

*How to Minimize our Pupils' Errors in  
English writing ?*

**كيف نقلل الأخطاء الكتابية لطلبتنا في اللغة الانكليزية ؟**

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### **1.1 Abstract**

The researcher , as a teacher of English , has noticed a lot of errors in pupils' writing which have negative effects on their performance in their exams , Therefore , this study aims at minimizing these errors .

The sample which was ( 14 ) pupils was taken from the 6<sup>th</sup> scientific grade ( the preparatory stage ) . The researcher used the technique" proofreading" in five types of tests . This technique which has never been applied in our schools link the two language skills : reading and writing . It motivates the pupils who have got fed up with the routine techniques used in our schools for a long time .

Finally the researcher used the percentage as a statistical instrument to draw his conclusions and make his recommendations and suggestions .

### **1 . 2 Introduction**

Teaching is an open – ended process. It is the arena when teachers compete with one another to transmit the knowledge and serve their pupils. It is an extremely laborious process , especially in teaching a foreign language , i.e. , English in non – English speaking countries. In short , it is a bittersweet process ; it is sweet when language teachers witness their pupils progressing in acquiring the foreign language and that will , surely , give them pleasure because they realize that they have

succeeded in their profession , but it is bitter when they fail to create a good atmosphere for interaction and overcome the difficulties their pupils face and , of course , this requires patience and tolerance.

Consequently , language teachers should be patient and tolerant and not to reproach or punish their pupils when they make errors. Thus , teachers should regard learners' errors as natural outcomes of the learning process. Errors making should be encouraged rather than discouraged , because making errors is a sign of attempts to learn on the part of the learners. This fact has driven Dulay and Burt ( 1974 )<sup>(1)</sup> to entitle their paper " You Can't learn without Goofing". A sweeping glance at Corder's ( 1967 )<sup>(2)</sup> seminal article " The Significance of Learners' Errors " will prove how important the study of error is.

Errors are only damaging when they are neglected and not analyzed and dealt with in a proper way. However , teachers should not neglect the errors. They should analyze them and try to find out new techniques or even innovate ones in order to alleviate them , because successful teaching as Genesee and Upshur ( 1996 : 266 ) mention is creative , on – going process.

### 1 . 3 The Statement of the Problem

In the 1980's , the researcher taught English as a foreign language in a secondary school.<sup>(3)</sup> He noticed that his pupils were speaking English satisfactorily , but they did not do well in the exams. He concluded from this that most of them faced difficulties in the mechanics of writing and spelling ; therefore , he decided to investigate this. For this purpose , he made a quiz for all his pupils.

The pupils were asked to write down their answers for the oral question which was , " What is your name ? " .

Surprisingly , the pupils' errors were the same in the 1<sup>st</sup> , 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> intermediate classes and the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> preparatory classes. Most of them did not differentiate between "my" and " may " , they did not begin their answers with a capital letter and

end them with a full – stop , and they did not write the word " name " in the correct spelling.

The results of that pilot test have paved the way to this paper which undertakes the task of how to minimize our pupils' errors in English writing.

#### **1 . 4 Theoretical Background**

Language teachers have to be familiar with all theoretical considerations of language teaching and these considerations should be submitted to the circumstances in which the teaching process takes place. These practical considerations such as the class size , the number of the pupils inside the classroom , evening or day classes , the availability of cassette–recorders , computers , teaching aids and the convenience of the school buildings ( Genesee and Upshur: 1996 : 30) should be taken into an account in order to shape the outlines of the teaching style that ought to be followed to achieve the desired ultimate goal.

In the field of methodology ( Richards : 1974 : 20 ) there have been two schools of thought in respect of the learners' errors. The first school emphasizes on accuracy , i.e. , if teachers follow a perfect teaching method , errors would never be committed in the first place and the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of our teaching techniques. The second one affirms that we live in an imperfect world and consequently errors will always occur in spite of our best efforts. Therefore , teachers should concentrate on techniques for dealing with errors after they have occurred.

