

ISSN 2550-7753

International Journal of Educational Issues

Vol. 5, No 1, October 2015



Published by

Department of Arts Education
Faculty of Education
Adekunle Ajasin University
Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria



THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

Volume 5, No 1, October 2015

Published by:

**DEPARTMENT OF ARTS EDUCATION,
FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

ADEKUNLE AJASIN UNIVERSITY,
Akungba Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria

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International Journal of Educational Issues
Department of Arts Education
Adekunle Ajasin University
Akungba Akoko, Ondo State

ISSN 2550-7753

Printed by:

Amure Super Printers,
Ikare-Akoko, Ondo State.
Tel: 08057072023

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A STUDY OF SPELLING ERRORS IN THE WRITTEN ENGLISH OF REMEDIAL STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN, ILORIN, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the spelling errors in the written English of the remedial students of University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. A total of one hundred students were randomly selected from the Faculty of Science and Arts. The instrument used for data gathering was a Teacher-Made Test (TMT) while simple percentage and frequency counts were used for data analysis. Among others, the findings revealed that weak morphophonemic attainment and over-generalization accounted for the students' poor spelling in written essays. On the basis of the findings, it was recommended among others, that teachers of the Use of English should teach spelling drillings through dictation. Also, they should provide opportunities for learners to always listen to recorded model materials in Standard British English (SBE).

Key words: spelling errors, written English, remedial students, university of Ilorin, Nigeria

Introduction

For close to four decades running, there have been consistent and robust researches in the field of Error Analysis. These researches have consistently shown that many learners, particularly, learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) have not attained a proficiency level that will make them write with minimal error. This paper too reports the findings of a study conducted to examine the spelling of errors made in the written English of Remedial Students of University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. The need for learners at the tertiary levels of education to be efficient writers cannot be over-emphasised. Undoubtedly, their achievement in English language and almost all other school subjects is largely tied to their ability to express themselves effectively in written English. Yet,

research findings of scholars such as Okedara and Oden (2001) have revealed that most learners at the different education ladder in Nigeria are poor in written English. Some of the reasons identified for the poor writing skill are pedagogical problems, teachers' attitude, and learners' as well as teachers' problems with the English orthography (Orisawayi, 1990; Adeniyi, 2006; and Dewey, 2009).

There are diverse opinions on how English orthography affects the written English of learners of English as a Second Language (ESL). Adeniyi (2006) sees English orthography as a burden to school children and their teachers; and Dewey (2009), a block on the path of literacy, an obstacle to foreign learners of English, and a persistent nuisance to writers, typists and printers. However, Taylor (1991) disagrees that English spelling constitutes a severe obstacle to learning the subject. On the contrary, he asserts that English has a very good writing system, which gives learners much valuable and essential information about such crucial matters as stress, morphology, lexis and syntax. He identifies three basic English writing systems— ideographic, syllabic, and alphabetic. The ideographic has no unique correspondence between sounds and symbols. The symbolic/ideograph stands directly for lexical and grammatical idea, that is, morpheme. It does not directly represent the phonological or phonetic shape of the morpheme, for instance, when we produce 'i.e' (idest) as 'that is' or viz (videlicef) as 'namely', we are using ideograms.

The second type of English writing system is syllabic (i.e there is direct correspondence between sounds and symbols). The symbol in this case represents a syllable. For example, the word 'ceremony' has four syllables— ce/re/mo/ny. The third type he identified as alphabetic, wherein individual symbols or letters represent individual sounds. But this does not necessarily mean that one individual letter corresponds directly or regularly to one individual sound. He further explains that an alphabetic system is based on separate and individual letters representing separate and individual sounds, regardless of whether the correspondence between sounds and letters is simple and straight forward or not. In ideographic writing, we can say then that the symbols represent 'meanings' whereas in syllabic and alphabetic writings, the symbols represent sounds. Taylor (1991) however concludes that English cannot have a writing system that directly reflects speech because in any variety of English, words are not always pronounced in the same way.

