PERSPECTIVES ON THE LEARNING AND TEACHING OF SPELLING

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ABSTRACT

English Language Teaching, in the past, has given very little emphasis on spelling and the teaching and research of it. This paper starts by providing a background on the teaching of spelling. A brief history of the developments in the teaching of spelling from the 1930s to 1940s is followed by an illustration on why there are important issues on spelling that need to be addressed from within the Arab context. An overview of research done on Arab learners spelling is discussed. The main part of this review which discusses the impact of the ideas of Piaget and Vygotsky on: i) learning, in general; and ii) the teaching and learning of spelling are presented. This is then followed by a critical appraisal of recent research done on the teaching of spelling where the influences of constructivism in the teaching of it are evident. The article concludes with implications of these constructivist movements in the teaching of spelling on learners.

Keywords: Constructivism theory, Piaget, EFL learners, learning of spelling


1.0 INTRODUCTION: A HISTORICAL VIEW

Historically the teaching of spelling also involved the teaching of pronunciation and grammar. In the 19th Century wordlists for study were common and it involved sometimes up to 50 words a week which had to be memorized. The study of words resembled that of the study of words in Greek and Latin. In the early 20th Century wordlists remained, with up to 50 words per week but sophistication began to creep in – one or two syllable words were introduced before four or five syllable words. The biggest development in spelling recorded in the early 20th Century was the beginning of research on spelling. People began to wonder if rote-learning of wordlists did actually contribute to the learning of spelling or whether it was a waste of time. Many began to question this sort of learning and whether the learning of words should be contextual and meaningful. It was only after the 1930s that researchers began to organize spelling lists along the most frequently words used in reading and writing (Rinsland, 1945).
Hanna, Hodges, and Hanna (1971) states that new memory-based learning strategies evolved in the 1930s-1940s period and researchers called this a “study” method where students first looked at a word, pronounced the word, closed their eyes and visualized the word, opened their eyes and wrote the word, checked the spelling of the word and repeated all these steps until they had written the word correctly several times. During this time, instructional investigations favoured a test-study-test method rather than a study-test approach. Pre-tests also determined individual differences among students (Horn, 1967). The main features of spelling derived from historic research suggest the following:

i. Learning spelling of words from wordlists is more efficient than learning from contexts.

ii. Creating spelling words from frequency lists like the 4000 most commonly words used is better than creating words from reading content.

iii. The study of words should be done in small amounts weekly rather than students given a large list to study at one go.

iv. The “look, say, cover, write, check” study method should be taught and practiced.

The most common belief that teachers had in the past was that words can be studied through repetition. Words were selected from a wordlist of frequently used words. The belief was that the most 4000 most frequently used words in the English Language would be the “security blanket” for learners – most teachers believed that knowing these 4000 words would enable learners to comprehend texts up to an astonishing 98%.

1.1 Why the seriousness of attention on spelling and what it means from the context of Arab learners

Spelling has been shown to significantly affect students’ written performance (Warda, 2005) and students with low spelling confidence and skills are expected to write less and without much authority than spellers who are more confident. English spelling has been found to be affecting Arab learners considerably (Al-Jarf, 2010; Bowen, 2011). A significant number of research conducted on error analysis of spelling revealed that Arab learners have been severely handicapped by their inadequacies in spelling (Albalawi, 2016; Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, & Gaudel, 2015; Al-Saudi, 2013). Researchers have assumed that the linguistic differences between English and Arabic writing systems have contributed to the problems learners face. Also, unlike English, the Arabic writing system is considered regular, which means there is consistency between its sounds and letters. Al-Jayousi (2011) and Ahmad (2013) claim that the irregularity of the English Spelling System could be the reason why Arab learners commit too many errors in spelling. Al-Jayousi (2011) stated that the spelling errors of Arab EFL learners can be grouped into four categories:

i. Lack of connection between sounds and letters which result in omission of silent letters in words like knew and light.

ii. Mother tongue interference – substitution of the /p/ sound for the /b/-bark for park

iii. Lack of knowledge on spelling rules and exceptions to rules – halves, party instead of halves/parties.

Alhaisoni et al. (2015) analysed English spelling errors of 122 Saudi male and female EFL learners and found that the errors could be categorized into omission, substitution, insertion and transposition. The total number of errors identified were 1189 and the most serious errors involved omission (462 errors, 35.6%) and substitution (429 errors, 34.9%). Most of the errors concerned wrong use of vowels and pronunciation. Albalawi (2016) reported on the spelling errors of 80 Saudi female EFL students who were given a writing as well as spelling test. Again, errors in omission was highest (59%) followed by errors in substitution (28.9%). Hameed’s (2016) study on Saudi students showed a concentration of errors around vowel sounds, diphthongs and words containing letters with silent sounds. The reports on spelling difficulties of Arab students show the seriousness of the matter and the need for researchers, materials developers and classroom teachers to seek possible solutions to these problems.

