

Effective Strategies for Enhancing Spelling Skills Among EFL Learners: A Case Study

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Abstract:

The present research is an investigatory paper headed to obtain comprehension about strategies in enhancing spelling skills used by Algerian students. The work deployed a mixed-method approach to gather data from the participants. A semi-structured questionnaire was conducted to 25 first year students at the department of English language, University of Ghardaia. The results of the investigation exhibited that the learners used strategies to enhance spelling accuracy, and more than half of them depend only on visual memory when checking the correct spelling. It is advocated that the foreign learners use several strategies and techniques that stemmed from diverse spelling teaching and learning approaches, namely: Targeted Practice, Mnemonic Devices, and Technology-Based Tools.

Keywords: Spelling learning, spelling strategies, EFL learners, English as a Foreign Language

1. Introduction

Words are the best channel through which human indelibly mould their ideas both simple and masterpieces. As such, acquiring a language requires strong mastery of its writing, and as spelling is the backbone of effective reading and writing proficiency, EFL Learners need adequate strategies (Jaspers et al. 2012) to convey accurate and precise thoughts.

Alongside to all other written elements, control of spelling is vital to success in language acquisition. (E. Horn & Ashbaugh, 1920, p. xi) defines spelling as the ability to accurately make words by

employing the correct letter combination. When learning a foreign language, good spelling can improve communication and reduce misunderstandings. (Westwood, Peter, 2018, p. 3).

In parallel way, within foreign language acquisition context, the importance of spelling is rather intensified because the level of comprehensibility and productivity among foreign learners depends greatly on the amounts of their collected lexicon. In addition, although people can communicate orally with limited language competencies, they cannot write without enough spelling proficiency. As Kreiner et al. (2002) points out that “correct spelling confers a “halo effect”—that is, beyond simply aiding a writer’s ability to communicate effectively, a lack of spelling errors can improve perceptions of their credibility and qualifications—and, conversely, the presence of such errors can lower such perceptions”.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Spelling

In the milieu of English language learning, vocabulary and spelling mastery are highly interrelated. While vocabulary is defined as terms and their dictionary definitions Richards (2003), and spelling is the ability to form words using the accepted conventions and rules of a particular language (E. Horn & Ashbaugh, 1920, p. xi), they are both considered as compound skills that encompass various linguistic components. In in any alphabetical language, spelling mastery requires lexicon, orthographical, syntactical, phonological, morphological, phonemic, and phonics awareness.

Phonologically, the principle of “one symbol for each phoneme” is a focal notion in phonology, which states that each phoneme in a language should be represented by a unique symbol (Treiman, 2004, p. 1731-1). However, there are some exceptions to this rule that make spelling mistakes frequently occur. For instance, in English, the phoneme /k/ is represented by the letter “c” in words like “cat” and “kite,” but by the letter “k” in words like “kangaroo” and “kite”. Similarly, the phoneme /j/ is represented by the letter “y” in words like “yes” and “yellow,” but by the letter “j” in words like “jelly” and “jungle”.

There is a clear relationship between the lexicon and spelling mistakes (Ravid, 2012, p. 4). The size and depth of a learners' lexicon can influence their spelling accuracy. When Students have a limited vocabulary or are unfamiliar with a particular word, they are more likely to make spelling mistakes when trying to write it. For example, consider the word "psychology." It contains the sound /sai/ at the beginning, which is represented by the letter combination "psy." Without prior knowledge of this word and its spelling, someone might mistakenly write it as "sai-kol-uh-gee" or "sai-kol-o-jee."

Additionally, the lexicon influences spelling mistakes through the occurrence of homophones. Homophones are words that have the same pronunciation but different meanings and spellings. For instance, the words "their," "there," and "they're" are all homophones but have different spellings and meanings. If an EFL learner is not familiar with the correct spelling of these words, s/he may make mistakes when using them in their writing.

Furthermore, the lexicon can also affect spelling mistakes through the occurrence of irregular words. Irregular words are those that do not follow the typical spelling rules or patterns. For example, the words "said" and "friend" are irregular in their spelling as they do not adhere to the usual sound-symbol correspondence. If individuals are not familiar with these irregular words, they may misspell them.

