

Problems Confronting Learners of English in Using the Apostrophe

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Abstract

This study looks at an important component of written English which is for many learners a very confusing area i.e. the use of the *apostrophe*. It is essentially devoted to presenting problems associated with the use of the *apostrophe* for intermediate level learners of English as a foreign language.

To achieve its objective, the study briefly identifies the various uses of the *apostrophe* and the ways of how they are spelled. Then it discusses the areas of possible difficulties with the uses of the *apostrophe* and presents some practical solutions. Finally, the study ends with certain conclusions of why learners face difficulties with the *apostrophe* and presents some recommendations for avoiding them.

1. Introduction:

Much research has been carried out discussing the various problems confronting learners of English; however, there has been very little discussion tackling the importance of the use of the *apostrophe*. Therefore, this research hopes to highlight this persistent problem and to present some remedial teaching ideas.

Dealing with the *apostrophe* is one aspect of written English that causes problems for many learners. The *apostrophe* is used for various purposes and it usually causes a great deal of confusion. A misplaced *apostrophe* can bring an essential change in a sentence on both the semantic and syntactic levels. Deciding when an *apostrophe* is needed and how it is realized is not always easy. Generally, and due to the negative transfer¹ many foreign learners of English are liable to face problems in using the *apostrophe* (Llurda, 2005:75). Accordingly, the study assumes that discovering the difficulties with the *apostrophe* and finding solutions to these difficulties is of great importance for teachers as well as learners.

The study intends to handle this problem via the following procedures: (a) Identifying the *apostrophe*. (b) Conducting a theoretical study of the *apostrophe*. (c) Surveying the homophones that may be confused with constructions with *apostrophes* as identified by some grammarians of English. (d) Supplying sufficient examples of structures with *apostrophes* quoted from English grammar books and some textbooks intended for Iraqi secondary students i.e. Learn 4 Iraq and Iraq Opportunities. (e) Specifying the areas of possible difficulties encountered by learners concerning the use of the *apostrophe*.

2. Definition of the Apostrophe:

The *apostrophe* is the mark ⁽¹⁾ which is used: ⁽¹⁾ to show that one or more letters or numbers have been left out ⁽²⁾ before or after the letter 's' to show that something belongs to somebody ⁽³⁾ before the letter 's' to show the plural of a letter or number. (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010:59)

3. Uses of the Apostrophe

In writing, the *apostrophe* is used to indicate the following:

1. The *apostrophe* is used to mark the genitive case in the singular and plural noun forms (Quirk et al, 1985:318), e.g.:

1. *Alice's* house is next to mine. (The house belongs to Alice)

2. The *boy's* toys are new. (The toys belong to the boy)

3. The *boys'* toys are new. (The toys belong to the boys)

4. The *children's* toys are new. (The toys belong to the children)

2. It demonstrates the difference between noun forms with "-s suffixes" like *spies*, *spy's* and *spys'* (ibid:319), e.g.

5. The spies were arrested. (plural, common case)

6. The spy's companion was a woman. (singular, genitive case)

7. The spies' companions were women. (plural, genitive case)

Moreover, the *apostrophe* helps readers distinguish the difference in homonyms like the "s" form of the verb *spy* as in (8) or the contracted forms of the noun *spy* plus *is* as in (9) or plus *has* as in (10) (Quirk et al, 1985: 319), e.g.:

8. He *spies* on behalf of an industrial company.

9. The *spy's* here.

10. The *spy's* been cycling along the coast.

3. It marks contractions in the verb phrase (Praninskas,1975:12 and Greenbaum & Nelson,2002:154), e.g.

11. She *isn't* home yet. (*isn't* denotes a contracted form of *is* plus *not*)

12. *He's* lost his key. (*He's* denotes *he* plus *has*)

13. I *can't* sleep with all this noise. (*Can't* represents the contracted form of *can* plus *not*)

14. *I'm* very glad to see you again, son. (*I'm* represents the contracted form of *I* plus *am*)

15. Ok, *we're* ready. (*we're* represents *we* plus *are*)

16. *I'll* talk to the manger as soon as see him. (*I'll* represents a contracted form of *I* plus *will* or *shall*)