Milton (1996) explains that English orthography is basically alphabetic and that there is sufficient consistency between letter and sound for it to be possible at least to begin the teaching of reading by sounding the letters individually and showing how they form words. For instance, the 'b' of 'bat' corresponds to /b/, the 't' of 'to' corresponds to /t/ etc. But the orthography departs obviously from the alphabetic principle. There are only twenty-six letters to represent thirty-six phonemes. Letter-pairs are often used instead of single letters to represent a single phoneme such as sh, th, oa, and oe, occasionally giving rise to momentary confusion when the letters are not to be taken as a pair e.g bishop, misup, swart and cooperative. This will only be a minor problem if the letters and the phonemes correspond consistently, but they do not. Milton (1996) further asserts that many phonemes have several different representations, e. g /f/ can be written as 'f' in (often), 'ff' in (off), 'ph'

in (graph), 'gh' in (enough). Many letters or letter patterns have more than one pronunciation e.g. 'ou' in out, four, though, tough, cough, though, dough and borough. At times, the principle breaks down so badly that one hesitates to say what corresponds with what e.g. to what extent does the gh correspond in night and bought? Which letter represents the /t/ in picture, or the /w/ in choir? Milton (1996) however concludes that if English spellings were redesigned on straight alphabetic lines, there would be more letters in the alphabet; each phoneme will be represented by just one letter and each letter will represent just one phoneme. This would obviously ease many spelling problems for second language learners and typists.

Some spelling errors occur because the writer does not know how to spell the word. These types of errors are sometimes called errors of competence. Other errors occur when the writer knows perfectly well how to spell the word but for some reasons writes or types something else. These are errors of performance. In discussing errors of competence which is more relevant to this work, it is obvious that some sounds are harder to spell than others and hard words are not uniformly hard all along but contain hard spots. Rogers (2000) identifies some hard spots that constitute errors in competence. They are:

- a) silent letters e.g. scissors, exhibition, etc
- b) double letters or single letters could be double, e.g. successful, disappoint, accommodation, etc
- c) when there are several plausible renderings of a particular phoneme, especially when the correct one is not the most obvious, e.g. politician (most often written as politition, ecstasy-extasy, etc
- d) in pronunciation, if the majority of the people start using or saying a word in a wrong way, then what used to be 'wrong' becomes 'right'. For instance, if most people use criteria as a singular rather than a plural word then with time, its use as a singular word becomes standard.

All these hard spots are places where pronunciation does not give good guidance as a spelling. This suggests that learners are guided (or misguided) by the pronunciation of a word when they are trying to spell it.

The influence of pronunciation on spelling as explained by Milton (1996) shows that learners' accents sometimes affect their spelling. For instance, the typical Hausa learner pronouncing 'Paul' as 'Faul', 'Park' as 'Fark', 'those' as 'zose', and so on. Also, some people have trouble spelling words with consonant clusters that contain /l/ such as split; the /l/ is either omitted or misplaced. Their hearing and pronunciation appear normal but when they are asked to analyze the sound structure of one of these clusters, they seem unable to identify the /l/ sound as a separate phoneme. Baron (1980) asserts that poor spellers generally are not good at analyzing the pronunciation of a word into its constituent phonemes. Presumably, this partly accounts for their poor spelling.

Overgeneralization is also one of the causes of errors among learners. Zydatiss (1996) carried out an analysis of spelling errors and concluded that overgeneralization marred students write up. Also, Wyatt's (1976) study shows that the omission of letters and miss-use of letters account for the causes of poor spelling of words among the subjects.

Other spelling errors are due to the problems bordering on inadequate supply of quality English textbooks. Richards (1971) asserts that production and supply of poor quality textbooks by hungry authors account for external causes of spelling errors among learners of English.

In Nigeria, English is widely used in all our daily routines. Most public businesses are transact in English. It is used as a suitable medium for international and national relations and cooperation. It is employed as a tool for the promotion of science and technology, for administration of sports and industry, commerce and so on. The prestigious status and roles the English language plays in Nigeria, particularly in her education system, and indeed globally, makes it a language that all learners in different rungs of education have to learn and be proficient in. However, critical studies of learners' performance in written English show that they are incompetent. For learners to attain a high standard in English language, they must have a sound mastery of the rudiment of English spelling. Oyeyemi, (1993) observes that good writing stems from a thorough knowledge of the English spelling system. It is therefore crucial to undertake an analysis of spelling errors in the written English of the remedial students of the University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. These set of students who are already in the mainstream of the university education must be groomed from the outset on the efficient process of writing English essays so that they can develop efficient communicative competence. The study will be significance in that it will bring to the fore the problematic areas of the learning of English spelling. It will also trace the sources of such errors and provide possible remediation.