Orthographically, when we speak, we use sounds to communicate our thoughts and ideas. However, in writing, we use letters or combinations of letters to represent those sounds (Pavicic Takac, 2008: 5). This system of representing sounds with letters is called orthography. It helps us understand and communicate meaning through written language. Spelling, on the other hand, refers to the ability to write words correctly. It involves using the correct combination of letters provided by orthography, and following specific rules to represent the sounds in a word accurately.

Although the relationship seems clear to apply, there are some phenomenon in English language that put foreign learners in puzzling situations when it comes to spelling mastery (Pavicic Takac, 2008: 5). The first is polysemy which is a linguistic term that refers to the

coexistence of many possible meanings for a word or phrase. For example, the word “run” has many senses, such as “to move quickly on foot,” “to compete in a race,” and “to operate a machine”. The next orthographical phenomenon is compound words which are words that are made up of two or more words that function as a single unit. Usually, spelling mistakes among EFL learners happened at the orthographical level, when they confuse among open, closed, and hyphenated types of compound words. For example, in “ice cream” “notebook” and “self-esteem” respectively.

At the Syntax level, there is a relationship between syntax and spelling mistakes, as the rules of syntax can influence the spelling accuracy of individuals. When constructing sentences, individuals need to choose the appropriate words and spell them correctly to convey their intended meaning. Failure to follow the syntax rules can lead to spelling mistakes.

One aspect of syntax that can impact spelling mistakes is word order. In English, the word order in a sentence generally follows a subject-verb-object (SVO) pattern. If learners are not familiar with this pattern, they may make mistakes in the spelling of words as they try to construct sentences. In addition, for example, consider the sentence “The cat chased the mouse.” If a learner is not aware of the SVO word order, they may mistakenly write “The chased cat the mouse” or “Chased cat the mouse the”

Additionally, the syntax of a sentence can influence the spelling of words through the use of conjunctions and prepositions. These words connect different parts of a sentence and help convey relationships between words. If EFL learners are unsure of the correct spelling of these words or their appropriate usage, they may make spelling mistakes.

For instance, consider the sentence “She went to the store and bought some groceries.” If EFL learner is uncertain of the spelling of the conjunction “and” or the preposition “to” they may misspell these words, leading to errors in their writing. Moreover, syntactic rules monitor the class of vocabularies and parts of speech in English

sentences. For instance, articles make parts of noun phrases; they occur before nouns and their modifiers, as in the long story.

Phonetically, phonetic spelling is a system of spelling in which each letter represents one spoken sound (Pan, et al p. 11). In general, in English language, some words are pronounced exactly as they look. However, the situation is not always systematic, for most of the time, spelling presents problems because of the contrasts between the sounds of letters or groups of letters, and the various ways they can be written down. For example, the words (knew and new) have the same pronunciation (/nju:/), which makes it difficult for learners to spell correctly. All in all, spelling is a fascinating aspect of the English language. It involves various linguistic elements such as orthography, phonology, morphology, and phonics. Spelling is not just about memorization; it's about understanding the underlying rules and patterns of the English language. With practice and perseverance, EFL learners can unlock the secrets of spelling and become a proficient speller.

1.2. Spelling Within Writing Competency

Undoubtedly, learning new words along with their spellings, even in people's native tongues, is a constant process that exceeded the amounts of class time to a person's lifetime (Adoniou, 2018). As such, in learning foreign language, EFL learners are required to extensively double their efforts in order to enhance their spelling skills. Although the process of spelling learning is to some extent learner-based task, spelling mastery is not merely a mental collection of individual lexical items as learning spelling of foreign language is linked to a teacher's collections of difficult words, and learners' perception of those difficulties.

Besides, Galuschka et al., (2020: 15) confirm that methodology of spelling teaching/learning have been ignored by linguists, applied linguists and language teachers. Accordingly, on methodological and interpretative grounds, the meta-analytic literature on spelling-focused instruction and reading skills has lately been questioned, which heightens the need for more research to verify the efficacy of such instructional methods.