4. The *apostrophe* is used when the construction *noun* plus *noun* is not appropriate; the second often gives the general class of things to which the compound belongs and the first indicates the type within this class (Hewings, 2005:86), e.g.:

17. Her parents sent her to a *girl's* school.

18. She works at a *women's* clinic now.

19. It is unwise to approach a *lion's* den.

5. It is used regularly in some plural nouns of unusual forms as well (ibid:305), e.g.

20. Dot your *i's*. (*the i letters*)

21. The show was famous in the *1990's*. (Numerals)

22. He was awarded two *PhD's* from two universities. (Abbreviations)

6. The *apostrophe* is not used in plurals, possessive determiners (except *one's*) or possessive pronouns (Straus,2008:7 and Brians,2005:20):

23. To do *one's* homework is important.

24. Do you like sport *cars*? (Not sport car's)

25. The dog bit *its* tail. (Not.... It's tail)

26. Is this wallet *yours*? (Not... your's)

For more details see (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973:460; Swan, 1984:209; Baker,1989: 118; Leech & Svartvik 1994:278; Penrose, 1997:2-4; Hewings,1999: 63; Seaton & Mew, 2007:153; DeCapua, 2008:38)

4. Spelling of the Apostrophe:

1. The *apostrophe* precedes the possessive "s" to realize the genitive form of singular nouns and irregular plural nouns (Praninskas, 1975:96 and Quirk et al, 1985:325):

27. *Tom's* computer is not working.

28. The *man's* hat blew with wind.

29. The *children's* room is rather small.

30. He stole the old *woman's* purse.

31. How old are *Chris's* daughter?

2. The *apostrophe* follows the plural "s" to realize the genitive form of the regular plural nouns (ibid):

32. My *sisters'* room is always messy.

33. The teacher didn't check the *students'* essays.

34. Betty does not know her *parents'* new address.

3. We can add either *an apostrophe* alone or *an apostrophe* plus the possessive "s" to realize the genitive form of singular nouns or names ending in –s. (Leech & Svartvik, 1994:276). Compare:

35. It is *James's* new car.

36. It is *James'* new car.

37. All of *Jones's* friends attended the party.

38. All of *Jones'* friends attended the party.

39. They didn't agree with the *boss's* ideas.

40. They didn't agree with the *boss'* ideas.

41. I met *Charles's* younger brother in the gym.

42. I met *Charles'* younger brother in the gym.

4. An *apostrophe* plus the possessive "s" are added to the last word to realize the genitive form of a noun phrase (Stageberg, 1981:62):

43. *Smith and Mary's* wedding is on the next Wednesday.

44. *My mother and father's* wishes came true at last.

45. Everybody went to *Bob, Carol, Ted and Alice's* party.

46. I liked *those other children's* paintings very much.

47. *That young Iraqi athlete's* performance was wonderful.

5. With the plural form of time nouns, the genitive form can sometimes be realized even though the *apostrophe* is omitted (Quirk et al, 1985:325). Compare:

48. It was a two *weeks'* vacation.

49. It was a two *weeks* vacation.

6. In contractions, the *apostrophe* is written just in the position of the omitted letters or figures (ibid:122):

50. *They'd* have passed the exam if *they'd* studied hard. (They would have passed the exam if they had studied hard.)

51. *I'm* not interested in detective stories. (I am not interested in detective stories)

52. The summer of the '89 was the loveliest for me. (The summer of the 1989 was the loveliest for me.)

For more details see: (Quirk & Greenbaum;1973:460; Swan,1984:209; Childs et al,1988:21; Burton-Roberts, 1997:156; Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002:199; Hewings,2005:86; Downing & Locke, 2006:425; Seaton & Mew,2007:153; Straus,2008:7; Henderson;Undated:37)

5. Problems in Using Apostrophes and Discussions:

There are many words with *apostrophes* which sound the same but have different spellings and different meanings.

