



Analysis of english spelling errors of Bangladeshi secondary school students

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Abstract

The study investigates the English spelling errors committed by the Bengali learners of English of class nine who learn English as a compulsory subject at secondary school level of Bangladesh. Attempts were also made to find out the sources of errors. Data collection was conducted through essay writing and dictation processes. Through analyzing the samples, the errors were found out and categorized them into five groups. The findings suggest that the inconsistency between grapheme and phoneme relationship in English, the silent letters, the lacking of knowledge regarding spelling rules and the internalized spelling system of Bangla language are mainly responsible for English spelling errors of Bangladeshi school students. The educational implication based on the findings address how the knowledge related to spelling can assist language instructors in improving the instruction on spelling.

Keywords: Spelling, error, orthography, English, Bangla, Bengali.

Introduction

English is taught in schools, colleges and universities as a compulsory subject in Bangladesh. Teaching correct writing is a challenging task for a language teacher here. Spelling is an important component of writing. Ideas can be expressed clearly through correct spelling by the writers¹. But many students often find difficulty in spelling English words correctly. The phenomenon was observed by the researcher during his teaching and examining scripts of his students at his university teaching career. Erroneous spelling creates a poor impression regarding the performance of a language student. Langer said that spelling represents language². Hyland and Hildreth noticed that right spelling testifies the sign of good sense while incorrect spelling conversely, is a sign of senselessness or

improper instruction. Wrong spelling indicates the writer's careless attitude or low intelligence than other pupils³⁻⁵. Since incorrect spelling may distort the meaning of a message or it may lead to mispronunciation of words, spelling errors should be addressed in the language class as an important part of language teaching. Bowen gave emphasis, as a part of writing, on the necessity of learning spelling not as secluded words⁶.

Literature Review: Assessment: Studies carried out regarding spelling errors suggested that English language learners find difficulty in English spelling including the Arab students⁷. This occurred for a number of reasons like first language interference (L1) or different orthographic systems etc. For example: Dixon et al mentioned, in Singapore, made a study on

285 bilingual children to see the impact of L1 (first language) on L2 (second language) concerning their spelling⁸. The result showed that L1 has a direct influence on correct spelling. Caravolas made a review studies on alphabetic writing systems in relation to various degrees of orthographic transparency in order to find the consistency of the systems in the process of learning spelling⁹. This review study included French, English, German and Czech speakers. The orthography of English and French is deeper than the orthography of German and Czech. The research suggested that the speakers of English language with deep orthographies progressed at a slower rate in spelling skills than those with less deep orthographies. Learners of more shallow orthographies like German and Czech, progress at a faster rate in spelling skills than those learners whose languages have less shallow orthographies like English and French. The differences occurred between the languages regarding the rate of spelling development because of different levels of orthographic complexity. Since English has deep orthography, there is an inconsistent correspondence between English graphemes and phonemes. For example; English letter 'a' is pronounced in different ways in different words like /ə/ in *above*, /æ/ in *cat*, /eɪ/ in *apex*, /ɑ:/ in *fast* etc. Again each English phoneme can be represented different ways in different words. For instance, English phoneme /eɪ/ has divergent ways of spelling as *ay* in *day*, *igh* in *eight*, *a-e* in *make*, *ai* in *paint* etc. This is very problematic for the learners especially whose first language has shallow orthography. The correspondence from phonemes to graphemes (related to spelling) and graphemes to phonemes (related to pronunciation / reading out) is very inconsistent in English and this inconsistency is found much more in English vowels than English consonants¹⁰. Swan and Smith saw in their study that because of linguistics dissimilarities between English and Arabic, the learners from Arabic language background committed more errors in English spelling than those who were from the background of non-Arabic language and whose languages have more similarities with English comparing the errors committed by the two groups¹¹. He and Wang researched on the errors of English spelling among the beginner young Chinese EFL learners and found errors as result of using 20 sound related letters and 10 name related letters¹².

Figueredo and Varnhagen conducted a study comparing various kinds of errors in spelling and their correction on some

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Canadian students (16males and 37 females) using two essays which were written by university students. The participants were told to go through the essays to look for the errors in spelling in the essays. The researchers categorized the errors into following three types: orthographic, morphological, and phonological and they saw the dominance of the errors in the area of phonology committed by the participants over the morphological and orthographic errors¹³. Al-zuoud and Kabilan looked into the errors regarding the spelling of English language of 43 university students of Jordan in their written compositions and 228 spelling errors were found out of 43 written papers. They categorized them into four following types based on Cook's categorization (1999): insertion, omission, substitution and transposition¹. The result showed that omission and substitution errors occurred more frequently than insertion and transportation errors⁷. Sun- Alperin et al examined in their study that the young native Spanish learners of English committed most spelling errors because of the influence of their Spanish orthography¹⁴.

