

**HOW SPELLING IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE AFFECTS THE
ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA**

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- **Abstract**

The perplexities of spelling in a Second Language against the First (Mother Tongue) has complicated situations in subjects that are taught in English as a Second Language in Namibian schools including the University of Namibia. The complexities on students unfortunately shift to the lecturers as students struggle with /r/ and /l/ in ‘pray and play’ as numerous mother tongues in Namibia have fossilized errors that mix the two. It is observed that first year students at the University of Namibia have numerous spelling mistakes that hamper both teaching learning. This study therefore aims at finding out the causes and effects of such errors on teaching and learning among mixed Second Language and First language students and lecturers who seek to find ways to solve the situation. A qualitative study, designed from phenomenology, through semi-structured interviews, deeply investigated six students and four lecturers teaching English for Academics at the University of Namibia. Amongst many, results show that students face language interference, ignorance, transfer of words from another language to English, false analogy, lack of interest in reading wide among students and exposure (post school activities, parent’s educational background, major language spoken at home) and carelessness. There is need for lecturers to incorporate fun activities in their lectures that cover spelling. Lecturers should also be encouraged to consider various strategies that assist students with spelling.

Keywords: ESL, spelling errors, orthography, phonology,

Background

Spelling is the writing of a word or words with the necessary letters and diacritics present in an accepted standard order and an arrangement of letters that form a word or part of a word, the process of forming words by putting letters together. Bosiwah, (2015) reveals that students in High Schools have problems with spelling and some of them found it difficult to even write a single error-free sentence. Some of the essays written by students also do not make sense or are not readable, because words miss components such as vowels and consonants that when brought together give meaning to a sentence.

Bosiwah, (2015) continues to assert that the reason for spelling errors are caused inter alia: first language interference, ignorance, transfer of words from another language to English, false analogy, lack of interest in reading wide among students and exposure (post school activities, parent's educational background, major language spoken at home) and carelessness. These challenges lead them to make different types of linguistics, semantic, syntactic, and phonological errors. However, Castles & Holmes, (2009) conducted a similar study with university students who were unexpectedly poor spellers, relative to above average spellers and revealed less extensive word-specific knowledge in their misspellings, but not inferior knowledge of phoneme and grapheme correspondences, indicating that many of their orthographic representations lack word-specific grapheme information. Performance on deceptive none words in a printed lexical decision task showed that the poorer spellers did not place particular reliance on word beginnings as the basis for identification Castles & Holmes, (2009).

For languages that have an alphabetic orthography, such as English, an understanding of the alphabetic principle contributes to skill in both spelling and reading Castles & Holmes, (2009). However, although children who have difficulty learning to read almost always have concomitant problems with learning to spell, becoming an accomplished reader does not necessarily lead to complete spelling mastery. Among normally developing learners, most individuals can read accurately more words than they can spell. Although the discrepancy between the two skills is usually unproblematic, the gap is sometimes noticeable enough for people to be considered as unexpectedly poor spellers (Frith, 1980, 1984). The goal of Castles & Holmes, (2009) study was to characterize the problem of advanced learners who are poor spellers relative to their reading ability. Nonetheless Fagerberg, (2006) argue that accurate spelling is desperately required in writing skill in order to convey messages efficiently. Hence, correct spelling is indispensable because one misspelling might spoil the meaning of an original message that a writer wants to convey.

Ahmed (2017) observed misspelling is one of the commonest mistakes that English as a second or foreign language (English Second Language/English First Language) learners encounter including Kurd English First Language learners. As it can be argued that one of the most frequent errors in Kurd students' written productions is spelling errors. The majority of students keep committing the same spelling mistakes throughout their learning stages of English even after they are admitted to college which often makes their written works difficult to understand as well as it probably hinders them to write in English with confidence due to fear of making spelling mistakes. The study also states that overgeneralization of spelling rules is a causative factor for the spelling errors committed Ahmed, (2014). As Smedley (1983) considers that spelling mistakes influenced the clarity and intelligibility of written works in a negative way and thus in damages communication between the author and the reader Ahmed, (2017). Students face difficulties with English sounds that do not exist in Arabic. Castles & Holmes, (2009), Ahmed (2014), and Ahmed (2017) indicate that most spelling mistakes done by students are brought forth by lack of reading and writing. Spelling difficulties amongst first year students of English as a Second Language

