

ANALYSIS OF SPELLING ERRORS AMONG PUPILS WITH SPELLING DIFFICULTIES IN NORTH-EAST NIGERIA (DEMONSTRATION PRIMARY STAFF SCHOOL, GUMEL, JIGAWA STATE).

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Abstract

This research seeks to assess the prevalence of spelling errors among pupils with spelling difficulties in Demonstration Primary Staff School, Gumel, Jigawa State, Nigeria. This is to ascertain the prevalent rate and types of these errors that English teachers may find useful to help their pupils improve their spelling proficiency. Therefore, the research used a sample of 485 pupils that comprised 250 boys and 235 girls. However, only 86 or 35.6% of pupils aged between 7-12 years were identified with spelling difficulties. The identified pupils with spelling difficulties were 40 boys and 46 girls from primary 6. Data were collected using the Spelling Proficiency Test (SPT) and analysed using frequency and ranking order. The results revealed that the prevalent rate of spelling errors was significantly higher among pupils with spelling difficulties than pupils without spelling difficulties. In addition, the investigated types of spelling errors were analyzed based on their frequency and ranking. The study recommended that teachers be aware of pupils with spelling difficulties in our schools and try to provide comprehensive support to them. They should also concentrate more on the errors with higher frequency. Finally, researchers should further investigate various strategies for improving spelling proficiency among pupils with spelling difficulties.

Keywords: Spelling Difficulties, Spelling Errors, Development Factors, Irregularity of the English Spelling System, Mother Tongue Interference

Introduction

Many researchers have carried out studies on spelling and the causes of its errors (Alhaisoni et al., 2015; Alenzi, 2018; Altamimi & Rashid, 2019b; Fitria, 2020). As a crucial component of

writing, spelling poses a major challenge to most beginner learners of English, resulting in misspelt words and incoherent sentences (Hyland, 2003). English spelling in general presents problems because of the contrast between the sounds of letters or groups of letters and the various ways they can be written (Altamimi and Rashid, 2019a). This becomes one of the obvious reasons for prevalent spelling errors bedevilling L2 learners. However, other learners with spelling difficulties may have poor phonological awareness, memory and visual/auditory perception. Therefore, pupils with one or all of these conditions may encounter many errors which repeatedly manifest in their writing. Consequently, pupils face spelling challenges due to their inability to spell correctly or to remember the spelling patterns of words. This leads to meaningless writing and poor comprehension of a written text. As a complex aspect, spelling needs mastery not only among pupils with spelling difficulties but also among other pupils who may not have the above-mentioned conditions.

Objectives of the Study

- 1) To find out the prevalent rate of the pupils exhibiting spelling difficulties among primary six (6) pupils of Demonstration Primary Staff School, Gumel, Jigawa State.
- 2) To find out the type of spelling errors exhibited by the primary six (6) pupils of Demonstration Primary Staff School, Gumel, Jigawa State.

Research Questions

- 1) What is the prevalent rate of the primary six (6) pupils who exhibit spelling difficulties in Demonstration Primary Staff School, Gumel, Jigawa State?
- 2) What are the types of spelling errors exhibited by the primary six (6) pupils of Demonstration Primary Staff School, Gumel, Jigawa State?

Spelling and its Difficulties

Spelling is highly crucial in learning the English language as its lack leads to students' pitiable academic performance. It offers insight into the actual level of learners' linguistic and cognitive abilities (Stage and Wagner, 1992). Spelling entails the correct connection of the phonemes and graphemes (Alenzi, 2018:118). The art of correctly combining a word from letters relates to the appropriate choice and arrangement of letters to form words (Fitria, 2020:24). However, learning to spell is not a straightforward process; it involves numerous mental processes (Alenzi *ibid*).

While, spelling difficulty is defined as a learning disorder with an impairment in written expression and requires the specification of whether spelling accuracy, grammar and punctuation accuracy, clarity or the organization of written expressions are compromised (American Psychology Association, 2013). Children with spelling difficulties are inaccurate writers in both orthography systems, transparent and opaque (Angelelli et al 2010). English language teachers need to identify these children and proffer comprehensive support to them.