Much of the research findings show fundamental problems to the way spelling is taught. The methods of teaching have been traditional, emphasizing rote learning. It would be therefore important to look at new ways or maybe revisit two prominent figures in the past, Piaget and Vygotsky and review some of the ideas they have put forth.

2.0 CRITICAL DISCUSSION ON THE INFLUENCES OF PIAGET AND VYGOTSKY IN LEARNING

In present times, the teaching and learning of spelling and the literature attached to it suggest that spelling and vocabulary are interconnected. In this part of the discussion, the writer illustrates the main theoretical ideas connected to spelling and vocabulary, the first being that students learning of vocabulary and spelling can be linked to age and this thought comes from Piaget’s (1926) Theory of Cognitive Development. This was in contrast to earlier views that schooling or the extent of time learning spelling and vocabulary would be a bigger contributor to learning and acquisition. The second theoretical idea linked to spelling and vocabulary learning was Vygotsky’s (1962) Theory of constructivism which suggests spelling and vocabulary are best learnt when learners are exposed to tasks that require investigation, discovery and show a deep interest or focus on meaning. While Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development has reinforced the notion that learners are only ready to learn if they are ready for it (age being the factor), Vygotsky’s Theory of Constructivism has bigger implications on curricula and approaches to teaching spelling and vocabulary. Constructivism has changed the way spelling was taught.

Constructivism is basically a theory on how people learn, which says that learners construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experience and reflections of those experiences. This of course would have deep implications of pedagogy of the past, where teachers had lists of words that learners have to learn to spell and the way in which they had to learn these words was by rote-learning. There was no emphasis on the context of the use of the word. Words existed in isolation.

According to a study conducted by Anderson (2016), Constructivist Theory is founded on scientific study and observation with regards to how people tend to learn. The key idea behind this theory is that learning must be an active process where new ideas are constructed by learners themselves, they are not simply given information to rote-learn, and they develop new concepts, which are based on their past or current knowledge and
experience. The theory of constructivism has a broader base than education, from subsets of research within the fields of social psychology and cognitive psychology, with its roots in sociology, psychology, education, as well as philosophy (Fosnot, 2013). In addition, Wilson (2017) also found in his study that the precepts of adult learning as well as cognitive theory are linked closely to constructivism. Cognitive constructivism is derived from Piaget’s (1972) work that presents the process of learning as an act of assimilation, accommodation, as well as equilibrium. According to Rana, Ardichvili, and Polesello (2016) learning is likely to be successful if it is based on the previous experience of learners, which helps promote active learning. The learner is a self-directed learning organism which can diagnose his learning needs, and can translate these needs into the objectives of learning, and recognize as well as use the appropriate resources to accomplish these objectives, and evaluate how far these learning objectives have been achieved.

Kiraly’s (2014) concept of constructivism is that human learning is cognitively created by being built upon past information or knowledge. In this process, the learner selects and transforms information to create and develop ideas and make decisions. Fosnot (2013) also states that the conceptual growth of an individual comes from the sharing of the different viewpoints and the subsequent changes in the internal representations of the learner in response to those viewpoints and thus develops through collective experience. More meaningful learning takes place when the learner finds solutions to puzzles as part of the process of constructing knowledge, rather than only having input from textbooks or teachers as the basis of their knowledge which is received (passive) knowledge, rather than constructed (active) knowledge by the learner him/herself (Singer-Brodowski, 2017). In fact, the educator and the learner are involved in a Socratic dialogue, whereby the educator prompts the students to discover principles by themselves. Siemens, Dawson, and Lynch (2013) suggest that the key task of the educator in the learning process is to design the format of learning appropriate to the current state of knowledge of the learners.

Bhattacharjee (2015) presents a model of the constructive theory as a spiral, which provides a useful way to understand the dynamics of the theory. The inner ring of the spiral consists of learners. Inside the ring, the learners form a group that cooperates with the instructor, who acts as the mediator, helping the learners achieve their objectives. The teacher/mediator needs to make significant cognitive bridges to the learners’ zones of proximal development, i.e. their point at which the students need help to advance or the limits of their current knowledge through social communications (Muslim, 2014). Continuous assessment of learning continues throughout the learning process. As each new activity is experienced, the student utilizes past learning to expand his/her thoughts processes to incorporate the new data. Constructivist instructors urge students to always reflect on how an activity helps them increase their understanding. Through this overall process learners acquire the systems schema that helps them become master learners. The dynamic learning process gives learners the continually expanding ability for long lasting learning (Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009).