Looking for approaches to enhance spelling capacities, especially among EFL learners, researchers like Shintani, Ellis and Suzuki (2014) argue that EFL teaching methods should be oriented to cover the main spelling errors caused by the non-phonetic aspect of parts of the English language. At the same time, apart from the regular sounded elements, English classes should be targeted to teaching spelling in order to reassure students and support them with knowledge, understanding, while dispelling any misconceptions about the link between phonetic sounds of English and their written representations.

1.3. TEFL Spelling Teaching Approaches

In the Grammar-Translation language teaching methodology, which was commonly used in the past for teaching foreign languages, spelling was typically taught through a focus on memorization and translation Karakaş (2019). He also argues that in the structural approach, vocabulary played a significant role. Engaging in spelling teaching, teachers would provide students with lists of vocabulary words to memorize, often along with their translations. These lists would include both the target language words and their corresponding translations in the native language. While this approach provided students with a solid foundation in understanding the structure of the language, it often lacked practicality. Students may have struggled to apply the rules and patterns they learned to spell unfamiliar or irregular words.

In the Direct Method spelling was taught in a more integrated and contextualized manner compared to the Grammar-Translation approach. The Direct Method focused on immersing students in the target language and promoting oral communication. While spelling was still an important aspect, it was approached differently. Visual and auditory recognition; spelling direct association with objects and actions was a channel to teach. Pictures and physical objects were used to demonstrate concrete vocabulary through the use of simple and familiar things such as objects in the classroom or clothing to relate vocabulary with reality Karakaş (2019). The Direct Method emphasized the connection between sounds and letters. Students were

introduced to the phonetic system of the target language, learning the sounds and corresponding letters or letter combinations. This phonetic approach helped students develop an understanding of the sound-symbol correspondence, which in turn supported their spelling skills.

To help students excel in spelling, educators employ various teaching approaches, the situational approach focuses on creating meaningful contexts that students can relate to when learning and practicing spelling. Accordingly, spelling words are presented in real-life scenarios, allowing students to understand and apply them in context. This approach enhances students' understanding of word meanings, usage, and spelling patterns, making the learning process more engaging and memorable. For example,

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach emphasizes the importance of using language in authentic contexts, allowing students to engage in real-life situations where spelling plays a crucial role (Qasserras, 2023, p. 763). By integrating spelling practice into communicative tasks, students are able to connect spelling to meaning, increasing their language skills holistically. One key feature of CLT is the emphasis on error correction and feedback. Instead of focusing solely on correct spelling, teachers also address common spelling errors and provide explanations and strategies for improvement. This helps students develop a better understanding of spelling rules and patterns, enabling them to apply this knowledge in their writing and communication.

1.4. TEFL Strategies of Spelling Learning

The literature suggests three spelling learning techniques to maximize the learners' spelling acquisition: 1) Targeted Practice, 2) Mnemonic Devices, 3), and Technology-Based Tools. It is argued that learners can and would benefit from a structured or directional approach to spelling and pronunciation as it is reasonable to claim that explicit instruction would raise orthographic and phonetic awareness of EFL learners.

1.4.1. Targeted Practice

Target practice involves aiming at a specific target, just like an archer aiming at a bullseye. Instead of arrows, you will be using words

as your ammunition. By correctly spelling the words, you hit your targets and improve your spelling accuracy. Target practice in spelling enhancement's classes encompasses specific techniques like; regular reading, retelling a text, word lists and cover, copy, and compare strategy (Alshahrani, 2019, p. 39). Firstly, regular reading engages EFL learners to extensive reading practice where they were exposed to wide range of words, helping them internalize correct spelling patterns and develop a strong vocabulary. The aforementioned strategy goes hand by hand with retelling a text.

Retelling a text and extracting keywords; is not simply regurgitating information, it also requires active engagement within a text, critical thinking, and the ability to communicate key ideas effectively. By regularly using this strategy, EFL students will develop stronger comprehension and analysis skills, which will benefit you in various confusing spelling situations.

