

Saudi EFL Learners' Perceptions of the Frequent Use of Spelling Correction Tools in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Spelling is an essential skill in EFL writing especially if writing is frequently used in texting through social media and smartphones. The study surveys Arabic EFL learners about their perceptions of using spelling correction tools: spell checkers and auto-correctors. The study focused on the perceived usefulness and ease of use of such tools in social media applications, since they are used frequently by the study's participants. The questionnaire was sent online to 84 participants at Aljazeera Academy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The data was analyzed quantitatively with descriptive and inferential statistics indicating that spell checkers are mostly perceived to be easier to use than auto-correctors. However, no significant difference was found in terms of learning the misspelled words.

Key words: Spelling, Arabic EFL Learners, Spelling Correction Tools, Spell Checkers, Auto-Correctors, Social Media, Smartphones

INTRODUCTION

Spell checkers are known to help writers to correct misspelled words immediately. All it takes is just a click on the word to have a list of suggested words similar in spelling to the intended word appear. This feature is also included in mobile phones to assist users in texting and typing on the phone. Learners of English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) are, like most other mobile phone users, immersing themselves in text messaging through different social media and chatting applications, as well as using the auto-correction feature built into smartphones' systems (i.e., Android or Apple). Therefore, this feature is definitely affecting language learners' spelling and writing especially when it is used frequently.

Research Problem

Spelling is an essential skill for writing, especially in a second language. Therefore, if the learners are using these checking and auto-correction tools almost every day and from the early stages of their language learning, the question arises: do they really learn the spelling of these words or do they become very much dependent on the spell checker to provide the correct spelling for them?

The literature relating to ESL/EFL learners and auto-correction or spell checking through mobile phone use is scarce, even though these features have attracted researchers' attention since their appearance in the 1960s (Lee, 1997). Research in this area was mostly in three directions: a) the effectiveness

of the spell checkers in detecting and correcting ESL learners' errors (Grami, 2020; Rimrott & Heift, 2005, 2008), b) training learners to use spell checkers and auto-correctors effectively (Cunningham, Rashid, & Le, 2019), and c) the impact of using spell checkers on ESL/EFL learners' spelling skills (Lin, Liu, & Paas, 2017). Most of these studies investigated the use of word processing software with spell checkers.

Aim of the Study

Based on the above-mentioned problems and gaps, this study investigates spell checkers but in the context of more frequent use, which is texting through mobile phones. It looks at the impact of the frequent use of spell checkers in social media on the spelling skills from the learners' perspective. The learners are from different proficiency levels (i.e., beginners, intermediate, and advanced).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of previous research focuses on three areas closely informing the current study: a) spelling for ESL/EFL learners and especially for Arabic learners of English, b) spell checkers and non-native language learners, and c) mobile texting and spelling.

Spelling for ESL/EFL Learners

Spelling is an integral component in language learning to

enable the learner to express thoughts and ideas in a written context. Spelling accurately helps in conveying the message more clearly with the exact intended meaning. Mpiti (2012) defined spelling as a process that involves several skills including phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic knowledge, as well as the ability to produce words by recalling the visual memory and orthographic rules. Furthermore, Westwood (2018) discussed several linguistic and cognitive theories that can explain spelling processes for language learners; for instance, the stage theory, dual-route theory, visual memory, and integration of multiple patterns theory.

Obviously, spelling requires conscious and unconscious cognitive effort to formulate accurate words in writing. It requires two levels of processing: lower-level processing (orthographic awareness) and higher-level processing (phonological awareness) (Martin, 2017). The phonological awareness refers to the processing of large phonological units (e.g., syllables), while orthographic awareness refers to the processing of small units (e.g., individual phonemes). Martin (2017) argued that orthographic knowledge is in fact shaped by their L1 background at least for beginning learners. He researched the impact of learners' L1 on their orthographic knowledge of vowels and consonants of English. The participants were from three different L1s: Chinese, Hebrew, and French. The study's results showed that non-alphabetic languages (i.e., Chinese) scored the highest in accuracy while Hebrew seemed to show the least accuracy among the other learners, especially on vowels as compared to consonants.