Students are often asked to decide the suitable word for a given sentence of several given homophones. The following exercises which are designed for the fifth preparatory level of Iraqi schools exemplify this type of questions:

In this exercise, students are required to decide whether /hu:z/ stands for (*whose* or *who's*):

“Write the sentence with the correct spelling of /hu:z/:

1. I don't know the girl /hu:z/ sitting next to Layla.

2. He is the man /hu:z/ car was stolen.

3. Is she the person /hu:z/ working on the new project.

4. That's the man /hu:z/ picture was in the newspaper.”

(Muslet et al, 2012:90)

The other exercise requires students to choose the correct word:

“ 1. The bird broke (*its* ,*it's*) wing.

2. (*Its*, *it's*) been a while since I've seen you.

3. *Who's/Whose book is that anyway?*

4. *I want to meet (your, you're) children..*”

(ibid:105)

However, possible problems of this nature and some others are discussed in the following with some practical techniques proposed to help learners deal with certain problematic homophones associated with the use of the *apostrophe*.

5.1 Apostrophes Indicating Possessive Constructions and Contracted Verb Forms

In contracted forms, the *apostrophe* is used to indicate the case in which one or more letters are dropped (Quirk, et al, 1985:122). Both native speakers and foreign learners of English sometimes confuse the contracted verb forms with the possessive forms and some other homophones, e.g.

53. This is the *teacher's* bag.

54. The *teacher's* been absent.

The most confusing homophones of this type are discussed in the following subsections.

5.1.1 It's and its / he's and his

Many unqualified learners may confuse *it's* with *its* and *he's* with *his* (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002:258). Consider the following examples where learners are asked to choose the right word:

55. *My favourite custom is the dishdasha . It's/Its great.*(Maris, 2010:5)

56. *I'm from a city in England. Its/It's name is Oxford.*(ibid)

57. *My friend is from Melbourne. His/He's great.*(ibid)

58. *My friend if from Britain. He's/His going to visit me next week.*

59. *My friend is from Australia. He's/His name is Mark.*(Maris, 2010:5)

60. *His name's Alan. my friend.*(His/He's/He) (ibid:7)

61. *My favourite custom is the abaya. It's/Its Lebanese.* (ibid).

62. *It's,its going to be the most famous festival in the world.*

63. *The cat lost its/it's fur.*

64. *The river flowed over its/it's banks because of the heavy rains.*

65. *He's/ his written an account of the trip.*

66. *Dan is talking to his/he's mother on the phone.*

Discussion:

In (55, 61 and 62) learners should choose *It's* which is a contracted form for the subjective pronoun *it* plus *is* or *has* . In (56, 63 and 64) they should choose *Its* which is a dependent possessive pronoun. In (57, 85, 60, 65 and 66) *He's* is the correct choice which is a contracted form for the subjective pronoun *he* plus *is* or *has*. *His* is right for (59 and 66) which is a dependent possessive pronoun. Clearly, *It's* sounds like *its* and *he's* sounds like *his* and the *apostrophe* in *it's* or *he's* is barely noticed (Brians, 2005:441).

To avoid such confusion, teachers are recommended to have learners do more exercises in order to build an adequate competence of the forms of these words. Moreover, they can draw learners' attention that the only case in which (*it* plus *s*) and (*he* plus *s*) have *apostrophes* are when they are contractions for (*it is* or *it has*) and (*he is* or *he has*) respectively (Straus, 2008:7).

5.1.2 who's and whose

As is the case of *it's* and *its*, learners may also confuse the contracted form *who's* (The subjective pronoun *who* plus *is* or *has*) with the genitive *whose* because both forms sound identical (DeCapua,2008:323), e.g.

67. Carol is the girl *whose* car was repaired.

68. Betty bought the house *whose* garden is full of apple trees.

69. Tom is the man *who's* repairing Carol's car.

70. Tom is the man *who's* repaired Carol's car.

Discussion:

In sentences (67 and 68) *whose* is a genitive pronoun, whereas, in (69 and 70) *who's* is a subjective pronoun plus *is* and *has* respectively. *Whose* refers to the possession of something by someone or something else. It signals a possessive relationship between two nouns. Precisely, genitive *whose* indicates that the following noun belongs to the preceding one (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002:259). However, learners still may confuse the genitive pronoun *whose* with the subjective pronoun *who's* (See: Alexander et al,1975:9; Brians, 2005:223 and Straus, 2008:64).

