

University of Babylon

**Iraqi EFL Learners' Performance of
Homophones**

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1. Introduction

If someone hears the sentence *I'll meet you in the /aɪl/*, it may mean "*I'll meet you in the isle*" (in which *isle* indicates an island) or "*I'll meet you in the aisle*" (in which *aisle* means a passage between seats). Thus, the ambiguity is due to the two words *isle* and *aisle*. Actually, misapprehension may suggest itself due to this phenomenon. In fact, the problem lies in the words that have the same pronunciation and different spelling and meaning, i.e., homophones. Iraqi EFL university students have difficulty (most of the time) in giving the right orthography of these words without confusing the word with its homophone. Furthermore, the vague context enhances the difficulty.

This study aims at:

1. Assessing Iraqi EFL university students' achievement in recognizing and producing homophones.
2. Identifying the points of difficulty which Iraqi EFL university student encounter in using homophones.
3. Finding out the reasons beyond students' errors and the suitable solutions posited to deal with such errors.

In view of the preceding aims, it can be hypothesized that:

- 1- Most Iraqi EFL university students are unable to differentiate the spellings of the homophones.
- 2- The performance of Iraqi EFL university students at the recognition level is anticipated to be better than their performance at the production one.
- 3- They have difficulty in giving the right spelling of the homophone.

The researcher adopts the following steps in order to achieve the objectives of this study.

- 1- Producing, as far as possible, a comprehensive exposition of English homophony depending on the literature available in this field.
- 2- A test has been submitted to Iraqi EFL university students in order to pinpoint the problems and difficulties that they may face in using homophony.
- 3- Analyzing the results of the test, on the bases of which conclusions have been presented.

This study is limited to fourth year students, Department of English, College of Education, University of Babylon during the academic year (2007-2008). The fourth year students have been selected because they have been taught this topic during the fourth year of study.

2. Homophony

Homophony is "a term used in semantic analysis to refer to words (i.e., lexemes) which have the same pronunciation, but differ in meaning." (Crystal, 1998:185). Katamba (1993: 36) as well as Yule (1999: 120-1) pinpoint that homophones are forms that sound the same but differ in their grammatical function or meaning. Lyons (1982: 71) states that "many-to-one correspondence between written and spoken forms is traditionally described as homophony (sameness of sound)".

Some linguists like Fromkin et al. (2003: 179) use the term homonymy instead of homophony. Hence, she (Ibid.) mentions that *to*, *too*, and *two* are homonyms according to their spelling differences. Similarly, Gleason (1961: 436) points out that many written languages have large numbers of homonyms (i.e., homophones) which are words that are amply distinct in spelling but pronounced alike.

Curiously, a difference of spelling does not always indicate a difference of origin. Thus, even what are today homophones may be derived from the same original form (Palmer, 1988: 102-3). In practice, the dictionary maker treats homophones as different words because they are spelt differently and he needs to keep words in their alphabetical position. This is done to shun the problems of whether the homophones are historically of the same origin or not since one cannot, or it is odd to consider words that are spelt differently to be the same word (Ibid.). Gleason (1961: 436) demonstrates that some of the homophones owe the difference in spelling to the conservatism of orthography and English is only modestly equipped with such pairs while Literary Chinese has very many more.

An extension in the meaning of a word is often what leads to the establishment of a homophone. Not many people nowadays consider *flour* and *flower* as having anything other than a homophonous relationship, yet the word *flour*, which means meal made by finely grinding up seed from a cereal plant, actually has its origin in the ellipsis of *flower of the meal*, which is the finest or choicest part of the meal. This meaning of *flower* is related to *flower* 'blossom' due to the fact that the latter is the choicest part of the plant. The spelling difference that contributes to our certainty that *flour* and *flower* are homophones did not always differentiate them; for example, in some old dictionaries like Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, these lexemes are spelled *flower* (Allan, 1986: 154).

Homophones can create ambiguity since a word or a sentence is ambiguous if it can be understood or interpreted in more than one way. As mentioned in the introduction, the sentence *I'll meet you in the /ail/*,

may mean "I'll meet you in the *isle*" or "I'll meet you in the *aisle*". Thus, the ambiguity is due to the two words *isle* and *aisle* (Lester, 1991:427). However, the dictionary often helps in identifying errors committed because of the existence of homophones.

Homophones are often used to create puns and to deceive the reader (as in crossword puzzles) or to suggest multiple meanings. The last usage is common in poetry and creative literature. An example of this is seen in Dylan Thomas' radio play Under Milk Wood: "*The shops in mourning*" where *mourning* can be heard as *mourning* or *morning* (Wikipedia, 2008: Int.).