Similar to Hebrew, Arabic ESL/EFL learners seem to gain attention for their difficulties in English spelling, especially for vowels (Altamimi & Ab Rashid, 2019; S Alenazi, 2018; S Ishizaki, 2018; Saigh & Schmitt, 2012). In 2008, Fender noticed that Arabic ESL learners had more problems with spelling than learners from other language backgrounds. He carried out research comparing Arab learners and non-Arab learners of English on their spelling comprehension. He found that Arab learners scored considerably lower than other learners. Bowen (2011) explored the data obtained from the homework writing tasks of Emirati EFL students to locate patterns for their spellings errors. She emphasized that vowels are more problematic than consonants and especially short vowels. The analysis showed that Arabic ESL learners tend to either add an extra vowel or omit the vowel(s) in the word. Saigh and Schmitt (2012) carried out a similar analysis study but in an empirical setting. They reported that short vowels are more confusing for Arabic ESL learners than long vowels. In fact, they suggested that the impact of the Arabic writing system with no written short vowels could be the main reason for such unique problems to Arabic learners of English.

Several researchers confirmed that Arabic ESL/EFL learners are noticeably influenced by the Arabic writing system where short vowels are represented by diacritics at the early stages of literacy and then are not written for more proficient readers (S Alenazi, 2018; S Ishizaki, 2018; Saigh & Schmitt, 2012). Therefore, the current study explores Arabic EFL learners' perception of the impact of these spelling problems along with the frequent use of spell checkers on mobile phones.

Spell Checkers and Non-native Language Learners

The research on spell checkers and non-native spellers focuses mainly on two areas: a) the ability of the spell checkers or auto-correctors to detect and correct non-native speakers' errors, and b) the efficient use of spell checkers and their impact on the learning of the target language.

With regard to the first aspect, several studies have examined the ability of spell checkers, mostly in a word processing context, to detect spelling errors from non-native learners (Grami, 2020; Rimrott, 2005; Rimrott & Heift, 2005, 2008). Working on language learners of German, Rimrott and Heift (2005) explored the ability of the spell checker in Ms Word in detecting and correcting the spelling mistakes of the language learners. Their research revealed that Ms Word could not detect 48% of 375 spelling mistakes made by British learners of German. In 2008, they expanded their sample of research to include 1027 errors. The findings seem to still be consistent with their first research, as they reported that the spell checker in Ms Word was able to correct only 52% of the learners' errors. They concluded that generic spell checkers, such as Ms Word, are not effective learning tools for L2 spelling and writing.

Another study was conducted with learners of Spanish as a second language. Blazquez and Fan (2019) examined the efficacy of three spell checkers especially designed for L2 learners of Spanish. The efficacy of these tools was tested on their ability to detect non-native learners' errors as well as to provide appropriate feedback to users. The findings revealed that 85% of the errors were detected by the spell checkers; however, all three of them failed to provide the learners with appropriate feedback of the correct alternative. Therefore, it is very important to advise language learners to use spell checkers wisely and to avoid using them as a learning tool.

Grami (2020) explored the effectiveness of using a special writing assistant on idioms, collocations and phrases in the writing of EFL Saudi Arabian learners as well as their perceptions of its advantages and disadvantages. The results showed significant improvement by using the writing assistant. However, the learners' perceptions were mixed between positive and negative opinions towards the use of such an assistant as a learning tool for EFL writing.

Another area of research in the literature concerned the impact of using spell checkers on the writing and spelling skills of the language learners. Gupta (1998) carried out research to examine the impact of using spell checkers in a word processor on EFL beginning learners. The study found that EFL learners rely on the spell checkers to either correct their spelling mistakes or to consult for a suggested list of words. The researcher emphasized that spell checkers are beneficial for beginning language learners. Lin, Liu, and Pass (2017) explored the impact of relying on spell checkers for aid in learning to spell in the target language. They wanted to test the hypotheses of the cognitive load theory that suggest "convenience might be harmful for learning because it reduces the amount of effort invested in the learning task" (p.1501). The results found that spelling aids reduce the learner's ability for error detection but increase the incidental learning of the word's spelling after being detected.

Cunningham, Le, and Rashid (2019) reported that effective use of a spell checker requires training ESL/EFL learners to use it properly. By training, learners will be able to utilize all the features of this tool in word processors more effectively in their ESL/EFL writing.