The role and status of English language in Nigeria

The place and importance of English language in Nigeria demands the learners to demonstrate a high level of proficiency and competence in both its spoken and written forms. Despite the arguments against the continued adoption of the English language and the call for the adoption an indigenous language as the lingua franca in Nigeria, English still remains a great force to reckon with in this country. There is no language that wields as much influence socially, economically, politically and academically as the English language. Apart from its functions as the language of commerce and administration among the various linguistic groups in the country, it is also the language of instruction at all levels of education (though this is in tandem with the Federal Government language policy statement that the child's mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction at the pre-primary and lower primary levels of education).

English language is a pre-requisite for admission into tertiary institutions of learning in Nigeria. It is the language of instructional delivery for virtually all the courses offered in such institutions. In fact, the ability to speak English is what one could refer to as the Oral Certificate to show that one has been to school. A learner, who cannot speak English in Nigeria, is looked down upon. In sum, the English language is seen as a supreme language because it is with it that Nigeria, a multilingual nation, can communicate with one another.

Functions of Spelling in Written English

Mastering of spelling in any language is a key to successful writing while bad

spellings distract the reader. This is because bad spellings attracts undue attention to itself and occasionally hampers meaning thereby creating a barrier between a writer and the reader. Adegbiya (1986) asserts that almost any word can be misspelt if a writer is not careful. However, some English words are more prone to be misspelt than other words.

Bad spelling of words renders work meaningless while correct spelling enables the readers to understand what the writer is passing across in any piece of writing. Any write-up with good spelling of words makes comprehension better, easier and possible for the reader. Conversely, correct and good spelling of words decrease communication gap between the writer and the reader. It aids better and fast reading. It permits good pronunciation of words and also aids listener to understand the word pronounced when it pronounced in the proper way.

The Place of Error Analysis in Language Teaching

Error analysis (E.A) is another approach to the study of errors in language production through systematic consideration of all possible sources of errors. Corder (1967), Adegbiya (1986), and Zydatiss (1996) do not all succumb to the empiricist notion of transfer and interference in language learning. For instance, Adegbiya (1986) notes that a second language (L2) learner, in this framework, is often compared to the first language (L1) learner by their similarity of errors. This implies that learners make errors in L2 learning as they do in L1 acquisition. Adegbiya then submits that the errors the learner makes are inherent within that language system and are not native language induced. That is, there are intralingual errors.

In the opinion of Olasehinde (2002) it is inevitable for learners to make errors and errors are unavoidable and a necessary part of the learning curve. She asserts that error analysis in language learning has an important Applied Linguistic justification because the data (data of error) from classroom can both serve as input to theoretical discussions and, after evaluation, feedback to the design of remedial curricula. In other words, the study of errors permits the formulation of rules for learner's interlingual systems, thus providing, incidentally for the teacher, confirmation of what remains to be learned, indicating progress and success as well.

Corder (1971) also proposes that if learner's errors are systematically studied, they could provide significant insights into how languages are actually learned. In the same vein, Dulay and Burk (1974) also submit that errors should not be treated as pathologies to be eradicated but as necessary stage in the gradual acquisition of the target language. They further assert that a systematic study of these errors might reveal more facts about language acquisition and inspire better language teaching methods.

Corder (1974) points out that the study of error is part of the investigation of the process of teaching. Error analysis is important in textbooks writing. It also helps in preparation of teaching materials and suggests to textbook writers or language teachers not only area to concentrate on but also how they should be ordered when being presented to the learners. Corder (1974) identifies three stages in error analysis as recognition, description and explanation. These three stages are preceded by collecting of samples of

learners' speech, written or oral, analyzing then, identifying the source and causes of each error.