To solve such a problem, focusing on syntax beside the role an *apostrophe* may play will be of great help. Nevertheless, (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002:119) state that the relative pronoun

whose resembles the possessive adjectives *his, her, its, their* in semantic and syntactic functions. So further disambiguation can be done when considering the fact that confusion between *whose* and *who's* can be avoided by checking whether *my, his, her, its, their* can substitute *whose*. If the resultant sentence is still conveying the same information on the semantic and syntactic levels, then learners should understand that the word they deal with is the genitive *whose*. In the following examples, we try to apply this technique to decide the right word:

71. Jerry is the man *who's/whose* car was stolen.

71.a Jerry is the man *his* car was stolen.

72. Those are the pupils *whose/who's* answers are correct.

72.a Those are the pupils *their* answers are correct.

73. It's me *whose/who's* to blame.

73.a *It's me *my* to blame.⁽¹⁾

74. I know *whose/who's* painted the house.

74.a * I know *your* painted the house.

Notice that sentences (71a and 72a) with a possessive adjective replacing the word of confusion still express the same meaning and have the same syntactic facts as in (71 and 72). In Sentences (73a and 74a) the possessive adjective don't function the same as *who's* in (73 and 74). Thus, learners can be sure that when they replace *whose/whose* with a possessive pronoun and the new sentence convey the same meaning they should choose *whose* whereas the opposite is true for *who's*.

However, the relative pronouns *whose* and *who's* are not the only homophones of the genitive pronoun *whose* and the subjective pronoun *who's*. Still, there are the question words *whose* and *who's*. *Whose* asks about the possessor and it usually precedes a noun denoting a thing belonging to someone and in some cases this noun is not stated when the item possessed is insight. (Praninsaks, 1975:42), e.g.:

75. *Whose* book is that?

76. *Whose* is this?

As a homophone of *whose*, the question word *who* asks about the doer of an action and in this very case it is either followed by *is* or *has* (Praninsaks, 1975:42).

The two homophones need to be dealt with in a slightly different way. The ambiguity can be resolved by regarding whether the form of confusion i.e. *who's* or *whose* can be replaced by *who is*. If the new sentence is still grammatical, then learners are to be certain that the word they deal with is the question word *who* plus an auxiliary verb and not the question word *whose*. This test is suitable for recognising genitive *whose* and the question word *whose* as well, Compare:

77. *Whose/ Who's* here? (Muslet et al., 2012:105)

77.a *Who is* here?

78. *Whose/ Who's* been robbed?

78.a *Who is* been robbed?

79. *Whose/ Who's* jacket is this?

79.a * *Who is* jacket is this?

80. *Whose/ Who's* the man with the jacket?

80.a *Who is* the man with the jacket?

81. It doesn't matter *whose/who's* fault it is?

81.a * It doesn't matter *who is* fault it is?

82. There are some British citizens *whose/whose* parents don't speak English.

82.a * There are some British citizens *who is* parents don't speak English

Notice that sentences (77a, 78a and 80a) with *who is* replacing *whose/who's* are semantically and syntactically correct. Thus, we can be sure that *who's* is the suitable word. While, replacing *whose/who's* with *who is* in (79a, 81a and 82a) yields inappropriate sentences and this leads us to conclude the right choice should be *whose*.

5.1.3 They're / Their /There

They're, there and their sound alike and many unqualified learners may confuse them (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002: 259):

83. *They're* staying at a five-star hotel!

84. *They're* late again.

85. *Their* books are on the table.

86. Last year, we visited London and stayed *there* for a week.

87. Is *there* any food left?

88. *There* seems to be a mistake here.

Discussion

They're in (83) and (84) is a contraction for the subjective pronoun *they* plus the auxiliary verb *are*. *Their* in (85) is a dependent possessive adjective. *There* in (86) is an adverb and in (87) and (88) is a subject of *be* and *seem* respectively.

