

Spelling Errors: Causes, Influence on Students' Performance in English Language Essay Writing and Strategies for Correcting Them

Author Details: Dada, Esther M. (Mrs.) Institute of Education, Faculty of Education, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti

Abstract: *Spelling as a language sub-skill is so important in learning any particular language. For students to excel in learning English Language and indeed all subjects (since English language is the language of instruction), they must understand and be competent in the rudiment of spelling. Unfortunately, Nigerian students of English Language seem to be deficient in the use of spelling as a sub-skill of English Language. Most of their write ups are full of spelling errors. It also seems much is not done by the stakeholders to address the problem. This study therefore assessed errors in students essay writing, causes of these errors, the influence of these errors on student's performance in essay writing and suggested strategies that could be used to correct them. The descriptive research design of the survey type was employed for the study. The population consisted of all secondary schools in Akure South Local Government Area of Ondo State. The sample consisted of 175 students and teachers randomly selected from 5 secondary schools (30 students and 5 teachers per school) within the population area. Two instruments were used for data collection. Students' essay writing which served as corpus on which analysis was made to identify the pattern of spelling errors and a self constructed and validated questionnaire administered on the teachers to elicit responses on the causes, influence of errors and strategies that can be used to correct them among the students. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentages. Results showed that spelling errors found in students' essays include, omission of letter(s), addition of letter(s), reduplication of letter(s) among others. Some of the causes of error include the fact that students don't usually take the pain to go through their work after writing; there are few books that emphasise spelling errors in the school libraries. Appropriate recommendations are made based on the findings of the study.*

Key words: *Spelling errors, Students' performance in English language, Essay writing, Nigerian students of English language, Error analysis.*

1. Introduction

Spelling is a language sub-skill under writing. It is such an essential skill of writing that has to be mastered by all learners and users of English language for the purpose of good communication in the written form of the language. A good writer must take cognizance of his/her spelling in order to avoid communication error or communication breakdown. Spelling is usually described as the correct arrangement of letters to represent a word. It relates to the knowledge of the orthography (the system of symbols and rules used to represent spoken language in writing) of a particular language. Students who wish to write well should therefore make frantic effort to understand and avoid spelling mistakes/errors especially in a second language situation.

English Language spelling is irregular that even the native speakers have problems with it. According to Asudo and Marsh (1998), English is a language with many rules, oddities and exceptions in its spelling. Many English words are not pronounced the way they are spelt and this has constituted a huge problem to learners of the language. Also, certain words sound alike in English language and this can lead to error while learners are writing them. Examples of such words are Seize/cease, scene/sin, right/write, suit/sooth among others.

Spelling is a complex cognitive activity in which several mental processes are involved. Learning to spell correctly is not usually easy for many people but it is very important for all those who are learning the language. This is because part of what determines a learner's proficiency in English Language is his/her ability to spell correctly for accurate expression. According to Kuiper and Allan (2004), English Language spelling seems straight forward in theory but turns out to be a little more complex in practice. They claim that many people find spelling difficult because English Language spelling does not always directly reflect the sounds people make when they say a word. To them, the problems associated with the spelling of English language could be based on three reasons:

- (1) We interpret words as sequences of sound segment rather than as continuous streams of sound.
- (2) The number of letters in the written version of a word and the number of sound segments in the spoken version are not necessarily the same.
- (3) Sometimes the same word can be pronounced with different sequences of sound segment.

Given the above reasons, learners are prone to committing spelling errors in English Language. Spelling errors are deviation from the rules of forming words (arranging letters to form words) which could occur in the form of replacing one letter with the other, omission of letters or wrong arrangement of the letters of a word (Oluwadare, 2012). As earlier stated English Language spelling is consistently inconsistent. According to Botley and Dillah (2007), spelling errors are ubiquitous because despite years of drilling and training in schools, spelling errors still appear in large numbers in the writing produced by learners. They investigated spelling errors using a corpus of university students' essay and found that omission of letters ranked highest among the categories of errors found among the students in their study. Spelling errors fall under what Kato (2006) categorised as mechanical errors which include, punctuation, spellings and capitalisation. According to Summaira (2011), committing errors is a reflection of a cognitive activity of a learner and tells us a great deal about the internalised process of language production. This implies that students commit spelling errors for lack of competence in the target language. According to James (1998) spelling errors fall within the context of Error Analysis (EA) and they occur when a learner makes an encoding error while writing and could be distinguished as 'mis-spellings' on one hand and 'mechanical errors in writing' on the other hand. Khansir (2010) posits that behaviourists believe that errors are symptom of ineffective teaching or as evidence of failure and also views it as largely due to mother tongue interference that the teacher has failed to predict and allow for when errors do occur. Even though errors are seen as an integral part of language learning, they are to be remedied by a bombardment of correct forms.