McDonough and Shaw ( 2003 ) mention that the traditional type of teaching , i.e. , the first school produced " structurally competent students " who were often " communicatively incompetent ". Nowadays , we can say that modern or current type of teaching has produced communicatively competent students who are often structurally incompetent.

Both schools have merits and demerits and FL teachers have to select the best principles that suit their pupils from the both in order to achieve the desired ultimate goal.

### 1.5 The Current Techniques Used in Teaching Writing

Some techniques which are used in our schools in the field of writing prove themselves of no great use for pupils ; moreover , they have become distasteful.

One of the most common techniques used in our primary , intermediate and preparatory stages is this :

Fill in the blanks with correctly - spelt words :

- 1- go , going ; have , -----.
- 2- help , helps ; teach , -----.
- 3- law , lawyer ; science , -----.
- 4- take , took ; pay , -----.
- 5- slow , slowly ; happy , -----.
- 6- put on , take off ; borrow , -----.

This technique is practical for the pupils at the primary and intermediate stages , but it is impractical at the preparatory stage. At the preparatory stage , language teachers have to investigate and invest in their pupils' production in language , whether their pupils have a good command of the language ( spelling , mechanism of writing and linguistic accuracy ) or not. Furthermore , this technique has become boring and not motivating for them. They face this type in the primary , intermediate and preparatory stages. To us , this technique is an initial step in the development of the writing skill and should be replaced by more advanced techniques as early in the teaching process as early intermediate stage. As a result , most of pupils falter in doing this technique despite the fact that it is easy and many of its examples are recycled in almost every exam and every stage of education. For example " have , having " may be seen in the primary , intermediate and preparatory stages.

Another technique used in writing is this :

Re-write the following sentence using capital letters and punctuation marks where necessary :

i go to baghdad twice a month

In this technique , the cases are limited and obvious. These cases should be examined within a passage , not in discrete sentences. Thus, many of the punctuation marks taught are becoming less and less frequently used in common everyday writing of our pupils.

### **1 . 6 Why is writing difficult ?**

Logically , the skill of English writing , as compared with other language skills, is very difficult. Richards and Renandya ( 2002 : 303 ) stress this fact when they mention that writing is highly complex. In order to improve our pupils' ability in writing , a number of sub-skills ought to be mastered such as : correct spelling , capitalization , punctuation , indentation , besides the linguistic system.

The major difficulty from which the pupils suffer is misspelling. It is undeniable that nearly all of the pupils misgive from dictation tests and spelling exercises , because they think that spelling is a dilemma from them. This phenomenon is not only Iraqi , but it is also international.

Such problems inherent in English have led Hutchinson and Waters ( 1987 : 31 ) to decide that learners of English need to spend more time on the spelling , tenses and countable and uncountable distinction.

The resultant of all these difficulties in writing is that our pupils lose marks and fail to pass written exams easily.

Consequently , exams should tend to highlight the importance of spelling , mechanism of writing and grammatical accuracy. ( Bungess and Head : 2005 : 64 – 70 ).

Our duty as language teachers is to help our pupils to build their self – confidence and to be more concerned with how to minimize their errors before language development tends to freeze and errors become fossilizable and our pupils cannot get rid of them easily.

Spelling errors in English are due to the following points which should be taken into language teachers' considerations in order for them to be covered in the classroom activities through a variety of techniques as remedial exercises.

1) Words which have the same spelling , but different pronunciation. They are called " Homographs". For examples : lead, bow , minute , close and use. ( Wales : 1989 : 220 ).

2) Words with the same pronunciation , but different spelling. They are called " Homophones". For examples : made , maid ; seen , scene ; pale , pail ; past , passed ; and prophet , profit ( Ibid : 220 ).

Here , it is interesting to mention the following dialogue in which the listener misunderstood the word "too". S/he thought it was "two" because both have the same pronunciation.