Mobile Texting and Spelling

Research on the impact of using auto-correction or spell checking through mobile phones is very limited especially for second language learners. Most of the previous research focuses on the impact of texting generally on L2 learners' writing. From these research studies, a number of findings relevant to spelling were reported. Elliott et al. (2016) reviewed the literature on students' learning of English writing and confirmed that there is no negative evidence on the use of texting in general on academic writing including their spelling skills. Westwood (2018) argued that "while texting may appear to the public and the media to negatively affect spelling standards, this may not be the case in fact." He emphasized that it could actually make spelling errors more visible to the eye. Westwood reported that before the advent of social media and mobile phones, several researchers expressed their concerns that the frequent reliance on spell checkers and auto-correctors might lead to skipping learning to spell L2 words. However, these concerns were disregarded as research has shown that texting applications, such as Line and Whatsapp, can actually improve the spelling skills of language learners significantly (Shih, Lee, & Cheng, 2015).

The current study attempts to fill in some gaps in the literature by exploring the Saudi Arabian EFL learners' perceptions of the frequent use of the spell checkers and auto-correctors in social media applications through mobile phones.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Which generic spelling tool in a mobile phone is more preferable: spell checker (corrects with a suggested list of intended words) or auto-correctors (automatically corrects words) and which one is perceived as more useful for EFL spelling learning?
2. What are Saudi EFL learners' perceptions of the usefulness of generic spelling correction tools in mobile phones and social media applications?
3. What are Saudi EFL learners' perceptions of the ease of using generic spelling correction tools in mobile phones and social media applications?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts the Technology Acceptance Model (Rusli, Hashim, Yunus, Zakaria, & Norman, 2019) as presented in Figure 1 below.

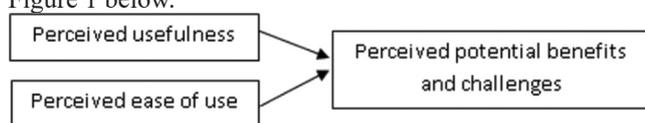


Figure 1. Technology Acceptance Model (Rusli et al., 2019) P. 87

The perceived usefulness refers to the potential benefits of using the target technology while perceived ease of use refers to the least efforts given in learning and using the features of the target technology; thus, it implies the challenges that can be presented by the use of the technology. Based on these main themes, a questionnaire was designed to survey Saudi EFL learners' perceptions of the use of generic spelling correction tools in smartphones and social media applications for their learning of English spelling. The questionnaire is divided into three main sections. The first section asks about the learner's background information and their use of and preference for social media applications. It also asks about their use of and preference for the built-in spelling correction tools in such applications, whether spell checker or auto-corrector. The second section surveys learners about the usefulness of each type of spelling correction tool (i.e., spell checker or auto-corrector) built into social media applications and smartphones for learning English spellings. The third section asks the learners about ease of using each type of tool for non-native English users. The internal validity of the questionnaire has been established through several studies using the same Technology Acceptance Model to design their perception studies' questionnaires (e.g., Davis, 1989; Rusli et al., 2019). The reliability of the questionnaire has been tested using Cronbach's alpha value to ensure that a stability coefficient alpha from the total amount of the questionnaires was established. The result implied that all of the items had a robust reliability level with the Cronbach's alpha value of 0.84.

PARTICIPANTS

The study was carried out on 84 Saudi EFL learners at Aljazeera English Learning Academy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The participants were all sent an electronic link to the questionnaire that was published through Google forms. Table 1 shows the main demographic information collected about the study participants. Their English language level was determined through their language proficiency level at Aljazeera Academy.

Table 1. The demographic information about the study participants

Gender		Age	Level		
Female	Male		Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced
62	22	15-35	31	39	14

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results from the analysis of the questionnaire's data are presented based on the major themes of the questionnaire.

Learners' Preference for Spelling Tools and Social Media Platforms

Data for the learners' preference for using spell checkers or auto-correctors in smartphones has been obtained from the first section in the questionnaire (see Appendix A). Based on their responses, 74% of the participants prefer spell checkers rather than auto-correctors in their daily use of social media applications in smartphones, as presented in Table 2.

Furthermore, learners chose Whatsapp and Snapchat as their favorite social media platforms as they are equipped with spell checkers rather than auto-correctors as in Instagram and Facebook. Figure 2 displays learners' preferences for the social media platforms used in practicing their English language.