Many reasons seem to be responsible for students' spelling errors. These include the fact that English language comes from different languages, that is, it has borrowed a bit of words from other languages like Latin, French and Greek. The fact that English Language has borrowed words from different languages makes its spelling to lack uniformity. Sometimes, English language even retain the original form of certain words from the language from which they were borrowed, examples of such words are: Clichés, elite, fiancée, fiancé.

Other possible reasons students commit spelling errors borders on the fact that English language is not a syllabic language and this makes spelling English words difficult by itself. Words are not sometimes written as they are pronounced. The discrepancies between the spoken and written form contributes a lot to spelling errors among students of English Language since many words having the same sound(s) are spelt differently. Furthermore, inattention on the part of the learners, mother tongue interference and teachers most of the times do not make deliberate efforts to teach spelling especially from the secondary school level and above are part of the probable reasons.

Based on the problems associated with the English spelling discussed above, it takes years of practice and consistent effort to be a good speller. However, it seems not quite many English language learners practice and make concerted effort at learning the English language spelling. This is why this has constituted a great problem especially as it affects students' writing. Since spelling is seen as a written language skill that draws upon an individual's repertoire of linguistic knowledge, including phonological awareness and knowledge of orthography, vocabulary, morphological knowledge and others, it requires a conscious and deliberate effort to learn it especially in a second language situation. This effort seems to be lacking among learners of English in Nigeria.

Ali (2012) asserts that errors are integral part of language learning and scholars have pointed out that the language of second language learners is systematic and that learners' errors are not random mistakes but evidence of rule-governed behavior. Scholars have made efforts to device means of assisting learners and teachers alike to ameliorate the problem of error in language learning. Two major approaches in studying students' errors are Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA). They are both offshoots of applied linguistics. Ali (2012) explains further that error analysis is to reveal that learners' errors were not only because of the learners' native language but also they reflect some universal strategies.

Essay writing is so important in learning English language in a second language situation like ours. This is why it constitutes a major aspect of the English language curriculum. However, one of the factors responsible for students' poor performance in English Language in recent years has been their inability to use the language to express their thoughts when writing. Part of what constitutes learners' inability is their deficiency of spelling English words correctly. Hartshon (2008) comments that learner's experience a lot of difficulties in their quest to produce writings that are fairly substantive and linguistically accurate, learners as well have problem of being able to express accurately the intended meaning to the examiners.

Spelling errors fall under what examiners call Mechanical Accuracy (M.A). Under M.A. grammatical errors, punctuation marks and spelling errors are assessed. WAEC Chief Examiners' reports have revealed that virtually all students don't score any mark out of 10 mark allotted to mechanical accuracy. Spelling error has been a great challenge to effective essay writing because it causes breakdown in communication and makes students' essays difficult to read.

Literature has identified some models of error analysis. Error analysis seeks to identify and describe erroneous utterances produced by a learner or a group of learners (Ogunyemi, 2014). Errors have been variously classified and some classifications include graphological, grammatical and lexicon-semantic errors, while some others include errors of omission, addition, selection and ordering. Error analysis should not just stop at identifying them but that it should include classifying them and giving an analysis/explanation on them for necessary corrections (Summaira, 2011). The first step towards this requires a selection of a corpus of language followed by the identification of errors for classification. This paper therefore collected a corpus of students' essay writing, identified and classified the spelling errors therein and also found out the causes of these spelling errors, the influence these errors have on students' easy writing and identified possible strategies for correcting students' spelling errors. In more recent years, efforts are ongoing to device technologies that could assist in analyzing errors as against the manual method that is usually cumbersome. Among such is the spell-check that would easily underline any word that is not spelt correctly. A lot of computer programming are being developed to facilitate error detection and correction.

2. Statement of the problem

Most secondary school students' essays are rife with several spelling errors, many of which have become embarrassing to both the teachers and the learners. The O'level English Language paper 1 (Essay writing) has constituted a major source of students' failure in English language as a result of students' inability to express themselves in flawless writings. A whole ten (10) marks allotted to Mechanical Accuracy (M.A) is lost as a result of spelling and other mechanical errors. It seems there is no conscious and deliberate effort on the part of teachers and even researchers to address this problem. There is paucity of studies in this area. Students often encounter problems spelling English words and there seem to be little or no effort at helping them overcome this problem. This study therefore attempted to identify this problem with a view to analysing it and suggesting solutions to the problem.

3. Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study.

- (1) What are the types of spelling errors found in the essay writing of students in the selected schools?
- (2) What are the causes of spelling errors among students?
- (3) What is the perceived influence of spelling errors on secondary school students' performance in English Language essay writing?