Actually, the examples tackled are pronounced according to the so-called Received Pronunciation (RP) of British English. It is an important fact about Standard English that it is pronounced differently by different groups and that what are considered homophones for one group of speakers may not be for another (Lyons, 1982:71).

The relationship between sound and meaning in language is arbitrary for the most part, that is to say, there is no good cause why a particular sound or string of sounds has a specific meaning (Katamba, 1993: 35). Consider the phonological form /sait/ which has three orthographic representations: *sight*, *site*, and *cite*, each one of which represents a different morpheme. Similarly, think about the phonological form /rait/, which has four spellings that represent four separate morphemes: *right*, *write*, *wright*, and *rite* (Ibid.). From the point of view of the spoken language, there are only two morphs, namely the forms /sait/ and /rait/. The two morphs represent three and four morphemes respectively, but written English uses a different form to represent each morpheme in each case.

The converse of homophony, to which less attention was given by traditional grammarians, is homography, which refers to sameness in spelling but difference in meaning. Both homophony and homography are subdivisions of homonymy (Allan, 1986: 151).

3 Data Collection

A diagnostic test has been designed in order to reveal the difficulties encountered by Iraqi EFL university students in manipulating homophony and to identify the causes behind such errors.

The test consists of two questions (see Appendix I). The first question measures the subjects' responses at the recognition level, whereas the second question measures their responses at the production one.

The first question includes fifteen items in which EFL learners are asked to underline the word that gives the correct meaning from two homophones set. The second question consists of fifteen items in which EFL learners are given sentences that include phonetic transcriptions of fifteen words and they are asked to jot them down in their orthographic way in order to match the meaning of each sentence.

Some items of the test have been taken from *A Writer's Handbook: Style and Grammar*" by James Lester (1991), *An Introduction to Language* by Victoria Fromkin, Robert Rodman, and Nina Hyams (2003), *Linguistic Meaning* Vol.1 by Keith Allan (1986), *Phonology: An Introduction to Basic Concepts* by Roger Lass (1998). The subjects have studied this topic in the second year in Stageberg's book *An Introductory English Grammar* (1971), in which the writer specified a section under the title "Homophones" in addition they studied it in the fourth year in Yule's book *The Study of Language* where the author

devotes a section to this topic entitled “**homophony, homonymy and polysemy**”.

4. Data Analysis

This section deals with the analysis and discussion of the results of the test. The errors that are committed by Iraqi EFL learners in using homophony have been identified and shown statistically. In addition, endeavours have been made to point out the plausible sources of these errors so as to get some insights into the nature of the difficulties that Iraqi EFL university students have encountered in this area.

In addition, this section produces the results of the subjects’ performance at each question of the test in particular and at the entire test in general, with regard to the recognition and production levels.

The following table shows the results obtained after analyzing the subjects’ performance at each item in the first question.

Table (1)

Subjects’ Achievement of the First Question

No. of Item	No. of Correct Choices	%	No. of Incorrect Choices	%
1	68	97.14	2	2.86
2	50	71.43	20	28.57
3	42	60	28	40
4	40	57.14	30	42.86
5	40	57.14	30	42.86
6	34	48.57	36	51.43
7	48	68.57	22	31.43
8	22	31.43	48	68.57

9	30	42.86	40	57.14
10	18	25.72	52	74.28
11	58	82.86	12	17.14
12	36	51.43	34	48.57
13	62	88.57	8	11.43
14	12	17.14	58	82.85
15	18	25.72	52	74.28
Total	578	55.05	472	44.95

The results denote that the total number of the correct responses (578, 55.5%) is higher than that of the incorrect ones (472, 44.95%). Thus, the first hypothesis which reads: most Iraqi EFL university students are unable to differentiate the spellings of the homophone, is refuted.

Table (2) displays the subjects' responses to the items of the second question:

Table (2)

Subjects' Achievement of the Second Question

No. of Item	No. of Correct Items	%	No. of Wrong Items	%
1	20	28.57	50	71.43
2	68	97.14	2	2.86
3	34	48.57	36	51.43
4	56	80	14	20
5	52	74.29	18	25.71
6	6	8.57	64	91.43
7	16	22.86	54	77.14

8	2	2.86	68	97.14
9	10	14.29	60	85.71
10	38	54.29	32	45.71
11	44	62.86	26	37.14
12	0	0	70	100
13	50	71.43	20	28.57
14	62	88.57	8	11.43
15	0	0	70	100
Total	458	43.62	592	56.38

It is clear that most subjects have failed to give the correct answers. Thus, the total number of their correct responses is (458, 43.62%), whereas that of their incorrect ones is (592, 56.38%). This denotes that the subjects have faced difficulty in producing homophony.