A : I love you.

B : I love you , too.

A : I love you three.

3) Letters which are written , but not pronounced. They are called "silent". For examples : come , comb , knee , eight , wrist , dawn , debt , muscles and psychology.

4) A combination of letters producing different sounds. For example : the letters ( ea ) are usually pronounced / i: / in words like : leave , beat , seat , meat ... etc. ; they are pronounced / e / in other words like : bread , sweat , ready , weather , death , ... etc. , and pronounced / ei / in others such as break , great and steak.

Another example , the letters "ch" are usually pronounced / tʃ / in words such as chance , chair , branch , match ... etc. , pronounced / k / in words like : school , ache , chemistry , stomach, character ... etc. , while they are pronounced / ʃ / in machine , parachute , moustache , Chicago and Chic.

5) Letters or a combination of letters which are pronounced in some words , but they are silent in others. For instance : draught , drought; sign , signature ;prohibit , prohibition ; health , smooth ; high ; though ,cough ...etc.

6) Single letter which may produce different sounds in different words , for examples :

sugar , gas , busy ; arrived , united , passed ; centre , clinic , ocean.

### 1 . 7 The Suggested Technique

The suggested technique is called "proofreading". Pupils are provided with a text involving a number of deliberate errors. It contains misspelt words , punctuation errors , indentation errors , linguistic errors , or extra words. In this technique , there is often overlap between the testing of reading and the testing of writing (Bungess and Head : 2005: 28 – 29 ) .

Thus , this technique helps pupils to master the mechanism of writing , spelling and grammar.

Teachers can introduce this technique to their pupils at the preparatory stage gradually. They have to spoonfeed it bit by bit as a psychotherapy.

Experience in teaching has led us to realize that a technical discussion of errors with pupils is not fully effective. Thus , there is a pressing need for practical and vital remedial exercises concerning this aspect to uproot these obstacles that lie in pupils' path and impede their progress in the target language , working

under the umbrella of the famous saying " Example is better than precept " .

Most pupils claim that this type of techniques makes them focus on the problems of writing because it is an integrated technique of writing. This technique may be used to enhance pupils' motivation and interesting by making into a race among the pupils by timing the pupils' finishing and results. It is also effective in developing speed reading.

Proofreading can be used to work with other sub – techniques to achieve the goals such as :

### **1 . 7 . 1 Spelling- race**

In this technique , the class is divided into two teams and the board is divided into two halves. A representative from each of two teams stands at the board with a board-marker pen or chalk. The teacher says a word and the representatives have to write it quickly. The first team to get the word on the board with its correct spelling earns a point.

The game continues with different pupils taking turns to be their team representatives. This takes 5 – 7 minutes. It can be practised twice a week for five of the new words. ( Adopted from Thornburg : 2002 : 104 ).

### **1 . 7 . 2 Misspelt Words**

In this technique , pupils are provided with misspelt words on the board and they are asked to write these words with correct spelling in their exercise-books. The words can be selected from the syllabus. For examples : sceince , sychology , lawer , sailler , freind , ... etc.

### **1 . 7 . 3 Grammatical Inaccuracies**

Grammatical inaccuracies can have negative effects on the overall quality of pupils' writing. Thus , EFL teachers ought to focus on pupils' most frequent errors , especially those that affect the meaning. They should not ignore accuracy. There



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should be a balance between fluency and accuracy. ( Richards and Renandya : 2002 : 304 ).

### **1 . 8 The Aim of the Tests**

The tests designed aim at investigating the effects of using proofreading technique on minimizing EFL learners' errors in writing.

### **1 . 9 The Sample of the study .**

Twenty – six pupils from the sixth scientific Grade at Al – Sharif Al – Radhi Preparatory School For Boys ( Diala Governorate ) were exposed to a diagnostic pretest ( 2010 – 2011 ). The purpose is to exclude those who are top. Thus , fourteen pupils who are bottom and inbetween constitute the sample of the study. These fourteen pupils were exposed to five tests in proofreading ( see the appendix ). The time of the administration of each one was 15 minutes.