Ahmed, (2014) conducted studies with Students at the University of Dongola, Sudan mentioned most factors that contribute to spelling difficulties include unwariness of spelling rules and sound problems. Based on the results it was found that most spelling errors were noticeable in vowels, which were particularly poor. Ahmed, (2014) study also found out that students find it hard with sounds (vowels) that are not in their mother tongue. Spelling Errors among Junior High School Students in the Cape Coast Metropolis, the results showed that six errors were found, omission, addition, substitution, pronunciation, inversion and miscellaneous which omission errors were committed the most Dadzie and Bosiwah, (2015). Furthermore Nyamasyo, (2009) did a study on the analysis of the spelling errors in the written English of Kenyan pre-university students and the results indicated that there was a variety of sources for the differences in the sound system of the first language of the students and English. Ahmed, (2014), Dadzie and Bosiwah, (2015) and Nyamasyo, (2009) agree that spelling difficulties amongst the students is brought by sounds or pronunciation.

Dada (2015) found that student's errors in essays included omission of letters, addition of letters, and reduplications to mention a few. In some cases, the fact that students do not usually take the pain to go through their work after writing was also major contributor making teaching even more complex and students losing marks. Green's (2014) study on low English proficiency and ethnicity shows that by the end of the programs, students from some non-local ethnic backgrounds underperform local students, particularly males in year one, which are more likely to have to repeat a year of study.

The spelling development of children's ability to map sounds to letters is described as phonological perspective. The challenge in spelling is the ability for children to realise that spelling in an alphabetic writing system lies in grasping that letters characterize the phonemes in speech Deacon & Sparks, (2015). "Although models under this perspective predict that children eventually use other spelling regularities, appreciating letter–sound correspondences is key, an emphasis that is in line with the phonological perspective's focus on learning to spell in alphabetic writing systems" Deacon & Sparks, (2015).

Brisk and Harrington (2000) argued that "literacy skills are acquired only once through one language and then applied to new languages". Language transfer from first language to English can be defined as "the effect of first language knowledge that was learned during the development of first language skills on learning or performance when spelling in English as a second language" Figueredo, (2006). The construction of ideas, approached in a constructive manner has a key strength in positing a mechanism that applies to all domains of children in learning and development. "In his classic work, Jean Piaget (1950, 1954) argued that children actively construct their knowledge by generating and testing hypotheses" Deacon & Sparks, (2015). Children tend to construct new and more sophisticated rules as they attempt to reconcile their originally relatively simple rules with their observations of the world. This kind of learning is characterized by stages, in that children's thinking is dominated by their constructed rule at each stage Deacon & Sparks, (2015).

By applying Piaget's, (1950, 1954) model of knowledge construction, Bryant and Nunes, (2009) argued that children's spelling goes through stages. Children go on to produce phonologically based spellings, first with fractional and then with complete phonological illustrations. In the final stages of the models', children have been predicted to master spelling that go beyond phonology Deacon & Sparks, (2015). They included orthographic and morphological patterns, allowing children to successfully spell complex words. It is not always accurate to say that children's pre-phonological spellings are entirely random (Kessler et al., 2013). However, it does seem that many young children produce spellings that lack a systematic relationship to the sounds of the words being spelled (Deacon & Sparks, 2015).