From the table above, it can be concluded that Iraqi EFL university students encounter difficulties at the production level because they do not know how to produce homophony appropriately. This verifies the hypothesis: They have difficulty in giving the right spelling of the homophone.

The results of the subjects' total performance at the recognition and production levels can be summarized in the following table:

Table (10)

Subjects' Achievement at the Recognition and Production Levels

Level	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%
Recognition	578	45.50	472	44.95
Production	458	43.62	592	56.38

Total	1036	49.34	1064	50.66
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Here, the highest rate of Iraqi EFL university students incorrect answers including avoided responses (1064, 50.66%) is higher than that of their correct ones (1036, 49.34%). The result indicates that they have faced more difficulty at the production level, since the total number of their correct responses at this level (458, 43.62%) is lower than that of their correct ones at the recognition level (578, 45.50%).

These results can be verified by using certain measures such as mean, as the mean for the production level (21.8) is lower than that for the recognition one (27.50). This verifies the hypothesis which reads: The performance of Iraqi EFL university students at the recognition level is anticipated to be better than their performance at the production one.

5. Sources of Errors

This section deals with error analysis and the sources of errors which are committed by Iraqi EFL learners in using homophony. All learners commit errors at different stages of language learning. Errors are natural processes of language learning. Interference from the students' own language into the target language is not the only reason for making errors. There are other categories of errors which are called developmental errors such as overgeneralization. The instructor must realize that all learners make errors. These errors enable them to learn something new about the language (Harmer, 2000: 62). Therefore, this section deals with the identification of errors and the reasons beyond committing certain types of errors as far as these errors are related to the learners' wrong use of homophony.

In this study, most errors are attributed to interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies.

5.1 Interlingual Transfer: Many errors occur due to the effect of the first language. The learner may resort to his own native language in an attempt to bridge the gap of the deficiencies of his knowledge of the target language, or he thinks that the target language operates like the native one. This does not always mean that the native language is the source of errors because the native language may facilitate the learning of the target one (Brown, 2001: 65-6).

Some of the subjects' wrong production of homophones in item (6) of the second question can be attributed to interlingual transfer in which the students did not realize the existence of the letter 'r' in the orthography of the word *sore* /so:/. Also, the repetition of some letters in words like *inn* /ɪn/, *too* /to:/. The fact that some sounds can be written in different ways affected the students responses as in the word *prophet* /profit/ in which the /f/ is represented by the letters 'ph'. Another example of this phenomenon is the word *missed* /mɪst/.

5.2 Intralingual Transfer: It is another sort of error which is manifested in students' writing due to faulty or partial learning of the target language and this is the negative element of intralingual transfer or overgeneralization. Such errors may be the result of the influence of one target language item upon another (Penny, 2001: 8-9). Some of the subjects' wrong answers were because, unlike Arabic, there are many vowels in English.

Overgeneralization, ignorance of the rule restriction, incomplete application of the rules, and false concepts hypothesized may be attributed to intralingual errors.

Overgeneralization error, “this type of error is the result of trying to use a rule in a context where it does not belong, for example, putting a regular *-ed* ending on an irregular verb, as in ‘buyed’ instead of ‘bought’” (Lightbown and Spada, 2003: 178).

Ignorance of rule restriction i.e. “applying rules to contexts to which they do not apply” (Richards and Sampson, 1974: 70).

Incomplete application of the rules involves the avoidance of the learner to use more complex sorts of structure or forms because the learner believes that he can communicate effectively by using relatively simple rules or forms, and **false concepts hypothesized** that may be derived from wrong comprehension of a distinction in the target language (Brown, 1987: 81-3 and Chanier et al., 1992: 134).

Intralingual errors are the most popular source of the subjects’ errors. Concerning overgeneralization, some students gave the word *floore* instead of *flour*.

The reason beyond the wrong spelling of the homophone *borne* /bo:n/ in item (12) of the second question may be ascribed to ignorance of rule restriction since most of the past participle forms of verbs in English are not made by the addition of ‘e’ at the end. Also, some subjects wrote the word *you* instead of *ewe*, *write* instead of *right*, and *floor* for the transcription /flaʊər/ instead of *flour*.

Some of the errors in the second question may be attributed to incomplete application of the rules, as shown in writing the word *prophet* /profit/ as *profit* and the word *inn* /ɪn/ as *in*.

False concepts hypothesized may be the reason beyond some of the subjects’ incorrect answers for the last item in question two for the reason that they gave the orthographies *jew*, *joe*, and *jaw* instead of *ewe*.

The total number of errors that are possibly due to the intralingual transfer is (744, 48.69%).