- (4) What are the strategies that can be used to correct spelling errors among students?

a total of 150 students and 25 teachers. Two instruments were used for data collection. The first was the essay writing of the students based on optional questions for SS 1 and II students. They were to choose a topic from two options and write a 400 word essay which served as the corpus on which analyses was made to identify the pattern of error among the students. The second instrument was a self designed and validated questionnaire which was administered on the teachers to elicit responses on the causes of error, influence of error and the strategies that can be used to correct spelling errors among the students. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentages.

4. Methodology

The study adopted the description research design of the survey type. All public senior secondary schools in Akure South Local Government Area of Ondo State constituted the population. The simple random sampling technique was used in selecting the sample. The sample consisted of 30 students and 5 teachers selected from each of the 5 secondary schools the randomly selected from the population area. These make

5. Results and Discussion

Research Question 1

What are the types of spelling errors found in the essay writing of students in the selected schools?

Table 1: Types of Spelling Errors Found in the Essay Writing of Students.

S/N	Types of Errors	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
1.	Omission of letter(s)	474	49%	1 st
2.	Addition of letter(s)	100	10.35%	4 th
3.	Reduplication of letter(s)	08	0.81%	7 th
4.	Incorrect/none use of apostrophe	11	1.14%	9 th
5.	Simplification/wrong abbreviation	08	0.83%	7 th
6.	Wrong prefixes and suffixes	04	0.41%	10 th
7.	Homophonic Error	45	4.65%	5 th
8.	One/Two faulty grapheme per word	173	17.91%	2 nd
9.	Three/Four faulty grapheme per word	106	10.97%	3 rd
10.	Order error	37	3.83%	6 th
	TOTAL	966	100%	

Table 1 above reveals that ten types of error are identified from the students essay writing. Based on the frequency in which they occurred, omission of letters ranked highest (474 occurrences) with 49%. This is followed by others in this order: One/Two faulty grapheme per word (17.91%). Having three/four faulty grapheme per word followed with 10.97%. Addition of letter(s) was next with 10.35%. Homophonic errors (4.65%), order error (3.83%), Simplification/wrong abbreviation (0.83%), Reduplication of letter(s) (0.83%), Incorrect/none use of apostrophe (1.14%), Wrong prefixes and suffixes (0.41%).

Research Question 1

What are the causes of spelling errors among students?

Table II: Causes of spelling errors among students

S/N	Items	A	%	D	%
1.	Students commit spelling errors because spelling is not actually taught as an aspect/sub skill of English language in secondary schools.	8	32	17	68
2.	Students commit spelling errors because most students don't take the pain to go through their works after writing.	25	100	0	0
3.	There are few books that emphasise spelling rules in the school libraries.	24	96	1	4
4.	Some teachers lack interest in teaching spelling.	19	76	6	24
5.	Many teachers sometimes seem to commit spelling errors while writing on the chalkboard or notebooks.	19	76	6	24

Responses from table II on the possible causes of spelling errors among students reveal that 32% of the respondents agree that it is because spelling is not actually taught as a major aspect of English Language in secondary schools while 68% of the respondents disagree. Other causes that the respondents agree to are that, most students do not take the pain to go through their works after writing (100%), there are less books that emphasise spelling rules in the school libraries (96%) some teachers lack interest in teaching. Spelling (76%) many teachers sometimes seem to commit spelling errors while writing on the chalkboard on in notebooks (100%). These responses indicate that there are different causes of spelling errors among secondary school students.

Research Question 3

What is the perceived influence of spelling errors on secondary school students’ performance in English Language essay writing?

Table III: Perceived Influence of Spelling Errors on Secondary School Students’ Performance in English Language Essay Writing?

S/N	ITEM	A	%	D	%
6.	Spelling errors make students to score less marks in essay writing.	20	80	5	20
7.	Spelling errors make students spend more than necessary time while writing essays.	21	84	4	16
8.	Spelling errors make students’ essay writing untidy.	23	92	2	8
9.	Fear of spelling errors affects students’ interest in essay writing.	23	92	2	8
10.	Spelling errors contribute to the poor performance of students in English language essay writings.	25	100	0	0

Table III reveals that considerable influence of spelling errors on students essay writing based on the responses of the respondents include, making students to score less mark in essay writing (80%), making students spend more than necessary time while writing essays (84%), making students’ essay writing untidy (92%), affecting students interest in essay writing (92%), contributing to students’ poor performance in English language (100%). The indication of these responses is that spelling errors have considerable influence on students’ performance in English language essay writing.

Research Question 4

What are the strategies that can be used to correct spelling errors among students?