The constructivist instruction model depends on carefully thought out methods and scholastic standards, and instructors who are able to prepare students to become autonomous learners. The major task is to change the locus of control from the teacher (in traditional teaching methods) to the student, changing the students from detached learners to dynamic members in a community oriented learning situation (Kilday, Lenser, & Miller, 2016). Although some researchers have criticized the constructivism theory for neglecting the role of
the teacher as an expert, the key role of the teacher or instructor is to help students construct their knowledge themselves (Bush, 2008).

2.1 Influences of Piaget and Vygotsky in the teaching of spelling and vocabulary

Researchers have now contrasted approaches that are constructivism inspired with those that are traditional in orientation and have come up with a list of the differences between traditional and constructivist approaches in the teaching of spelling and vocabulary:

i. Traditional Methods begin with the teaching of parts of a whole and emphasizes basic skills while the constructivist teacher deals with big concepts and starts with the whole which expands to include the parts.

ii. The curriculum is strictly followed in the traditional classroom while the constructivist classroom allows for interruptions; student questions and student interest and likes are highly valued.

iii. Materials in the traditional classroom come in the form of textbooks or modules while the constructivist classroom uses the textbook and other material which is manipulative in nature.

iv. Repetition and rote-learning are ways of learning in a traditional class while interactive learning and building upon knowledge that learners already have is emphasized in the constructivist class.

v. Teachers in the traditional class teach and prescribe while those teaching under the influences of constructivism build dialogue with their students and help them construct their own knowledge.

vi. The teacher in the traditional class is also highly authoritative and his role is that of a director, while the teacher who adheres to constructivist ways is more of a negotiator and encourages interaction.

vii. The teacher of the traditional classroom puts emphasis on correct answers in assessment – very summative test and the product is the only focus, while the teacher in the constructivist class puts emphasis on classwork, observations as well as tests, where the process in building skills is bigger that the product (test).

viii. In the traditional class, knowledge is inert but in the constructivist one knowledge is dynamic, expandable and constantly in a state of flux with new experiences.

ix. In the traditional class students normally work alone but the teacher under the influences of constructivist theory invites pair and group work with a lot of interventions on the part of the teacher.

While spelling can be problematic especially at the lower levels (as it has been proven from Piaget’s (1972) Theory of Cognitive Development, that learners learn spelling only when they ready to learn), then who decides on selection of words for learning? Based on the literature, there are four sources where they are selected from: commercial textbooks, students’ content area reading curriculum, wordlists from the literature program and wordlists from themes in student writing programs.

There are three paradigms of spelling instruction as observed by Heald-Taylor (1998) and this meant three different ways of selecting words for instructional purposes. The first paradigm referred to as traditional was the way in which the words that need to be learnt were sourced from prescribed textbooks. Most teachers were pressed for time do this. This was
confirmed by Johnston (2001) who claimed that 93% of the teachers surveyed in his study claimed they used lists provided by course books/textbooks.

The second paradigm, known as the transitional allows for spelling, reading and writing to be synchronized (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004). In the transitional paradigm, learning to spell is based on the integration of phonetic, graphic and syntactic letter patterns to semantics. This means that spelling is interconnected with all of the students’ reading and writing across the curriculum. The emphasis here is that spelling is learnt within a meaningful context. The traditional and transitional paradigms are alike in some ways – both approaches depend on direct instruction, spelling rules, study techniques and tests (usually weekly). The transitional approach however differed from the traditional in that there were word study techniques used, such as word sorts and word games (Bear et al., 2004). Spelling lists are developed from formal textbooks, reading and writing resources and words covered in content courses. In the transitional approach, students are given a pre-test and they are only required to study the words they missed (did not know) in pre-test.

The third paradigm is called student-oriented and views the learning of spelling as developmental and places emphasis on learner reading and writing as the main sources for selecting words for spelling instruction (Heald-Taylor, 1998). Wordlists are derived solely out of students’ reading and writing. This is the theory that combines the influences of the Cognitive Developmental Theory (Piaget, 1926) and Social-Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1962). Maturity of spellers allowed them to inductively learn to spell from their broader experiences in reading and writing. This was supported by Krashen (1993) who reported that most words that people knew how to spell were learnt incidentally through reading.