Spelling Errors

Spelling is a complex cognitive activity in which several mental processes are involved (Esther, 2015). 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 cited in Esther, 2015).

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. Summaira (2011) affirms that committing errors is a reflection of the 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 due to a lack of competence in the target language (Esther, 2015). Likewise, Cook (1997:474) argues that “correct spelling is a sign of education; a spelling mistake is a solecism that betrays carelessness or plebeian origins. Spelling is thus a crucial factor in the way people present themselves.”

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 ‘misspellings’ on one hand and ‘mechanical errors in writing’ on the other hand. Khansir (2010) cited in Esther (2015) posits that behaviourists believe that errors are a symptom of ineffective teaching or as evidence of failure and also view it as largely due to mother tongue interference that the teacher has failed to predict and allow for when errors do occur.

Types of Spelling Errors

Basically, spelling errors have been classified into two, namely typographic and cognitive errors (Amir, 2016). The former includes errors, such as letter insertions, letter omissions, letter

substitutions and transpositions, whereas the latter stems from phonetic similarities, such as writing ‘acedemy’ instead of academy (Yanyan, 2015:1629). The following are the specific errors stated by Esther (2015), Subhi and Yasin (2015) and Amir (2016):

- (i) **Letter Insertion:** This is a spelling error where one additional letter is included in the spelling of words. One of the most common insertions is known as consonant doublings, which include errors, such as /gg/ in ‘aggreement’, /ff/ in ‘proffessional’ or /ll/ as in ‘allready’ or ‘carefull’ and are considered “one of the most complex areas of the English spelling system”. Other common insertions include the insertion of /e/ after /i/ (as in /ie/) for sounds corresponding to /ai/ in misspellings, such as ‘priemary’ or ‘dierect’. Insertions typical for pupils with spelling difficulties include writing /boxxes/ instead of /boxes/ due to a lack of phonemic awareness of letters.
- (ii) **Letter Omission:** This is a spelling error where one letter in a word is not spelt out. The most common letter omitted by pupils with spelling difficulties is /n/ when it is used within consonant clusters, such as with the misspelling ‘desigs’. Other common errors include the omission of one consonant in a pair consonant, such as the omission of /c/ from the consonant pair /cq/ in misspellings like ‘aquisition’ or the /h/ from /ch/ or /gh/ in misspellings, such as ‘scolarship’ or ‘thought’. Another common omission is the silent word-final /e/ in misspellings, such as ‘morphem’ and ‘softwar’ as well as when it precedes /ly/ in ‘unfortunatly’ or ‘completly’.
- (iii) **Letter Substitution:** This is one of the most common errors committed by pupils with spelling difficulties. It is also divided into either the substitution of single letters or grapheme substitutions of multiple related changes, for example, writing ‘thort’ instead of thought. Therefore, vowel substitutions occur with the letters /a/, /e/, and /i/, for example, /a/ may be replaced by /e/ and /i/ resulting in ‘persueded’ and ‘imaginitive’, /e/ can be replaced by /a/ and /i/ resulting in ‘machinary’ and ‘convinient’ and /i/ can be replaced by /a/ and /e/ resulting in ‘languistics’ and ‘definately’.
- (iv) **Transposition:** This is a spelling error where two consecutive letters change places. It mostly occurs with the letter pairs /e/ and /i/ that produce errors such as ‘concieved’, ‘acheived’ or ‘foriegner’. The transposition of letter pairs /t/ and /e/ is

also common and can lead to well-known confusions of homophones, such as spelling discrete as ‘discreet’ or near-homophones, such as spelling quite as ‘quiet’.