These findings indicate that learners are more comfortable using a spelling assistant with a suggested list rather than a tool that automatically corrects for them. Haque and AlSalem (2019) emphasized that auto-correct spelling assistants are not preferable spelling learning tools for EFL Saudi learners. However, Grami (2020) reported that EFL Saudi learners have positive attitudes towards the use of automated corrective feedback on their spelling. It is very important to note that in Grami's study (2020) the system was used in a computer-based context while in Haque and AlSalem's study (2019) the spelling tool was examined in social media platforms. The current study agrees with Haque and AlSalem's findings that auto-correction is not the preferred tool for EFL spelling in a social media context.

Learners' Perceptions of the Usefulness of Spelling Tools in Social Media and Smartphones

To answer this research question, the questionnaire items from the second section were analyzed using a Likert Scale. This analyzed data by averaging the responses for each numeric value given for each Likert Scale option where strongly agree is given 5 and strongly disagree is given 1. Figure 3 represents learners' perceived usefulness of spelling correction tools in social media applications. The figure shows the results based on their responses for either spell checkers or auto-correctors.

The results reveal that spell-checking is perceived to be more useful than auto-correction except for the benefit of learning the spelling of the English words. Apparently, the learners agree that spelling correction tools are somehow beneficial with only 3.00 for spell checkers and 3.1 for auto-correctors. These findings imply that the perceived learning value for the learners is not really high. To confirm these results, inferential statistics were carried out using an independent t-test to compare between the perceived usefulness of spell checkers and auto-correctors. As presented in Table 3, there is no significant difference between the corrective tool with very small variance found between the two types and the p-value is higher than 0.05 for all the items. The only significant difference is found in their preference to turn off the corrective tool. The learners prefer to turn off auto-correctors more than spell checkers. These findings imply that the spelling correction tools are perceived to be useful and used frequently in social media and smartphones.

However, spell checkers are more preferable than auto-correction in frequent use.

Furthermore, the learners responded to the questionnaire items inquiring about their reliance on the spelling correction tools as generally agree with average mean of 3.8. This indicates that they consult their tools for spelling on a regular basis. Also, they responded with an average of 3.5 to the ability of the spelling correction tools to detect their spelling mistakes. These results imply that the learners generally perceived these tools as useful in spelling English words in social media and smartphones.

These findings seem to be in consensus with the previous results in the literature (e.g., Grami, 2020; Shih et al., 2015; Westwood, 2018). In most of the previous research, learners reported that a spelling aid on a computer or online is beneficial in their learning of an L2 spelling. Ishizaki (2018) argued that, especially in the case of Arabic learners, a spelling aid is necessary to enhance their observation and learning of

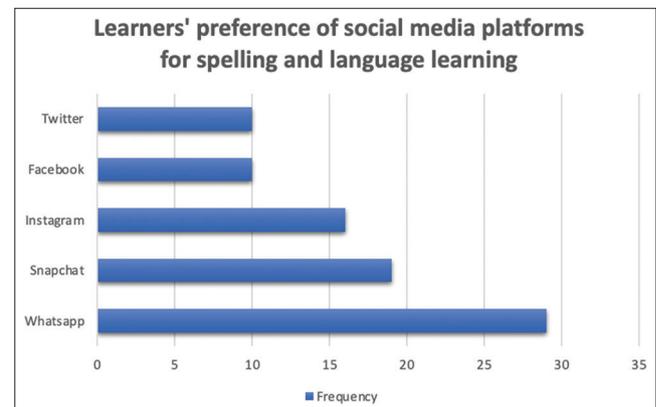


Figure 2. Learners' preferences for the social media platforms in practicing their English language

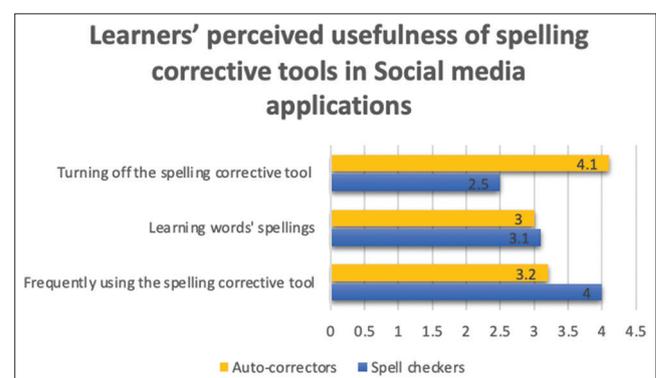


Figure 3. Perceived usefulness of spelling tools in social media

Table 2. Learners' preference for generic spelling tools in smartphones

Learners' preference for spelling tools in social media and smartphones		
Spelling tools		Response percentage
Spell checkers		74%
Auto-correctors		26%
		Response total
		62
		22

