this category, the children wrote only the correct beginning letter for each word. Ferreiro and Gomez Palacio (1982) also reported a small

category with only one letter or pseudo-letter for each word. However, in their study, there did not seem to be any indication that this letter corresponded to the first letter of the word

5. Conclusions

Findings in the study are very similar to Ferreiro and Teberosky's (1982), but there are three differences. First, children in the study made their first phoneme-grapheme correspondences by focusing on consonants, while the Iraqi-speaking children focused on syllables. Second, children in the study wrote strings of conventional letters at level 1, instead of strings of letter-like squiggles. Third, in the study, children wrote so many correct initial letters at level 2 that the researcher created an additional level called level 2b.

The major difference, that of the consonantal correspondence as opposed to the syllabic correspondence at level 3, can probably be explained by the nature of the differences between the two languages. Arabic differs from English in that syllables and vowel sounds are much clearer in Arabic than in English. English is primarily a stress-timed language in which vowel sounds and syllabic boundaries are clear only in stressed syllables.

Additionally, from the standpoint of phoneme-grapheme correspondence, Arabic is a much more consistent language than English. Moreover, many of the words frequently used by children are monosyllabic in English and multisyllabic in Arabic.

Level 2, in English and in Iraqi-peaking children, is remarkable because no one teaches children that words have to be written with a fixed number of letters or with a minimum and a maximum number of letters. Level 3, the consonantal or syllabic level, is likewise remarkable because no one teaches such rules that children carefully follow. These rules suggest that children construct one coherent system after another as they try to make sense of the writing that they find in the environment.

It is significant to note that almost all the children in our study wrote conventional letters but used them in a wide variety of ways at a variety of levels. The majority of the kindergartners the researcher interviewed were at levels 2 and 3, but eight percent and seven percent, respectively, were found to use letters below and above levels 2 and 3. These findings attest to Piaget's theory that even social knowledge is not acquired directly by internalization from the environment. Social knowledge, too, is acquired by assimilation into the knowledge an individual already has and is constructed from within. Detailed, longitudinal research is necessary to understand how children progress from one level to the next. In addition, it’s needed to know how schools can intervene in kindergarten and the primary grades to produce the best results. Children need information, but they can assimilate it only at their own levels. It is, therefore, important for us to refrain from high-pressure instruction that may result in confusion or loss of confidence. If we foster children's curiosity and desire to read and write, they are likely to do better than if we impose isolated bits of information on them.

Also it should be noted that, materials developers and those involved in course design, testing and assessment could benefit from the results of this study. First, materials developers can tailor ELT materials to the specific needs of a particular group of students by incorporating different aspects of spellings into textbooks. Second, course designers could identify the characteristic of spelling patterns of their course attendants and supply them with the most appropriate materials and third, testing and assessment practitioners could adjust their test and assessment procedures to the learning situation to which their test takers have been exposed.

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