Table IV: Strategies that can be Used to Correct Spelling Errors among Students.

S/N	ITEMS	A	%	D	%
11.	Students should develop the desire to learn correct spellings and denote necessary time to learning it.	25	100	0	0
12.	Emphasis should be laid on spelling rules in all recommended English language texts for secondary schools.	25	100	0	0
13.	Teachers should develop interest in and create more time to teaching spellings.	25	100	0	0
14.	Spelling should be included as a major aspect of English Language to be taught in secondary schools.	25	100	0	0
15.	Spelling competitions should be organised among students.	25	100	0	0

On table IV, all the respondents agree 100% on all the items raised on strategies that can be used to correct spelling errors among students. This indicates that if schools and other stakeholders should do the needful, the problem of spelling errors can be ameliorated.

6. Discussion of Findings

From the results of this study, it is discovered that spelling errors that occur in students' essay writing include the following, (in descending order) omission of letters, addition of letters, reduplication of letters, incorrect/non-use of apostrophe, simplification/wrong abbreviation, wrong prefixes and suffixes, homophonic error, one/two faulty grapheme per word, three/four faulty grapheme per word and order errors. This finding is similar to that of Bathley and Dilhah (2007) who found that omission of letters ranked highest among the categories of errors found among students in their study. They investigated spelling errors in Malaysian learners' Corpus in degree and diploma levels and reported the following categories of spelling errors in their descending order. Omission (31%), replacement (17%), addition (11.6%), Mis-use of punctuation (10%), L1-influence (.9%), mis-ordering (7%), doubling (5%), word coinage (4.93%), US spellings (2%), direct borrowing (1.17%) and mis-pronunciations (1%). Many other researchers have also used different categories and came up with different results. This might be as a result of the fact that there is no standardised error tagging schemas.

The study also shows that certain reasons students commit spelling errors include the fact that there are few books that emphasise spelling rules in the school library. Also, teachers do not deliberately teach spellings especially at the secondary school level and some of the teachers do sometimes commit spelling errors while writing. This is in line with the submission of Khansir (2010) that errors are symptom of ineffective teaching or as evidence of failure and also views it as largely due to mother tongue interference. The study also reveals that spelling errors are perceived to influence students' essays in a number of ways and ultimately has contributed to students' poor performance in English language. This also confirm the assertion of Hartshon (2008) that learners experience a lot of difficulties in their quest to produce writings that are fairly substantive and linguistically accurate, learners as well have problem of being able to express accurately the intended meaning to the examiners.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has shown that students in the study area commit a great deal of errors which are identifiable and can be categorised in their essay writings and quite a lot of reasons are responsible for this problem. This problem of spelling errors has also contributed in a way to their poor performance in English language, especially in essay writing. Teachers and students alike seem not to be making concerted efforts in order to ameliorate the problem of spelling errors as it is seen from the responses of the respondents. Spelling as a skill requires intensive practice and efforts to be able to achieve competence in it. If appropriate measures are put in place therefore, the problem can be tackled.

It is therefore recommended that the teaching of spelling, especially at the secondary school level should be made a major aspect of the English language curriculum and there should be concerted effort at teaching it on weekly basis. Course book writers should also lay emphasis on spelling as a writing sub-skill in their books. Teachers should also be encouraged to collect corpus of their students' writing in order to identify areas of spelling problems among their students in order to device better spelling teaching methods. Students also, should in deliberate practice that can help them improve on their spelling competence level. Appropriate textbooks should also be made available in school libraries for students and teachers to be able to use.

References

- (1) Ali, A. K. (2012). Error Analysis and Second Language Acquisition. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 5, pp. 1027-1032.
- (2) Asudo& Marsh(1998). Forty Lessons and Exercises in Grammar and Language. Nigeria: Spectrum.
- (3) Botley, S. & Dillah, D. (2007). Investigating Spelling Errors in a Malaysian Learners Corpus. *Malaysian Journal of English Language Teaching (ELT)*. Vol. 3 74-93.
- (4) Kato, A. (2006). Error Analysis of High School Student Essays. *Accent Asia (online)*, 1(2). 1- 13. Available at :<http://www.acetasia.org/1-2/kato.pdf>.
- (5) James, K. (1998). Errors in language learning and use: Exploring error analysis. London: Longman
- (6) Ogunyemi, K. O. (2014). Explicit and Implicit Manageable Reactive Focus-on-Form Strategies as Determinants of Senior Secondary School Students, Learning Outcomes in English Essay Writing. An Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
- (7) Summaria, S. (2011). Error Analysis of the Written Essays of Pakistani Undergraduate Students: A Case Study. *Asian Transaction on Basic & Applied Sciences(ATBAS)*. Vol.(3). 29-51.