The best way to differentiate between these three structures is to recognise the *apostrophe* in *they're*. Learners should know that the only form of the homophones *they're*, *there* and *their* that has an *apostrophe* is a contraction for (*they* plus *are*) (Brians, 2007: 205).

As for the other two homophones, *their* is a dependent possessive adjective and it is always followed by a noun in the genitive case. *There* is an adverb as in (86) or a subject of *be*, *seem*, *appear* etc. as in (87 and 88) (Burton-Roberts, 1997: 156). This fact entails that it will be easier for learners to avoid confusing *their* with *there*. Learners can replace *their* or *there* with a possessive adjective and observe if the resultant is a grammatical sentence. If the new sentence is grammatically acceptable¹ then it should be understood that a given sentence should go with *is their*. If the new sentence doesn't make sense then learners should be sure that the word they deal with is *there*. Now, let's use this technique to decide the right choice in the following examples:

89. Their room is over *their/there*. (Harris et al., 2010:15)

89.a* Their room is over *my*.

90. *There/Their* children are swimming too. (ibid)

90.a *Your* children are swimming too.

91. Is that *their/there* new car?(Dean, 2010:37)

91.a Is that *your* new car?

92. *There/Their* goes the last bus!

92.a* *My* goes the last bus!

93. They camped *there/their* for ten days.

93.a* They camped *my* for ten days.

94. *There/Their* camping in the forest was for ten days.

94.a *Our* camping in the forest was for ten days.

Notice that sentences (90a, 91a and 94a) with possessive pronouns as an alternative of the word of confusion are grammatically correct and this entails that the right choice should be *their*. Whereas, sentences (89a, 92a and 93a) have the

possessive pronouns not followed with a possessed thing and they are, thus, grammatically incorrect. This fact assures us that the word we should use is *there*.

5.1.4 Theirs and there's

Learners frequently fail to distinguish the differences between these two forms because they sound very alike, e.g.:

95. *There's* a tree in front of the house.

96. *There's* been some mistake in this bill.

97. I brought my bag with me but the two boys forgot *theirs*.

98. *Theirs* is the house with tree in front of.

Discussion:

Theirs is an independent possessive pronoun. *There's* is a contraction of *there* plus *is* or *has*. Again and as is the case with other possessive pronouns previously mentioned, teachers should draw students' attention that the *apostrophe* is not used with possessive pronouns (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002:200 and Hewings, 2005:86). Therefore, whenever students confuse *theirs* with *there's* they should be sure that the word bearing an *apostrophe* must be a contraction for *there* plus *is* as in (95) or *there* plus *has* as in (96).

Further clarification of these very confusing homophones can be achieved by replacing *theirs* or *there's* with a possessive pronoun and

see if the new sentence is acceptable. If the new sentence still makes sense¹ then learners can be sure that the word they deal with is *theirs*. If the new sentence with the replaced possessive pronoun is ungrammatical then learners should be sure the word they deal with is *there's*. Contrast:

99. *Theirs/ There's* is the red car.

99.a *His* is the red car.

100. *Theirs/ There's* a red car in the park.

100.a * *His* a red car in the park.

101. *Theirs/ There's* been an accident.

101.a * *Hers* been an accident.

102. The restaurant in the corner is *theirs/there's*.

102.a The restaurant in the corner is *hers*.

103. *Theirs/ There's* a restaurant around the corner.

103.a * *Yours* a restaurant around the corner.

104. It's a favourite game of *theirs/there's*.

104.a It's a favourite game of *hers*.

105. My neighbour owns a big chain of restaurants. *Theirs/ There's* are the best restaurants in the town.

105.a My neighbour owns a big chain of restaurants. *Yours* are the best restaurants in the town.

Sentences (99a, 102a, 104a and 105a) with the possessive pronouns replacing *Theirs/ There's* are syntactically correct and according to our simple rule, this fact entails that *their* should be the suitable word. Conversely, when the resultant sentences are syntactically incorrect, then *there's* should be chosen as in (100a, 101a and 103a).