5.3 Context of Learning: Errors may arise from the effect of the situation of learning, ignorance of the importance of the topic homophony, or the textbook designer who concentrates on some aspects of the target language and neglects others, according to his own beliefs and experiences. In addition, no exercises or lists of homophones are given in the textbooks. All of these factors may encourage EFL learners to make faulty hypotheses about the language (Richards, 1974: 178).

The total number of errors that are possibly due to using such strategies is (284, 18.59%) of the total number of the subjects' errors.

5.4 Communication Strategies: When the EFL learners try to communicate, they may encounter difficulty because their foreign language is not well developed. In this respect, the learner may anticipate such a problem and modify what he intends to say. If he is engaged in speech, must try to find an alternative way of getting the meaning across. His way of facing the situation is called communication strategy (Littlewood, 1984: 83-4).

In this section, some of the communication strategies which the learners have been observed to use are given.

Avoidance in which the learner tries to avoid the item which will present difficulty because he has no information to solve it (Ibid.). This strategy has been used by the subjects in items (12) and (15) of the second question. No student was able to answer any of them.

Create New Words or Coinage, i.e., the learner may make up a new word or phrase, in order to express the desired idea (Faucette, 2001: 15). Some students have written the word *flour* /flaʊə/ in the following

ways: *flauer, flower, floure, flowr, and floar*. Similarly, they wrote the word *missed /mist/* as: *mast, mist, messed, and meast*.

Guessing: when the learners are in doubt about the correct answer they begin to guess (Brown, 2001: 309). This strategy has been used in the subjects' answers especially in the items of the first question by underlying both of the homophones given.

The total number of errors that may be related to using such strategies is (374, 24.47%) of the total number of the subjects' errors.

6. Conclusions

In the light of students' responses, it can be concluded that:

1. Some Iraqi EFL university students are unable to differentiate the spellings of the homophones. The total number of their correct responses is (578, 55.05%) and the incorrect ones is (472, 44.95%). Thus, the first hypothesis is refuted.
2. They encounter more difficulty at the production level. For this reason, the total number of their incorrect responses at the production level (592, 56.38%) is higher than that of the recognition one (472, 44.95%). This confirms the second hypothesis.
3. They have difficulty in giving the right spelling of the homophone. Thus, the total number of their correct responses (458, 43.62%) is lower than that of the incorrect ones (592, 56.38%). This verifies the third hypothesis.
4. There are three sorts of errors which are committed by the sample of the present study. The errors can be summarized as follows:
 - a- Wrong choice of homophones.
 - b- Failure to recognize the right spelling of the homophone.
 - c- Giving no answer.

5. The subjects' errors have been attributed to the following factors:

I. Interlingual transfer, whereby the subjects resort to the rules of their native language to produce homophony. This type of error constitutes (8.25%).

II. Intralingual transfer, whereby the subjects use their prior knowledge of the target language. This type of error constitutes (48.69%).

III. Context of learning as little attention has been paid to homophony in the textbooks. This type of error constitutes (18.59%).

IV. Communication strategies which are selected by the subjects to fill the gap of their knowledge. This type of error constitutes (24.47%).

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Appendix I

- Q.1/Underline the word that gives the correct meaning from the homophones between brackets.
1. She learned to (write/right) in cursive during third grade.
 2. It was (plane/plain) to see that he was hurt.
 3. After the snowstorm, the sunshine was a welcome (scene/seen).
 4. Some pencils are made out of (lead/led).
 5. We shopped for many things at the (flee/flea) market.
 6. Her favourite fruit is (pare/pear).
 7. The horse had a long (tale/tail).
 8. When making homemade bread, you must (need/knead) the dough for five minutes.
 9. The (breaks/brakes) in our car were not working properly.

10. Could you (pour/paw) the orange juice, please?
11. Mark got a letter in the (male/mail).
12. A rabbit is a bit like a (hare/hair).
13. James didn't have a very good (nights/knights) sleep.
14. Two-year-olds go through a (faze/phase) when all they say is "no".
15. She'll go down the (isle/aisle).

Q.2/Rewrite the transcribed words in a normal orthographic way in order to match the meaning meant in each sentence.

1. Mum put some /flaʊər/ in the cake mix.
2. Lucy couldn't wait to /mi:t/ her friend.
3. Andrew /mɪst/ the coach.
4. Glen has a long /weɪt/ for his brother.
5. The /meɪd/ was beautiful.
6. I have a /s:/ throat today.
7. They've put their house up for /seɪl/.
8. /li:ks/ are usually eaten cooked.
9. He was one of the early /prɒfɪts/ of socialism.
10. Greg's face looked so /peɪl/.
11. We found an /ɪn/ that is nearby.
12. Ann had /bo:n/ that situation for two years.
13. We always have to do what is /rɑ:t/.
14. Bin likes John, /tu:./.
15. The /ju:/ that farmer is carrying is so cute.