### **1 . 10 The Construction of the Tests :**

The tests had been designed by the researcher from the pupils' text-book ( 6<sup>th</sup> Scientific Grade ) before the research made. They were exposed to a jury<sup>(4)</sup> of five experienced teachers of English to decide their suitability. The suggestions of those teachers were taken into consideration in the making of the final versions. The sequence of the tests were chosen by a lottery plan. ( see Table –1– and the appendix ).

## 1 . 11 Data Analysis

*Table – 1 –  
Types of Errors made in the tests designed*

<u>Test</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>indentation</u>	<u>spelling</u>	<u>punctuation</u>	<u>Capitalization</u>
<u>Grammar</u>					
1 <sup>st</sup> test	16/1/2011	1	3	1	1
	4				
2 <sup>nd</sup> test	25/1/2011	1	3	1	2
	3				
3 <sup>rd</sup> test	6/3 / 2011	1	2	1	2
	4				
4 <sup>th</sup> test	17/3/2011	1	2	2	1
	4				
5 <sup>th</sup> test	31/3/2011	1	3	1	2
	3				

*Table – 2 –  
The Percentage of Errors :*

<u>Test</u>	<u>indentation</u>	<u>spelling</u>	<u>punctuation</u>	<u>Capitalization</u>
<u>Grammar</u>				
1 <sup>st</sup> test	57 %	71 %	92 %	42 %
				57 %
2 <sup>nd</sup> test	50 %	40 %	42 %	21 %
	46,5 %			
3 <sup>rd</sup> test	42 %	26 %	39 %	7 %
				48 %
4 <sup>th</sup> test	35,5%	24 %	35 %	7 %
				39 %
5 <sup>th</sup> test	14 %	25 %	35 %	7 %
				40 %

Table ( 2 ) reveals that the mechanics of writing and grammatical points are problematic ; therefore , pupils make a lot of errors. More emphasis should be placed on all above-mentioned aspects , i.e. , further continued practice as a remedial

work. In the process of time and with continued practice ; their errors will reduce.

### **1 . 12 Conclusions**

According to the results obtained from the study , the following conclusions have been drawn :

- 1- This technique has proved to be a practical proven instrument for minimizing EFL pupils' errors in writing.
- 2- English spelling and the mechanics of writing are totally capricious.
- 3- Grammatical errors outnumber other types of errors.
- 4- When pupils are actively involved in writing , their errors gradually fade away.
- 5- The pupils react positively to this technique.

### **1 . 13 Recommendations and Suggestions**

- 1- The technique of proofreading ought to be included in both school and ministerial exams of the preparatory stage.
- 2- It is preferable that language teachers give their pupils some rules about spelling which equip them with a handy tool when writing. Thornbury ( 2002 : 155 ) states that research studies have shown that as many as eight out every ten words are spelt according to a regular pattern and that only three percent of words are so unpredictable that they have to be learned by rote. Rules which help correct spelling should be given priority and taught with adequate practice with their exceptions to make their application automatic.
- 3- Concerning grammatical errors , EFL teachers have to seize every opportunity in speaking , reading and writing to explain linguistic rules briefly.
- 4- It is advisable to expose pupils to as many written exams as possible and teachers ought to correct or underline every error the pupils make and put them on a list of common errors in order to discuss them in the class.

In general , it is universally agreed that writing is a difficult

skill ; therefore , pupils need further continued practice in it ,

especially those who are slow and careless pupils.

- 5- The global spread of English in all fields of life such as business transaction , communication , policy , scientific researches , and last but not least , the global network with its various academic , social and entertainment sites necessitates involve pupils in learning process , especially in writing.
- 6- There should be a balance between fluency and accuracy in the teaching process of English as a foreign language when school environment is the only medium where pupils acquire the target language.