Creating personalized word lists and using flashcards are other modes of targeted practice strategies. They can aid in memorizing commonly misspelled words and reinforcing correct spelling patterns. In addition, prepare for a cover copy compare in session, the teacher selects up to 10 spelling words, sight words for the student to practice during that session and writes those words as correct models into the left column of that cover, copy, and compare worksheet.

1.4.2. Mnemonic Devices

Mnemonic devices are powerful tools that can help EFL learners to enhance their spelling memory and retain information more effectively (Alshahrani, 2019, p. 39). These clever memory aids leverage associations and patterns to create mental shortcuts, making it easier to recall important spelling and details when learners need them most. Mnemonic devices encompass the followings:

1.4.2.1. Acronyms and Acrostics

Acronyms and acrostics are powerful mnemonic devices that can help students remember information more easily. These techniques utilize the first letter of each word to create a memorable acronym or acrostic phrase. By associating complex information with

a simple and memorable word or phrase, students can recall information more effectively.

1.4.2.2. Visualisation Technique

Visualization is a powerful technique that can greatly improve spelling skills. By creating mental images of words and their correct spellings, students can enhance their ability to remember and accurately reproduce those spellings. Here's one way how teachers can use visualization to improve your spelling:

Choose a Word: Select a word that you want to improve your spelling of. It can be a word that you frequently misspell or a word that you find challenging.

Study the Word: Take a moment to study the word closely. Look at the letters, their arrangement, and any patterns or unique features of the word.

Visualize the Word: Close your eyes and create a mental image of the word in your mind. Imagine the letters floating in space or forming a clear and vivid image. Pay attention to the shape, size, and color of the letters.

Spell the Word: Mentally spell out the word, letter by letter, while visualizing each letter in your mind. Focus on the correct order and arrangement of the letters. Take your time and visualize each letter clearly.

Associate Meaning: Connect the word to its meaning or context. Visualize the word in a relevant context or create a mental image that represents the meaning of the word. This association can help reinforce the correct spelling in your memory.

Practice and Reinforce: Repeat the visualization process several times, gradually increasing the speed and accuracy of your mental spelling. You can also practice writing the word down while visualizing the correct spelling.

Apply in Context: Use the word in sentences or contexts where it is appropriate. Visualize the word as you write or type it, ensuring that you spell it correctly.

Review and Reflect: Regularly review the words you have practiced and reflect on your progress. Take note of any

improvements or areas that still need work. Adjust your visualization techniques accordingly.

1.4.2.3. Word Association

The technique depends on creating connections between new information and existing knowledge, word association techniques facilitate the recall of word spelling. Here is one example of effective word spelling association. Take the verb “impute”; using word association technique, the clue for this first definition is hidden in this word itself. Teacher asks the student to read the verb impute as “I’m putting” (existing knowledge), I am putting it on you. If I lay the responsibility or blame of something on you, I am imputing a failure to the person (new information).

1.4.3. Technology-Based Tools

Although many scholarly works argued that social media devices have interrupted spelling capacities, and rendered spelling skills obsolete. (Wilson, 2018, p. 152), computers and technology prove to grant a series of tools and resources that can enhance language learning in various ways. There are numerous online platforms, websites, and applications designed specifically for EFL language learning in order to offer interactive lessons and spelling practices. Here are some of them.

1.5. Spell-Checkers

Utilizing spell-checkers available in word processing software or web browsers can help identify and correct spelling errors in real-time. Using a spell-checker can provide several benefits. It can catch simple typographical errors, such as accidentally transposing letters or omitting them altogether. It can also highlight more complex spelling mistakes that may go unnoticed to the writer's eye. By offering alternative word options, a spell-checker allows the user to choose the correct spelling in context.

1.6.. Spelling Apps and Games

To make spelling more enjoyable and engaging, there are various spelling apps and games available. These tools not only make learning fun but also provide opportunities to practice and improve spelling abilities. Here are a few amazing spelling apps and games that

can help enhance your spelling skills: Word Brain, Spell Tower, Hangman and Word Scapes.

2. Methodology

The present paper adopted an exploratory approach to explain the ways first year students develop their spelling skills. This work aims at analysing the different techniques used by first year students at the department of English language, University of Ghardaia, Algeria, to learn spelling and enhance their spelling capacities.