vowels and, hence, overcome their common spelling problems. Westwood (2018) also emphasized that a spelling correction tool in social media helps in training the learners to notice their own spelling mistakes and overcome them. Lin et al. (2017) and Cunningham et al. (2019) confirmed that learners often perceived spell checkers as useful tools, however, they need to be trained to use their full potential.

Learners' Perceptions of the Ease of Using Spelling Tools in Social Media and Smartphones

Averaging the Likert Scale data in the third section of the questionnaire was used to evaluate learners' perception of the ease of using spelling correction tools in social media and smartphones. Generally, the learners responded with average of 4.1 on the ease of using corrective tools. However, when comparing between spell checkers and auto-correctors, Figure 4 shows the learners' perceptions of the ease of use of these two types of corrective tools in smartphones. The descriptive statistics reveal that learners perceived spell checkers to be easier than auto-correctors.

Inferential statistics were carried out to confirm if there were any significant differences between the two tools, as apparent to the naked eye on data or through the descriptive statistics. An independent t-test was used to compare for the variance between the means of two tools as presented in Table 4.

According to these results, significant differences were found between spell checkers and auto-correctors as the p-value is less than 0.05 for all the measures. Therefore, spell checkers are easier to use than auto-correctors for EFL learners in social media applications.

The findings from this study inform the literature in this area by comparing learners' perceptions of those common corrective tools in social media applications. Several

research studies (e.g., Lin et al., 2017; Blazquez & Fan, 2019) reported that spell checkers can be beneficial for second language learners if they are built with an expanded database of non-native users' mistakes. Also, they reported that learners can benefit from a spell checker because it requires a cognitive decision on choosing the correct spelling form of the intended word. This provides a plausible explanation of why the learners prefer spell checkers over auto-correctors. Furthermore, it is very important to note that in our study the EFL learners are from an Arabic language background, hence their choice of spell checkers is in support of Ishizaki (2018) who emphasized that a spelling enhancement aid is needed for Arabic EFL learners to avoid spelling mistakes especially in vowels. Spell checkers provide such enhancement by providing a suggested list with different alternatives, especially vowels. Several researchers (e.g., Bowen, 2011; Deacon, 2015; Saigh & Schmitt, 2012) who were interested

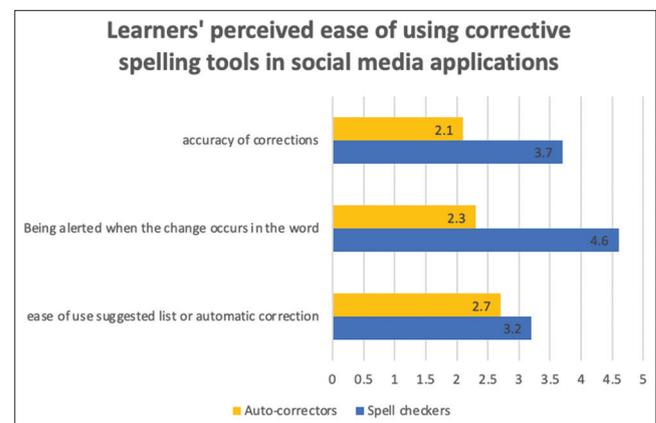


Figure 4. Ease of using corrective spelling tools in social media

Table 3. Independent T-Test for the usefulness of spell checkers and auto-correctors in social media

Item	Spell-checkers		Auto-correctors		T-test				
	Mean	Variance	Mean	Variance	T stat	P(T<=t) one-tail	t Critical one-tail	P(T<=t) two-tail	t Critical two-tail
Frequently using the spelling correction tool	4.04	0.50372	3.2	0.910355	5.7804	2.0250	1.654873	4.05014	1.975590
Learning words' spellings	3.1	0.97576	3	0.674698	1.1040820	0.1356	1.654373	0.2712049	1.974808
Turning off the spelling correction tool	2.5	1.50243	4.1	1.280550	-8.6987	0.0431	1.654140	0.056362	1.974445