5.1.5 you're and your

Other words of confusion associated with the *apostrophe* are *you're* and *your* (Straus, 2008:56). The two homophones *you're* and *your* sound the same but are spelled differently and consequently have different meanings. *You're* is a contraction for the subjective pronoun *you* plus *are*. *Your* is a possessive pronoun (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002:259). The following examples depict the type of questions learners often face:

106. Go ahead *you're/your* about to reach the finish line.

107. *You're/Your* the first one to make friends with Tom since he came here.

108. Dave, you don't know what *you're/your* doing?

109. *You're/Your* too young to get married.

110. *You're/Your* late again!

111. *You're/Your* lecture about the environment was very useful.

112. What's *your/you're* favourite lesson?(Maris, 2010:25)

113. I want to meet *you're/your* children. (Muslet et al, 2012:105)

114. Excuse me, is this *you're/your* bag?

115. Dentists advise you to have *you're/your* teeth checked every six months.

116. This is *you're/your* typical English breakfast.

Discussion:

To solve this problem, recognizing the *apostrophe* is a decisive factor in deciding the identity of the form dealt with. As mentioned before, possessive pronouns don't take *apostrophes* (Straus, 2008:7). So whenever students confuse *your* with *you're*,

they should look for the *apostrophe*. When they don't find an *apostrophe* they should be sure that the form of confusion is the possessive pronoun *your* and verse versa. Moreover, learners can test if they have made the right choice by replace the form of confusion with *they are*. If the resultant sentence is semantically and syntactically the same as the original one then learners should be sure that the sentence should go with *you're*. Consider the following examples where the words of confusion in sentences (106-116) are replaced with

you are:

106.a Go ahead *you are* about to reach the finish line.

107.a *You are* the first one to make friends with Tom since he came here.

108.a Dave, you don't know what *You are* doing?

109.a *You are* too young to get married

110.a *You are* late again!

111.a * *You are* lecture about the environment was very useful.

112.a * What's *you are* favourite lesson?

113.a * I want to meet *you are* children.

114.a * Excuse me, is this *you are* bag?

115.a * Dentists advise you to have *you are* teeth checked every six months.

116.a * This is *you are* typical English breakfast.

Notice that sentences (106a-110a) express the same semantic and syntactic functions as (106-110). Thus, learners can be sure that they should choose *your're*. Whereas, sentences (111a-116a) are semantically and syntactically unacceptable, so learners can be sure that they should choose *your*.

5.1.6 Let's/ Lets

Let's and *lets* sound alike and learners may confuse them (Brians,2005:126). *Let's* is a contraction for (the verb *let* plus the objective pronoun *us*). Whereas, *lets* is simply the (s) form of the verb *let*. If learners confuse these homophones, they should be noted that the only time an *apostrophe* is used is with "*let* plus *us*". Hence, the problem becomes easily handled. Learners can test which form to choose by replacing the form of confusion with (*let us*). When they find the new sentence still semantically and

syntactically acceptable, they should be sure that right choice is *let's* and vice versa. Consider the following examples:

117. *Let's/lets* go to the mall.

117.a *Let us* go to the mall.

118. My dad *let's/lets* me use his car if I fill the tank.

118.a *My dad *let us* me use his car if I fill the tank.

119. It's too hot, *let's/lets* go swimming.

119.a It's too hot, *let us* go swimming.

120. Mrs. Baker *let's/lets* her children go swimming when it is too hot.

120.a *Mrs. Baker *let us* her children go swimming when it is too hot.

Discussion:

Sentences (117a and 119a) with *let us* replacing the form of confusion are semantically and syntactically acceptable. Therefore, *let's* should be chosen. Whereas, *let us* renders sentences (118a and 120a) semantically and syntactically unacceptable. Accordingly, *lets* is the right choice.

5.2 Singular and Plural Possessive Forms with Apostrophes:

Op.5 Ac. P10

1. The *apostrophe* causes the most problems with singular and regular plurals indicating possession (Brians, 2007:20). Compare:

121. The *girl's* dresses are red. (Singular, genitive case)

122. The *girls'* dresses are red. (Plural, genitive case)

123. The teacher corrected the *student's* mistakes rapidly. (Singular, genitive case)

124. The teacher corrected the *students'* mistakes rapidly. (Plural, genitive case)

Discussion:

The *apostrophe* will be a key mark that helps learners distinguish the type of the noun they deal with. So, in handling such a problem, learners need to decide whether the noun form indicating the possessor or possessors is singular or plural. And this can be done first through excessive practice on singular and plural of regular noun forms. Second, teachers may help their students by drawing their attention that a noun with an *apostrophe* preceding the possessive "s" as in (121) and (123) is singular and it is plural

with a following *apostrophe* as in (122) and (124) (See: Murphy, 2004:162).