3.0 RECENT ARGUMENTS ON THE INFLUENCES OF CONSTRUCTIVISM IN THE TEACHING OF SPELLING

Teachers influenced by constructivism theory are aware that students need to know the connection between prior knowledge and new knowledge (Coulson, Jacobson, Feltovich, & Spiro, 1991). It is crucial that teachers develop effective strategies that incorporate the concept of “situational Teaching” in spelling lessons. Situational teaching serves as a means for students to establish association between new and previous information. This helps to avoid writing problems such as spelling mistakes (Bonk & King, 2012). As part of the restructuring of education, teachers need to strive towards creating beneficial teaching atmospheres that meet the genuine demands and needs of the student. One way to create a situational teaching set up is for teachers to use multimedia in teaching-learning. For example, teachers can use programs in the multimedia room to showcase graphics and images that are more memorable and are associated to the word/text rather than having students memorize plain text only. Situational teaching permits English teaching to be more effective by creating an environment where students are less stressed and more enthused, and helps teachers complete teaching goals and improve students’ writing performance (Farrell, 2016). In most classrooms there are limited interactions or discussions between students and teachers. Students only play supporting roles (Stigler & Hiebert, 2009). In contrast, the students’ learning needs should be the main focus in class, while teachers should assist them or facilitate in improving the writing skill. For English Language Teaching, advocates of constructivism emphasize interaction as the key point for students to regain an interest in learning. If teachers only concentrated on completing their teaching tasks while ignoring
interaction, regardless of the student’s competence level, teaching and learning will continue
to be separated from each other.

With the recent efforts to bring awareness to Constructivism Theory while attempting
reform in English teaching curriculums, there was a significant role shift among teachers,
from those who bestow knowledge to those who became guides and facilitators to students.
The English Language Teaching interaction process can be broken down into two categories:
collaborations between teachers and students, and collaborations amongst students. This
process shows the shift in traditional teaching methods and what is lacking in undergraduate
education (Nie & Lau, 2010). English learning and English communication skills can be
developed upon with more interactions amongst students and teachers. Additionally, learners
must be willing, must be active and confident in themselves and their abilities. This suggests
that the way the classroom is organized and the structure of the learning relationship between
students and teachers need to be adjusted for optimal learning situations. Documented studies
have proposed that when students feel confident in their learning ability and have support
from fellow classmates through positive interaction in the classroom, they are more likely to
participate in learning activities willingly (Tobin & Tippins, 1993).

Guidance from the teacher in the classroom is essential to the success of
implementing elements of Constructivism Theory into English Language Teaching. Thus,
teachers should encourage students to learn at their level of understanding, as well as closely
observe students’ attitudes, emotions and moods. Teachers should be guides that look at
whether students have comprehended and internalized the knowledge or not. In addition,
guidance from teachers will help students implement their knowledge to practice and
formulate methodologies of their own to follow (Zimmerman, 2001). Effective guidance
leads to more effective learning by stimulating and exciting students to learn. Traditional
teaching systems for English lessons frustrates some undergraduate students. So, teachers
should apply constructivism theory to guide students to take control of their own learning in
the learning process. Making students recognize their own potential in initiating their own
learning will help reduce spelling errors in their writing performance (Selley, 2012).

Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) have composed a constructivist model on spelling
development that has been ideal in many areas in South America and Europe. It was
hypothesized that young children, in the early age group, formulated their own assumptions
about how writing works. Children test their hypotheses against the writing that they see,
discarding or modifying some hypotheses and developing others. One hypothesis states that
young children recognize the letters in print form that have the same syllables as letters
spoken in full words. Another hypothesis concludes that young children associate the visual
form of words to that of the characteristics of objects the words stand for. For example, a
child may write dog with larger letters than puppy because dogs are generally larger than
puppies. The constructivist view has helped to underline that children learn a good deal about
writing from an early age, before formal instruction begins at school. Some of the specific
hypotheses that children are thought to construct according to this theory, however, have not
been supported by well controlled experiments. (Pollo, Kessler, & Treiman, 2009). As one
example, children do not appear to go through a period during which they consistently write
words using the same number of letters as syllables (Cardoso-Martins, Corrêa, Lemos, &
Napoleão, 2006; Pollo et al., 2009).
4.0 CONCLUSION

The historical view and the problems faced in spelling by Arab learners can be an eye-opener to researchers. The problems studied so far, especially in the Arab world show that most of the problems come from the differences between the English language and Arabic. The Arabic writing system is considered regular, while in English it is not the case. The lack of one-to-one correspondence between English phonemes and graphemes makes its writing system irregular.

The studies on spelling problems of Arabs will probably be minimized if teachers move away from traditional ways of teaching spelling which is usually in the form of getting learners to learn by memorizing these words. It is unfortunate that learners are still held back because of the lack of professional development of teachers. Continuous professional development of teachers will help teachers become more aware of contemporary approaches in the teaching of vocabulary and spelling which will have influences from Piaget (1926) and Vygotsky (1962). Vygotsky’s views on constructivism if seriously considered by teachers of vocabulary and spelling can redefine the way these two aspects are taught. Getting learners to visualize words being taught and within the context of occurrence will bring about the changes necessary to making learners spell well.

REFERENCES