The influence of L1 on L2 spelling errors was examined to a great extent and it was found that the L1 phonological knowledge of the learners has a great impact on the L2 spelling errors. Most of the errors in L2 spelling occurred due to the influence of the learners' L1 phonological knowledge. The above reviews on spelling errors reveal that though several studies were carried out on English spelling errors across languages, no research as per my knowledge till now has been done to investigate the difficulties regarding English spellings faced by the Bengali learners of English.

Methodology

The paper is dedicated to look into the errors committed by the Bengali learners of English of secondary level both boys and girls. Some procedures were followed to analyze the data: i. Finding out the errors through a detailed analysis of the sample ii. Categorizing the errors found in the sample, iii. The causes of errors were looked for as well as a frequency count of errors was made.

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A total 47 students took part in the study; 26 boys and 21 girls. They all are secondary school students of class nine under national curriculum of Bangladesh at Hashimpur M.A.K.U High School of Chattogram district of Bangladesh. They all were aged from 14 to 16 years old and they all were from same socio-linguistics and socio-economic background. They learnt English only at their school and they all had exposure to English at least for eight years which was only limited to school. All of the participants reported that none of them was student of English medium school at any level of their student life. At this level, they all were supposed to be able to write paragraph and essay on different topics.

Using two ways, spelling skill of the participants were tested; dictation method and essay writing. To test English spelling skill, dictation method was adopted in which some passages were read aloud out following the principles of dictation from the text book of class nine and students were asked to write what they heard. The students were provided with four options for writing essays. They were asked to write an organized essay out of them. The word limit was mentioned which was from 800 to 1000. The provided topics were the following: My Daily Life, My Aim in Life, My Village, Social Media.

In order to collect data, there was arranged one and half hour sitting with the participants for two days. After the accumulation of data, the researcher counted the errors and classified them into 6 groups. The frequency of each type of errors and their percentages were recorded. A comparison was made between boys and girls regarding the errors committed by them.

Results and discussion

The section presents the errors committed by the secondary school students of Hashimpur M.A.K.U. High School of Chattogram, Bangladesh. The errors are examined and categorized into six groups based on the nature of errors with an explanation of probable main sources of errors.

The table shows that there occurred 688 spelling errors, of them, with a percentage mean of 38.8% (267 errors), the errors of omission take the highest position, near to it, with a percentage mean of 28.3% (195 errors), the errors of consonant doubling followed by the errors of substitution with a percentage mean of 20.2% (139 errors). The study also reveals that the errors of homophones and errors of transposition happened less often than the first three categories with a percentage mean of 5.7% (39 errors) and 3.8% (26 errors) respectively. 3.2% (22 errors) of errors are kept under the category of errors of others since they are hard to categorize. Regarding, gender, boys committed a total of 353 errors whereas girls committed a total of 335 errors. The difference occurred because of bigger sample size of boy subjects. Regarding percentage mean, girls made 48.7% of total errors whereas boys made 51.3%. This difference has no significance regarding the gender variation.

Errors of omission: The spelling errors belonging to this category occurred most frequently in this study. EFL learners showed strong association regarding spelling between the pronunciation of English words and the spelling manner of the words by the students participated in the study. The most commonly found errors in this category for example, were rutin, routin or routine ...probably because of the effect of articulation. Attempts were made to find the sources of errors. It is assumed that students try to spell a word according to their understanding of the relationship between grapheme and phoneme. For this reason, silent letters probably create a great difficulty for the students to spell words correctly. It was widely found that at the end of the words, the participants eliminated silent 'e' with a high frequency such as befor for before, abid for abide, becaus for because or complet for complete etc. Omission of silent letters was also found in other words. For example: some students wrote chak for chalk, gest for guest, lisen for listen or gost for ghost etc.

The analysis of the errors were made based on contextual writing in which the students were told to write a composition on one of the four titles. This gave a great scope to find errors not only at the level of words but also at sentence level. It was found that many students eliminated inflections like ing in I was walk or singular marker 's' with the verb in My mother

teach me mathematics or plural marker 's' in we have two pet cat.

Errors of consonant doubling: These errors were the second most frequently occurred in the study. In this category, the participants committed errors either using double consonants such as *helpfull* for *helpful*, *opinion* for *opinion* or *hardder* for *harder* etc. or omitting to use one consonant where it is necessary to use double such as *realy* for *really*, *prety* for *pretty*, *suportive* for *supportive*, etc. These errors probably occurred because of the lacking of knowledge regarding spelling rules or the influence of pronunciation.

Errors of substitution: This category of errors occurred more frequently in vowels than in consonants and they were possibly linked to pronunciation. For example, the participants wrote *dreem* for *dream*, *develap* for *develop*, *together* for *together*, *enginear* for *engineer*, *reason* for *reason* or *muzic* for *music* etc. in their scripts. These errors possibly occurred out of phonological influence.

Errors of transposition: This category of errors occurred least frequently in the study. It is a kind of mis-ordering of letters in word spelling like *onec* for *once*, *freind* for *friend*, *quite* for *quiet* etc. These errors possibly occurred out of confusion or carelessness.