The problematic of the research is that spelling shortage hampers EFL students to perform well in language learning, especially in writing-based modules. Learners are attempting to find out better ways to better their spelling acquisition.

The work looks forwards to tackle the following research questions:

1. What puts the students incapable if acquiring adequate spellings?

2. What are the effective solutions used in enhancing spelling acquisition?

It is assumed that the students find hindering to acquire difficult vocabulary spellings, and this is due to the inadequate strategies they use in learning spellings.

2. 1. Participants

A group of 25 first year English students (Group 3) at the department of English, University of Ghardaia during 2023/2024 academic year participated in this study.

2.2. Data Collection

The empirical section of the study was headed through a semi-structured questionnaire administered to the participants to obtain information about their opinions, strategies, and choices to tackle spelling deficiencies. The questionnaire encompasses ten closed-ended questions and one open-ended question, and it is divided into three sections. The first section is about the students' opinions towards spelling learning; the second is about the strategies the students use to learn spelling. And the third section is about the students' choices in learning spelling. It should be stated that in many cases percentages have been used in rounded-off figures for better convenience.

2.2.1. Questionnaire' Sections

Section One: Learners' opinions about spelling acquisition

Question 1: How significant is correct spelling in learning English?

Table 1. The significance of Correct Spelling in English Language Learning

| very important | important | not important |
|----------------|-----------|---------------|
| 100% | 0% | 0% |

There is an over majority agreement among the learners about the significance of correct spelling in EFL language learning. All of them (100%) assume that correct spelling is very significant in learning English.

Question 2. How difficult is spelling learning?

Table 2. Spelling Learning Difficulty

| very easy | easy | difficult | very difficult |
|-----------|------|-----------|----------------|
| 10% | 12% | 40% | 38% |

More than half of the students (40% + 38%) think that spelling learning is difficult. The students' views can be reflected in their productive skills where many of them face deficiencies in using the right spelling especially for confusing words in written expression.

Question 3. Are you pleased with the means you use in learning spelling?

Table 3. Learners' Satisfaction of the Spelling Learning Means

| very pleased | Pleased | not pleased |
|--------------|---------|-------------|
| 10% | 30% | 60% |

More than half of the students (60%) think the means selected in learning spelling not satisfying. The issue reason behind this status is the unvaried means selected in learning/teaching spelling. The situation should suggest the instructors to seek more efficient means of the spelling learning/teaching system.

Section Two: Strategies of spelling Learning

Question 4: Which of the following strategies/techniques you think is more effective in spelling learning?

Table 4. The Effectiveness of spelling Learning Strategies

| | | | |
|------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Retelling a text | personalize d word list | Acronyms Acrostics | Spelling Apps |
| 15% | 42% | 11% | 32% |

The suggestions provided in the table above are some of the familiar strategies and techniques to teach/learn spelling. 42% of the participants declare that personalized word list is effective. 32% go for spelling apps. 15% assume that they consider retelling a text more effective. Just 11 opt for acronyms acrostics.

Question 5: What is the best mean to enhance spelling? If you choose 'other', mention it, please.

Table 5. Participants' Best Means in Spelling Learning

| Target strategies | Mnemonics | Technology-based | other |
|-------------------|-----------|------------------|-------|
| 48% | 22% | 30% | 0% |

(48%) of the students consider target strategies the best mean in spelling learning. The others (30%) opt for technology-based strategies, while 22% assume that mnemonics are the best.

Question 6: Do you develop spelling mastery outside the class setting? If so, mention the mean(s), please.

Table 6. Students' Developing Spelling Mastery Outside the Classroom

| | |
|-----|-----|
| yes | no |
| 60% | 40% |

The results show that (60%) the students tend to learn vocabulary outside the classroom through different ways. Portion from (60%) mention that they watch movies with subtitles and download lyrics of songs. (40%) say that don't develop their spelling skills outside the class.

Section Three: EFL Learners' Preferences in Spelling Acquisition

Question 7: What do you do when meeting a confused spelling?