### **Appendix**

Language teachers can select a passage from their pupils' textbook or from unseen passages and make a number of errors ( usually ten errors ) in spelling , capitalization , indentation , punctuation and grammar and ask their pupils to re-write that passage correctly.

The following are the final versions of the tests :

#### ***The First Test***

in the marshes villages houses is maid of reed and reedmats. every house in the village stands on its own platform on the surface of the water. This houses are made during the hat season when the water level of the marshes is law.

#### ***The Second Test***

the following are some geometry figures with thier definitions

- A line is a one-dimension figure having length only .
- An angle is the space between two meet lines.
- A solid has three-dimension : length , wideth , and hight .

#### ***The Third Test***

for a current account the bank clark gives you abook of printing cheques and ask for copy of your sign sothat he will be abel to recognize your cheque.

#### ***The Fourth Test***

a parson who cannot breath is in danger of suffocate or asphyxia . this my be cause by : drowning when the patient lung are filled

with water instead of air ; swallowing the wrong way ; breathing poison gas or disabling of the breathing muscle.

### *The Fifth Test*

first aid is the branch of medicine science in which treatment is giving to pupils suffering from accidents or from sudden illnesses . It is call

"first aid" because treat must given at once.

### *Abstract in Arabic*

#### *كيف نقلل الأخطاء الكتابية لطلبتنا في اللغة الانكليزية؟*

رصد الباحث من خلال عمله مدرسا للغة الانكليزية كثرة الاخطاء الكتابية في اللغة الانكليزية لدى عموم الطلبة ، مما يؤثر سلبياً على ادائهم لامتحانات ، لذا هدف البحث الحالي التقليل من هذه الاخطاء .

بلغت عينة البحث (14) طالباً من المرحلة الاعدادية / السادس العلمي ، استخدم الباحث الاختبار في نصوص انكليزية في خمسة نماذج امتحانية في مدد زمنية متباعدة بعد أن عرضت هذه النماذج على خبراء لتقدير ملاءمتها ، استخدمت في هذه الاختبارات تقنية Proofreading التي لم تطبق في مدارسنا حالياً والتي تقتضي إحداث اخطاء معينة كأن تكون عشرة أخطاء توزع ما بين اخطاء إملائية ، قواعدية ، في الحروف الكبيرة ، نقص في علامات التنقيط ... الخ ، والطلب من الطلبة قراءتها بترو لتعيين هذه الاخطاء لغرض اعادة كتابة النص بشكل صحيح من قبلهم .

اهمية هذه التقنية تكمن في انها تربط ما بين القراءة وبين الكتابة وتحفز الطلبة وتشجذ همهم لإثبات ذاتهم أمام أقرانهم ، لأنها كسر للتقنيات الرتيبة المستخدمة منذ عقود خلت.

أخيرا استخدم الباحث النسبة المئوية وسيلة احصائية في استخدام النتائج ثم توصل الى بعض التوصيات والمقترحات .

**Notes :**

- ( 1 ) see : Error Analysis , *Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition* . Edited by Jack C. Richards. (1974) Longman Group Limited , p : 95 .
- ( 2 ) Ibid : p : 19 .
- ( 3 ) The researcher was a teacher of English at Kanaan Co-educational Secondary school. ( Diala Governorate ). A secondary school includes both intermediate and preparatory classes.
- ( 4 ) The jury were :
- 1- Ali M. Naji. ( Al-Sharif Al-Radhi Preparatory School ).
  - 2- Anwar F. Darwash ( Al-Markaziyah Preparatory School ).
  - 3- Hamid A. Saltan ( Al-Markaziyah Preparatory School ).
  - 4- Mahmoud H. Ali (Al-Sharif Al-Radhi Preparatory School ).
  - 5- Qassim Aboud (Al-Sharif Al-Radhi Preparatory School).

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