Furthermore, Corder (1974) claims that error analysis provides feedback to the teachers. Errors enable teachers to discover the effectiveness of his teaching materials. He reveals that error analysis is useful in the methodological world and function in many ways as summarised below.

- a. Error helps in planning a future scheme for the students.
- b. It serves as a diagnostic agent.
- c. Error helps the syllabus designer
- d. Error aids teachers discover student's problem and means to solving the identified problems
- e. Error analysis is helpful in organizing and administering achievement test.

Research Methodology

In carrying out this research, one hundred remedial students were randomly selected from the Faculty of Science and Arts. A Teacher Made Test (TMT) was used to collect data. Simple percentage and frequency count were the statistical tools used for data analysis.

The choice of the subjects was deliberate since the category of these students has completed senior secondary school programmes. They have gained enough experience in English language to be able to write correctly a large extent of words in English.

The following questions are raised for the purpose of this study:

1. What are the major categories of spelling errors often committed by the learners?
2. What other minor spelling errors are committed by the learners?

Presentation of Data and Analysis

Research Question 1

What are the major categories of spelling errors often committed by the students?

Table 1: Frequency and percentage distribution of major categories of spelling errors committed by the learners.

Categories of Spelling Errors	Frequency	Percentage%
Omission of letters	130	52
Phono-graphological	65	26
Addition of letters	40	16
Overgeneralization	15	6
	250	100%

Table 1 above shows the categories of spelling errors and their frequency of occurrence. A total number of 250 errors were identified from the test of the students. Omission of letter top the list with 130 (50%) errors. Addition of letters has 40 which is 16%, phono-graphological came out with 65 (20%) errors while overgeneralization has the least frequency occurrence: 15 (6%) of the total errors committed.

Research Question 2.

What other minor spelling errors are often committed by learners?

Table 1: Frequency and percentage distribution of minor categories of spelling errors identified

Categories of minor spelling errors	Frequency	Percentage%
Inconsistency in writing letters in words	110	64.7
Omission of punctuation marks in words	60	35.3
Total	170	100%

It is can be seen from table 2 above that the inconsistency in the English spelling system and errors of omission of punctuation have made the students to deviate totally from the rules guiding the award of marks in English.

Discussion

Findings from this study revealed that the students committed more error of omission of letters than other errors. That is, omission of letters had 52% of the total errors identified from the result. For instance, some of the errors committed by the students include: 'Febuary', 'Septeber', 'begining', and 'collegues'.

Phono-graphological errors had 26% of the total errors identified in the study and it is next to error of omission of letter. For instance, some students wrote 'clik', 'devise' 'compasion', 'hagard', 'odeal'. Thus, this finding agrees with Wyatt's (1976) study that the omission of letters account for the causes of poor spelling among the subjects.

The findings also revealed that addition of letters had 16% of the total errors committed by the students. It is clear that this error was less committed than phonological errors by the students. For example, students wrote: 'harmlet', 'priviledge', 'coronetion'. These findings simply show that most of the students were not careful about what they wrote; little or no attention was paid to their spellings.

Generally, students were a bit more conscious of overgeneralization error during the course of their writing than the other three spelling errors that the earlier researchers found out. This is against the finding of Zydatiss (1996) whose study on analysis of spelling errors showed that overgeneralization marred students write up.

Conclusions:

The study has highlighted and discussed the types of spelling errors that were frequently committed by the students. The findings from this research show that spelling is

very important to the study of English language. Therefore, remedial students should be motivated to develop good spelling habits and as well use words correctly in spelling and writing. As pointed out by different researchers, spelling mistakes and errors are inevitable. However, learners of English language should always make efforts to reduce errors to the barest minimum in their writing and ultimately strive towards error-free writing.

Recommendations:

On the basis of the findings, the following recommendations are made: Teachers of the Use of English should teach spelling drilling through dictation. They should take cognizance of the need to concentrate more on developing good spelling habits in their student. Teachers should be good models themselves and in addition, they should make it a routine for learners to always listen to recorded model materials in Standard British English (SBE).

The result of this study suggests to textbook writers the need to revise the existing texts and give concentrate more on spelling exercises in the language content. The problematic areas that have been identified in this study should be given priority in the selection of course books.

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