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- *What spelling difficulties do first year students of English as a Second Language at the University of Namibia experience?*
- *How do spelling difficulties affect teaching and learning at the University of Namibia?*
- *What strategies can be used to help students improve spelling in English as a Second Language?*

When a language learner is competent in his or her first language, the transfer of spelling to second language can be positive or negative. In the case of positive transfer, there are commonalities between the first language and second language and those commonalities learned in the first language are applied in the second language Figueredo, (2006). An example of positive transfer is the transfer of letter knowledge or phonological awareness Figueredo, (2006). Negative transfer on the other hand occurs when language learners have not learned the English specific knowledge, or when they do not show consistent reliance on it Figueredo, (2006). In this case, the transfer from first language to second language is strategic but inappropriate Figueredo, (2006). An example of negative transfer is the errors caused by first language pronunciation of phonemes Figueredo, (2006).

Methodology

The researchers chose a qualitative research methodology with descriptive data to gauge a phenomenon that depicted the participants' own written or spoken words pertaining to their behaviours, perspectives, experiences and people's feelings for the first-year students and the lecturers at the University of Namibia's Main campus (Brynard, Hanekom and Brynard, 2015). The study focused on the participant's opinions, attitudes, and experiences on spelling as a phenomenon. About 6 first-year students and the lecturers assigned to the module English for Academic Purposes were purposively engaged in semi-structured interviews that allowed probes.

Results and Discussion

The data collected was analyzed using the thematic method (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Dudovskiy, 2018). Similar statements from individual respondents were brought together for meaning and interpretation.

Theme 1: Spelling difficulties amongst first year students of English as a Second Language
Students and lecturers were asked on the difficulties they find in spelling as a phenomenon hindering their success in the first year of their university and they had this to say:

Student 1, *“my biggest struggle since high school was spelling words with **ie** and **ei**, as I confuse them on which letter comes before other is some words like “receive” and “believe.”*

(Transcription 1)

Student 2, *“ I experienced quite a lot of misspelling as high school and university vocabulary are not on the same level, this caused my grades to decrease as I scored a satisfactory.”*

(Transcription 2)

Student 3, *“I omit letters out of word, e.g. instead of writing “what” I would write “wht”. I reversed the correct order of letters for example I might write “wierd” instead of “weird”. I*

am usually very confused by words such as double letters e.g. disappear, disappointed, assassinate.” (Transcription 3)

Student 4, *“I had difficulties with spelling many words are not spelled as they are spoken. The differences between pronunciation and spelling cause a lot of confusion.” (Transcription 4)*

Student 5, *“I have experienced difficulties in spelling long words of English as well as the commonly misspelled words.” (Transcription 5)*

Student 6, *“spelling of words that are kind of new to me when a lecturer says a word that is unfamiliar to me during lecture when emphasizing on the topic.” (Transcription 6)*

Deacon & Sparks (2015) support **Student 1** that spelling may be confused by students in an alphabetical writing system which lies in grasping letters characterized in phonemes through speech. This finding is strengthened by the lecturer’s answers during the interview that illustrated that most students doing their course obtain spelling errors due to letter confusion of words, *“students often lack vocabulary, which impedes their understanding of certain questions when presented to them. They also lack grammar and correct pronunciation, for example the confusion of the correct placing of letters “r” and “l”, and are also mostly hesitant to speak because they fear doing mistakes and being laughed at”*, **Lecturer 1**.

Student 2 indicated that spelling errors has to do with the gap of vocabulary between secondary level and the expected level at the university that leads to an effect in the student’s academic performance. Dadzie and Bosiwah, (2015) however disagrees with the student by indicated that spelling difficulties is not determined by vocabulary knowledge between secondary and university level, but between gender interest in language studies as “boys are more likely to have a better spelling than their female counterparts”. These findings have some educational implication for people who are interested in language studies.” Even though this seems to be an important aspect (Ahmed, 2014) argues that most spelling errors were noticeable in vowels, which were particularly poor and that students find it hard with sounds (vowels) that are not in their mother tongue. Lecturer 2 who lambasted that students show only “one way of thinking”, try to translate most English words into their mother tongue further supports this. The differences might have been brought by learner’s observation of what the teachers at their secondary schools complained about and what lecturers emphasize on at the university.