Table 4. Independent T-Test for the ease of using spell-checkers and auto-correctors in social media

Item	Spell checkers		Auto-correctors		T-test				
	Mean	Variance	Mean	Variance	T stat	P(T<=t) one-tail	t Critical one-tail	P(T<=t) two-tail	t Critical two-tail
Ease of use suggested list or automatic correction	3.2	1.03786	2.7	1.97059	2.201689	0.014602	1.655007	0.02920	1.975798
Being alerted when the change occurs in the word	4.6	0.23235	2.3	1.53356	15.764346	0.049326	1.65908	0.0598653	1.982173
Accuracy of corrections	3.7	1.94262	2.1	0.789873	9.0427	0.04190	1.65573	0.048381	1.976931

in studying the spelling of Arabic learners of English emphasized that conscious noticing and explicit correction of their errors is needed to train their cognition into avoiding such problems especially in noticing vowel problems. This explains the learners' preference for spell checkers over auto-correctors.

CONCLUSION

This study surveyed the learners' perception of their use of spelling correction tools in social media. It focused on the two popular methods in smartphones and social media applications: spell checking and auto-correction. The main goal of this research was to investigate learners' perception of the frequent use of spelling tools in social media and smartphones. The results reported that generally spell checkers are preferable to auto-correctors. However, in terms of the perceived usefulness, there seems to be no significant differences between the tools except for their tendency to turn off auto-correcting tool more often than the spell checking one. For the ease of use, spell checkers are found to be easier and preferable to auto-correctors. These findings not only inform research in the area of EFL spelling and Mobile Assisting Language Learning (MALL), but also inform social media developers to take into consideration language learners in updating or building such applications that are used frequently. These results add to the body of knowledge and research in the area of using and developing spelling tools for EFL learners in general and for Saudi learners specifically. It shows how those tools are used and perceived by the learners themselves in terms of usefulness and ease. Previous research has focused mostly on testing and developing the spelling tools themselves rather than evaluating them from the learner's side.

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APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire: Saudi EFL Learners' perceptions of the use of generic spelling correction tools in social media mobile applications

Background information

Name or Nickname:.....

English language level at Aljazeera Academy:.....

Age:.....

Gender:

Do you use Social Media Applications (e.g., Whatsapp, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Messenger, and others) to practice your English?

- 1- Always. 2- Often 3- Sometimes. 4- Rarely. 5- Never

Which Application do you use most frequently? (if your answer is never in Q1, skip this question)

- 1- Whatapp
- 2- Snapchat
- 3- Instagram
- 4- Twitter
- 5- Facebook
- 6- Messenger
- 7- Others:.....

Which spelling correction tool do you prefer in social media or smartphones?

- 1- Auto-correction: the tool corrects the spelling mistake by changing the word automatically (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter)
- 2- Spell checker: The tool provides a list of suggested alternatives to choose as a correction for the intended word (e.g., Whatsapp and Snapchat)

Perceived usefulness

Questionnaire item	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I use the spell checker in social media applications frequently.					
I allow the auto-corrector to fix my spelling mistakes automatically.					
I learn the spelling of English words suggested by spell checkers in social media applications and I use it by myself in another context.					
I learn the spelling of English words from using auto correctors in social media applications and I can use it by myself in another context.					
I turn off the spell checking features because it is not beneficial for me.					
I turn off the auto-corrector because it is not beneficial for me.					
The spelling correction tools in social media detect most spelling mistakes and correct them.					
I rely only on the spelling correction tools in social media applications to correct my spelling mistakes.					
I need to consult other learning tools (e.g., dictionary) to correct my spelling mistakes.					
Dependance on the spelling correction tools does not help remember the correct spelling when I need it.					
My spelling has improved by the frequent use of spelling correction tools in social media applications.					

Perceived ease of use

It is easy to use the spelling correction tools in social media applications.

Spell checkers as in Whatsapp shows an easy-to-use list of words.

The list provided by spell checkers to correct my spellings are not always correct.

Auto-correctors as in Facebook correct my words automatically and promptly.

The auto-corrector does not affect me when changing the words.

The auto-corrector embarrasses me when it changes the word to the wrong one instead of the intended one.

The auto-corrector does not always change the words to the intended one.