Other types of spelling errors include:

1. **Reflection of Mispronunciation:** Reflection of mispronunciation occurs in a situation whereby a pupil perceives a sound which is not pronounced. This happens as a result of not paying attention attentively to a teacher. In other words, a reflection of mispronunciation happens on the words which share the same sound but differ in spelling form (homonyms). In this case, a pupil with spelling difficulties cannot write a word contextually due to associated problems with difficulty in realizing words in context.
2. **Neographism:** This is also another type of spelling error. This situation occurs when a pupil does not know the spelling pattern of a particular word. A pupil with this form of error writes any word which comes to his/her mind without necessarily knowing whether it is correct or wrong.

The Causes of Spelling Difficulties

In fact, a recent research done by Gibreel & Babu (2018) explained the following as the main causes of spelling errors:

- (i) **Development Factors:** One of the main causes of spelling errors is natural developmental factors. Many of the spelling errors that learners of English commit stem from the linguistic development stage, which conditions what learners are capable of producing. Such errors are out of their hands, as the language stage they are at does not enable them to master certain language features. Many of the spelling mistakes made by the learners were very similar to those made by native speakers as part of their developmental stages.
- (ii) **Irregularity of the English Spelling System:** The main cause of spelling errors and one that seems to cause most learners of English a big problem in developing their spelling proficiency is the irregularity of the English writing system. This irregularity appears to confuse learners from different language backgrounds, including native speakers. The main cause of this irregularity is that: there is no one-to-one correspondence between the written word and its pronunciation (Bulushi & Seyabi, 2016).

- (iii) **Mother Tongue Interference:** The differences that exist between the mother tongue and the target language act as a hindrance to the process of learning a language. Those speakers whose mother tongue has more similarities to the target language are likely to find it easier to acquire than other speakers whose mother tongue is more distant linguistically. The influence that the mother tongue may have on L2 acquisition is the transfer or interference effect.

Results

Research Question One: What is the prevalent rate of primary six (6) pupils who exhibit spelling difficulties in Demonstration Primary Staff School, Gumel, Jigawa State?

Table 1: Table showing the prevalent rate of primary six (6) pupils exhibiting spelling difficulties in Demonstration Primary Staff School, Gumel, Jigawa State.

| Sex | No. of Pupils | No. of Pupils with Spelling Difficulties | Percentage |
|---------|---------------|---|------------|
| Males | 250 | 40 | 16.0% |
| Females | 235 | 46 | 19.6% |
| Total | 485 | 86 | 35.6% |

Table 1 above shows the prevalent rate of primary six (6) pupils exhibiting spelling difficulties in Demonstration Primary Staff School. Based on the investigation, the Table depicted 485 pupils, including 250 males and 235 females. On the whole, 86 were identified as having spelling difficulties, representing 35.6%. Among the identified pupils are males (40 or 16.0%) and females (46 or 19.6%), respectively.

Research Question Two: What are the types of spelling errors exhibited by the primary six (6) pupils of Demonstration Primary Staff School, Gumel, Jigawa State?

Table 2: Types of spelling errors exhibited by primary six (6) pupils of Demonstration Primary Staff School, Gumel, Jigawa State.

| s/n | Type of Spelling Errors | Frequency | Percentage | Ranking |
|-------|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------------|
| 1. | Insertion of Letters | 160 | 26.2% | 2 nd |
| 2. | Omission of Letters | 225 | 36.8% | 1 st |
| 3. | Substitution of Letters | 35 | 5.7% | 5 th |
| 4. | Transposition | 10 | 1.6% | 6 th |
| 5. | Reflection of Mispronunciation | 80 | 13.1% | 4 th |
| 6. | Neographism | 100 | 16.3% | 3 rd |
| Total | | 610 | 100% | |

Table 2 above reveals six types of errors identified from the primary six (6) pupils. From the Table, the type of spelling errors depicted the highest frequency of 225 out of 610 was the omission of letters (36.8%). The subsequent one was the insertion of letters (160 or 26.9%). The third was neographism (100 or 16.3%) and reflection of mispronunciation (80 or 13.1%). While substitution of letters was found to have a frequency of 35 (5.7%), the last was transposition (10 or 1.6%).