Student 3 showed that most spelling errors that students make happen through the omission of letters, addition of letters and letter placement. Dada, (2015) also found that students spelling errors in essays included omission, addition and reduplication of letters of words. Results are further supported by lecturers interviewed that this difficulty is brought by the transfer of linguistic knowledge form home language to English accounting to many spelling errors especially the omission of letters through the phonological and orthological transfer of words

from one language to the other. These agreements are similar because students, lecturers and researchers have observed that omission of letters, addition of letters, letter placement and reduplication of letters in words has become a common problem in students spelling, which is also illustrated by **Students 6**.

Theme 2: Effects of spelling on teaching and learning of English as a Second Language

When students were asked on what effects have spelling on teaching and learning, they had this to say:

Student 1, *“They negatively affect teaching and learning because most especially for English modules when a lecturer notices the weakness they are the most likely to remain stagnant at one point of assisting students with spelling difficulties, instead of moving on to another part of the content that has to be lectured” (Transcription 1)*

Student 2, *“I don't think it does affect me during teaching, but it can affect when the lecturer is marking the work because sometimes the word can mean another thing, it will be very difficult for the lecturer and this leads to failure” (Transcription 2)*

Student 3, *“Badly because those students may develop a negative attitude towards school and are at a risk of suffering from low self-esteem as a result they might absent themselves from school or certain classes. Lecturers are also forced to implement coping strategies and proper classroom accommodations to overcome spelling difficulties” (Transcription 3)*

Student 4, *“They slow down the teaching and learning process as every student has to be accommodated and learn at the same pace” (Transcription 4)*

Student 5, *“In every lesson, whenever the teacher gives an activity, it has to be marked. The teacher has to go back to spelling error in which he/she corrects and teaches on spelling and this slows down the teaching, in the end, the teacher does not cover what he or she supposed to cover” (Transcription 5)*

Student 6, *“They negatively affect teaching as most of the classroom time is spent on improving the students' spelling, leaving other work not being touched” (Transcription 6)*

Student 1 stated that students with spelling errors affects teaching and learning through time wasting as lecturers need to constantly stop the lesson and help students with spelling difficulties. This is further supported by Lecturer 1, who illustrated that this is a problem as lecturers have to go back and pay more attention to students with spelling difficulties and it takes time, “Most errors tend to distract lecturers rather than distort meaning. A little part will be covered in a lot of time since there will be a need to help students with spelling difficulties until they know how to go about everything and this is time consuming (**Lecturer 3**).

However, **Student 2** urges that students with spelling errors do not affect teaching and learning but academic performance through wrong spelling of words in academic writing. This

statement is supported by Nell & Muller (2009) and later by Dada (2015) as they expressed that teaching and learning is affected by learners' omission and addition of letters as well as the limit of English proficiency. According to Dada (2015), students' errors in essays include omission of letters, addition of letters and reduplications and the related. In some cases, the fact that students do not usually take the pain to go through their work after writing, spelling errors also make teaching even more complex and student losing marks. Nel & Muller (2009) states that there is a limited English proficiency on English as a Second Language on learners. This was shown through assessments given to both teachers and learners, which was viewed in many written errors or wrong spelling. **Student 3** furthermore believes that teaching and learning is affected by learners' low self-esteem and results into absenteeism from classes. This is however not supported by either of the resources used to collect the data but raises an important fact.

Students 6 stated that spelling affects teaching and learning as lecturers have to constantly slow down on work to assist students who are experiencing spelling errors, which results to time wasting. Lecturers provide information that agrees with the students by indicating that *"it is negatively affects the university's teaching and learning process. The teaching process is slowed down as we lecturers have to move at a slow pace to help these students achieve the intended objective"* and *"It will take a lot of time correcting learners' spelling errors and this will slow down the learning and teaching processes. Lack of time, it probably is the most common excuse for those who try to learn English while pursuing their own business and daily life. However, I still believe that once you have a strong motivation, you will definitely find time to fit it in"* (**Lecturer 4**).