2. Another problem is that learners may confuse a regular plural noun form with a noun with a possessive "s". Compare:

125. These are my *sisters*.

126. These are my *sister's* friends.

127. These are my *sisters'* friends.

Discussion:

Sisters in (125) is a regular plural noun it has no *apostrophe*. *Sister's* in (126) is a singular noun with an *apostrophe* plus a possessive "s". In (127) *Sisters'* is a regular plural noun with an *apostrophe* plus an omitted possessive "s". Unqualified learners scarcely notice the slight differences in those forms. And it is the teachers' role to explain all about such an ambiguity. They may draw their students' attention that regular plurals never require *apostrophes* (See Swan, 1984:179). So, whenever they meet a noun form like that in (125), they should be certain that it is not a possessive form. With regular plural possessive forms, the *apostrophe* should be added after the "s" plural suffix and the possessive "s". is usually omitted. In singular nouns, the *apostrophe* is added at the end followed by the possessive "s"(See Quirk et al, 1985:319).

3. More possible problems are confusing homophones like that of *signs*¹ (regular plural), *signs* ("s" form of the verb), *sign's* (a contracted form for *sign* plus *is*), and *sign's* (contraction for *sign* plus *has*), e.g.:

128. There are no *signs* that Charles was a rich man.

129. Charles *signs* the papers before he leaves the office.

130. The *sign's* noticed by the watchman.

131. The *sign's* noticed by the watchman

Discussion:

Signs in (128) is a regular plural noun it has no *apostrophe*. *Signs* in (129) is the "s" form of the verb *sign*. In (130) *Sign's* is a noun with an *apostrophe* plus the auxiliary *is*. In (131) *Sign's* is a noun with an *apostrophe* plus the auxiliary verb *has*.

To clarify all about such a problem, teachers are recommended to focus on syntax. They can help their students observe that what follow the words with the *apostrophes* like those

in (130) and (131) are verbs in the past participle forms. This fact entails that what precede the past participle forms must be contractions for auxiliary verbs (See: Greenbaum & Nelson, 2007:292). Learners can identify the word class of homophones of this type through the slot they occupy in a given sentence.

6. Conclusion:

1. Commonly, the *apostrophe* causes the most problems in singular and plural words indicating ownership, time, quantity and the shortened forms.
2. Problems with *apostrophe* particularly occur when learners have to deal with homophones associated with *apostrophes*.
3. Learners of English do not usually build the adequate competence of the language through sufficient practice on its various forms and uses. This fact entails that learners are unable to recognise homophones accompanied by *apostrophes*.
4. The first language interference may constitute a substantial cause for the difficulties in dealing with the *apostrophe*. Learners whose native language has no use of *apostrophe* or have a different forms with different uses often have some difficulties in dealing with the *apostrophe* due to the negative transfer.

7. Recommendations:

The study suggests the following as some practical methods in order to cope with difficulties associated with the *apostrophe*:

1. Teachers should focus on the most common areas in which learners may face some difficulties with the *apostrophe* and try to help learners overcome them through various methods and materials.
2. Teachers should consider the errors related to *apostrophes* committed by their learners when designing tests in punctuation and writing in general so that they could measure their improvement by proper tests..
3. Generally, non-native speakers often require specific instructions in the use of the *apostrophe*.
4. Learners should have sufficient practice to be familiar with the different functions of the homophones associated with the use of the *apostrophe*.
5. Using the *apostrophe* requires mastery of the different features of the language. In other words, learners should be taught to look

for a quite wider frame to cover the structural environment in which an *apostrophe* may appear.

6. Teachers should exclude the idea that teaching punctuation in the early stages of learning is not important.

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