Discussion of the Findings

The first finding indicated that the identified pupils with spelling difficulties (86 or 35.6%), 40 males represent 16.0% and 46 females 19.6%. This finding is in line with the study conducted by Bartonova (2014), who studied 30 students with learning disabilities in Bron City and discovered that 80% (n=24) were girls and 20% (n=6) were boys. The prevalence by sub-type in the sample shows that 40% (n=12) had dyslexia, 7% (n=2) dysgraphia, 7% (n=2) were dysorthographic, 7% (n=2) had dyscalculia and 13% (n=4) dyslexia and dysgraphia while those with dysgraphia and dysorthographia were 26% (n=8).

The second finding of this study revealed that the participants committed different types, forms and patterns of spelling errors. The most common errors committed by the primary six (6) pupils were the omission of letters with a high frequency of 225 (36.8%) and the insertion of letters with a frequency of 160 (26.2%). This finding corresponds with the studies conducted by Subhi and Yasin (2015), who conducted a study on English spelling errors: a sample of Iraqi students in Malaysia. The findings indicated that the omission and insertion of letters were the major of the predominant areas of spelling errors committed by the students. They committed 182 omission spelling errors (53%) of the total followed by 84 insertions (24%). There were 62 substitution spelling errors (18%) of the total and only 16 transposition spelling errors (5%) of the total. The majority of spelling errors were centralized in omission and insertion with 266 errors out of 344 (77%) of all the errors committed by the students.

The finding is also in line with that of Esther (2015), who conducted research on spelling errors, their causes and influence on students' performance in English essay writing and the strategies for correcting them. The finding indicated that, based on the frequency in which they occurred, the omission of letters had the highest (474 occurrences or 49%). This is followed by others in this order: one/two faulty grapheme per word (17.91%); having three/four faulty grapheme per word (10.97%); addition of letter(s) (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%).

In addition, the finding is similar to the work of Alhaisoni, Al-Zuod and Graudel (2015) on the analysis of spelling errors of beginner learners of English in the English foreign language context in Saudi Arabia. The finding reveals that out of 1189 total errors analyzed, the errors of omission occupied the highest position (39.6% or 462 errors) followed by errors of substitution (34.9% or 429). Another study in support of this finding was also conducted by Amir (2016) on L2 English spelling error analysis involving an investigation of English spelling errors made by Swedish senior high school students. The findings examined that spelling errors across all six (i.e. letter insertion, letter omission, letter substitution, transposition, compounding and apostrophe) categories between first-and-third-year students did not appear to change very much and only differed by less than 3%. Judging by the results, it is clear that letter omissions with 799 spelling errors (28.88%) were the most frequently made spelling errors by Swedish first-and-third-year

high school students followed by letter substitutions with 633 spelling errors (22.51%) and letter insertions with 488 (17.64%). These three categories accounted for 71% of the first-year students and 66% of the third-year students' total spelling errors. The remaining 29% and 34% respectively, were errors that fell into the categories of transpositions and compounding errors, as well as misuses or omissions of apostrophes.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the study found some pupils with spelling difficulties in Demonstration Primary Staff School, Gumel, Jigawa State, Nigeria. Thus, the types of errors were analyzed using frequency and ranking order which concluded that omission of letters was found to be the highest occurring errors among the primary six pupils.

Recommendations

This study provides the following major recommendations:

- i. Teachers should be aware of the existence of pupils exhibiting spelling errors so that appropriate intervention can be provided.
- ii. Since the types of spelling errors exhibited by the pupils vary, teachers should concentrate on remediating the errors with the highest frequency.
- iii. Studies should be conducted on the use of the computer or computer software to detect errors. Computer-assisted technology in our modern lives will help us to sort out the spelling errors observed by the pupils.
- iv. Researchers should further study various strategies for improving spelling proficiency among pupils with spelling difficulties.
- v. Researchers should also study the relationship that exists between spelling, reading and writing.

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