Errors of homophones: Some spelling errors could not be categorized since no pattern was found in the errors committed by the participants. The errors were random. The examples of this category included *plezar* for *pleasure*, *disition* for *decision*, *mobail* for *mobile*, *fon* for *phone*, *taffor* for *tough* etc.

Conclusion

The study looked into the various kinds of errors regarding English spelling committed by the Bangladeshi secondary school students. The paper also aimed at discovering the

sources regarding spelling errors and found that spelling errors occurred for a number of reasons like the differences between English and Bangla language, the lacking of knowledge of the students regarding spelling rules or syntactic rules etc. In English language, the relationship between sound and letter is inconsistent, since it is orthographically deep language. On the other hand, Bangla is orthographically shallow language and so, there is a consistent relationship between sounds and letters. Since, there is a close connection between Bangla phonemes and graphemes, the Bengali learners already are accustomed to write what they hear and this naturally led them to spell words like *plezant*, *develap*, *taf*, *fon* etc.

English has some spelling rules like when the morpheme *full* is added to another morpheme to form a word, one of the two 'l' is omitted (e.g., *helpful*) or there are some words (e.g. *big*, *begin* etc.) in English whose last letter will be doubled (e.g. *bigger*, *beginning*) when any suffix is added to them. Lacking of the knowledge of these spelling rules led the students to make errors like *helpfull*, *fullfill* etc. belonging to the category of errors of consonant doubling. Also insufficient knowledge regarding English syntactic rules of the students led them to make errors like *walk* for *walking*, *teach* for *teaches*, *cat* for *cats* etc. belonging to the category of errors of omission. The study revealed that spelling errors occurred more frequently in the case of vowels than in consonants. Maybe the reason is that English has only five vowel alphabets which have to correspond almost 20 vowel phonemes including the diphthongs of English language. This is why, a vowel alphabet is pronounced in different ways in different words. For example, the alphabet 'o' is pronounced as /əʊ/ as in *open*, /ɒ/ as in *costume*, /ʌ/ as in *company* or /ɔ:/ as in *uniform*. Again, an English sound can be spelled in different words differently. For example, the English sound /əʊ/ can be spelled as 'o' in *open*, 'oa' in *road*, 'ow' in *show*, 'ew' in *sew* etc. This is problematic for the students whose first language has one to one correspondence between sound and symbol. So, it is very difficult for the Bengali learners of English to remember the right use of vowel alphabets since it is often impossible to predict the use of right alphabets in spellings based on pronunciation. Another area which was explored in this study for which students found difficulty in making correct spelling is the silent letters of English. Silent letters led the participants to

spell *befor* for *before*, *abid* for *abide* etc. belonging to the category of errors of omission.

Implications: The study suggests that peer assessment improves students' EFL writing performance in several ways. It enables students to be in the centre of assessment process, which helps them become accountable for not only their own learning but also that of their friends¹⁵. In addition, as students have an active role in the assessment process, they also tend to participate in the lessons more in order to have a deeper understanding of the content, compose more quality writings and provide more quality feedback to others. It could be concluded that once peer assessment is integrated with the EFL writing courses, it is possible that the interaction between students increases creating an atmosphere in which students study in cooperation and collaboration¹⁶.

Peer assessment activities in the classroom can also have a positive effect on students' social life outside the school¹⁷. The study showed that such activities could improve students' problem-solving skills. In addition, interacting with their peers, the students developed a sense of cooperation, which is quite similar to the real-life situations where people need to work together to achieve a greater goal¹⁸. Consistent with the needs of the modern society¹⁹, the peer assessment activities enabled students to successfully examine their own strengths and weaknesses, which is a skill they might as well utilise in their future careers²⁰. The study provided proofs that Bengali learners of English find difficulty in English spelling and also the study attempted to put forth the sources of spelling errors which implicate the necessity of adopting some effective measures for teaching and learning spellings. It is necessary for classroom instructors to have knowledge of the orthographic systems of both English and Bangla language which will aid them to understand better why students misspell some English words and this knowledge help them to develop strategies to facilitate the learning of spelling since spelling is highly associated with pronunciation. But the relationship between sound and symbol is inconsistency in English language. Bengali learners of English should be made aware of the phenomenon. Students should be made familiar with 44 English sounds and how the sounds are spelled in words focusing on those spellings which seem to be abnormal for the Bengali students.

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In writing class, teachers should teach the common spelling rules and syntactic rules regarding the positions of different homophonic words like *their* and *there* etc. This may help to reduce the number of spelling errors to some extent. Students can apply some strategies to memorize the spellings of difficult multi-syllabic words like in chunks as con-ve-ni-ent instead of individual letters c-o-n-v-e-n-i-e-n-t. Spellings of difficult words can effectively be memorized applying this strategy. Dictation of short passage should be administered from the text book of the students in the class on regular basis like once in a week. Students should be asked to find out the errors of spelling committed by themselves using their text book and to write them again correctly. This technique maybe effective to reinforce their leaning. Here, teacher can also give feedback regarding the nature of spelling errors. To make the learning of spelling interesting, students can be asked to play different games related to spellings.

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