Theme 3: Strategies to improve spelling of English as a Second Language

When students and lecturers were asked on what strategies will improve spelling, they had this to say:

Student 1, *"students should follow rule-based spelling strategies. This occurs for example knowing the rules regarding the use of "c, k, j, g and DGE" and other related strategies."* (**Transcription 1**)

Student 2, *"come up with flashcards written different words and practice them with their colleagues and look for the root where a particular word is built from."*(sic) (**Transcription 2**)

Student 3, *"play games, keep a vocabulary books and co-operative learning."*(sic) (**Transcription 3**)

Student 4, *"students should use chunking to help others that have spelling difficulties."* (**Transcription 4**)

Student 5, “*group work activities.*” (sic) (**Transcription 5**)

Student 6, “*help one another when possible.*” (sic) (**Transcription 6**)

Lecturer 1, “*In the English department of the university, lecturers should be encouraged to incorporate fun activities in their lectures that cover spelling. For example, playing word sort, developing phoneme awareness, teach spelling patterns and practice spelling words.*” (**Transcription 1**)

Lecturer 2, “**Phonetic spelling strategies.** *The first strategy that should be taught to students is to listen for each sound in a word and to represent each sound with a letter or combination of letters.*

Morphemic strategies, *which are based on the knowledge of how the meaning of a word influences its spelling.*

Visual spelling strategies. *Does the word look right? Good spellers often try spelling a word several ways to see which way looks correct.*

Rule-based spelling strategies. *Though many words can be spelled phonetically, student will soon recognize that there are often several possible spellings for the same sound—the sound of /j/ can be spelled J, G, or DGE, for example—and that’s when knowing some rules will come in handy! There are many reliable rules and generalizations in English spelling that will help students make the correct choices in their own writing.”*

Wai, Chan and Zhang (2014) identify five strategies, which are phonological strategy, and integration of phonological and orthographical strategies, the rule-based strategy, the visual-imagery strategy, and teaching spelling with other skills. Marulanda and Martinez, (2017) believe improving English Language Learners’ Academic Writing: A Multi-Strategy Approach to a Multi-Strategy Approach to a Multi-Dimensional Challenge, showed that this complicated academic writing module significantly improved pre-service teachers’ competences such as discourse, grammar, language, method and language conventions. These strategies will be guidelines in finding solutions to the research that will be conducted.

The findings showed that students, lecturers and researchers agreed to some extent that the most effective strategy to improve students spelling will have to be the rule-based spelling strategies and learning how phonology and spelling work together. There is an agreement here because both participants understand the root of the problem that in order to spell words correctly, one needs to know how vowels and consonance letters work together and which letter of the word belongs where.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the participants' responses the findings and literature review, spelling difficulties are experienced amongst first year students of English as a Second Language at the University of Namibia include the confusion of letters, on what letter should appear first and what letter follows, which this study concludes to be the biggest challenge experienced by these students. The confusion is due to lack of vocabulary, grammar and correct pronunciation and one's hesitance to speak as a fear of doing mistakes and being laughed at by their classmates. On the other hand, although early literature disagrees, this study concludes that spelling errors have to do with the vocabulary gap between secondary school level and the level expected at the university which affects student's academic performance students are through the omission of letters, addition of letters and letter placement.

The findings emphasise that spelling has a negative effect on the teaching and learning process of English as a Second Language. The study reveals that students with spelling errors affect teaching and learning by consuming time because lecturers are forced to pause their lessons to assist students with spelling difficulties. The study also concludes that spelling errors do not only affect teaching and learning but also student academic through wrong and spelling of words in academic writing.

There is need therefore for the lecturers of the Department of English at the University of Namibia to improve spelling by incorporating fun activities in their lectures that cover spelling. Lecturers should also be encouraged to consider various strategies that assist students with spelling. These strategies could include phonetic spelling strategies, morphemic strategies visual spelling strategies and rule-based spelling strategies. The researchers and lecturers highly recommend the rule-based spelling strategy as well.

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