Table 7. Students' Techniques Adopted when Confusing Spelling

| | | |
|---------------------------------|---|------------|
| Check the meaning in Dictionary | Associate the new meaning with prerequisite | Ask Others |
| 60% | 20% | 20% |

The majority of the students 60% tend to check the meaning in dictionary when they face confusing spelling. 20% of them associate the new meaning with prerequisite, and equally 20% say that need to ask their peers.

Question 8: Do you agree that spelling learning should be concentrated in the classroom setting?

Table 8. Spelling Learning Priority

| | | | |
|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| strongly agree | agree | disagree | strongly disagree |
| 70% | 30% | 0% | 0% |

The results displayed on the table show that all the students (70% + 30%) tend to concentrate in spelling learning within the classroom.

Question 9: Which among the following language skills do you think is more useful in learning spelling?

Table 9. The Usefulness of Language Skills in Spelling Learning

| | | | |
|-----------|----------|---------|---------|
| listening | speaking | reading | writing |
| 3% | 7% | 60% | 30% |

Sixty percent (60%) of them go for reading, while 30% opt for writing. Only 7% think that speaking is useful in vocabulary learning, and 3% go for listening.

This shows that participants are aware of the targeted skills in the process of spelling acquisition.

Question 10 is an open-ended question asking the students to provide suggestions that seem to them useful in spelling learning.

These are some of the students' views and suggestions:

One of the students says that dictionaries are very useful in spelling learning, Check word origins in the dictionary. Knowing the origin of a word can help you understand its spelling. For example, the word "psychology" comes from the Greek word "psyche," which means "soul"

Another answer may raise how to overcome difficulty of learners with spelling. "Chunk it. Break long words into smaller parts or syllables to make them easier to remember. For example, you can break down the word "accommodation" into "ac-commo-da-tion."

"I find it very useful to sound it out. Pronouncing a word slowly and carefully can help you identify its spelling. For example, the word "receipt" can be sounded out as "re-seet"

"I like draw a picture. Drawing a picture that represents a word can help you remember its spelling. For example, you could draw a picture of a "desert" to remember how to spell the word."

3. Results and Discussion

Relevant information was collected from the questionnaire. The results reveal that the learners are well aware of the significance of spelling mastery in EFL language learning. In addition, it can be explained that participants have various points of view in terms of spelling learning. Moreover, the results confirmed the research hypothesis which declared that the EFL students use various spelling learning strategies. It is advocated that the strategies and techniques adopted in spelling learning should be of multi-source basis.

Data analysis showed that reading and writing receptive skills are skills, are best sources of enhancing spelling competencies for the EFL learners, and spelling master support students' performance in reading and writing.

It can be deduced from the results of the study that the students tend to lean towards check the meaning in dictionary, associate the new meaning with their prerequisite when they spelling is confusing. Although checking the word in dictionaries seems to outdated way, EFL learners preferred to learn spelling from dictionaries. Technology-based strategies offered also easy-to-access online and offline linguistic resources. They are efficient and provide language users with an abundance of information. According to some students, electronic dictionaries, platforms, and websites provide learners with practically everything they need to know about the word they are looking up, including its definition, spelling, origins, grammar, alternative spellings, and collocation. Students of languages need to take full benefit of the accessibility of these new gadgets and accept the chance to own smartphones and their applications.

Conclusion

This article is a research project that aims to investigate Algerian students' beliefs and perspectives on the spelling-learning strategies they utilized. The survey included only First-year English students from the University of Ghardaia's English Language Department. To this goal, the study used a mixed research strategy in which the students were given a semi-structured questionnaire. It is worth noting that the students believed spelling was very significant in foreign language learning. It is also possible to conclude that the teaching/learning syllabus did not place a high value on input skills such as writing and reading. And there is an occasion to question the need of these receptive abilities in order to expose students to adequate amounts of spelling activities during their sessions. It was also clear that the tactics employed to learn spelling were limited and consistent. Diversity repels monotony, and variation motivates EFL students. Again, one encouraging finding was that the students used electronic tools to learn spelling. They used electronic dictionaries, websites, and platforms to assist them enhance their spelling mastery.

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