



**GOMBE
SAVANNAH
JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE
AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES
(GOSAJOLLCOS)**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY**

**Volume 4 No. 1
September 2023**

Spelling Errors in the Written Essays of Final-Year Students of Government College, Lafia, Nasarawa State

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Abstract

Spelling errors affect students' performance in the English language. This study assesses spelling errors among final-year students at Government College, Lafia. The study employs David Ausubel's (1963) Theory of Meaningful Learning to examine students' spelling errors in English. The study found spelling errors, such as substitution, insertion, and transposition in the written essays of the final-year students of the school. It was also found that these spelling errors are caused by mother-tongue interference and lack of practice in spelling skills in English. The study recommends that thorough attention should be given to spelling skills to enhance students' overall academic performance.

Keywords: Discourse, Error Analysis, Essay, Spelling Error

Introduction

Spelling is an important language skill to learners of the English language just like writing. As a result, students need to acquire spelling skills to avoid communication breakdowns in their writing. Spelling refers to the correct arrangement of letters to represent a word. It concerns the knowledge of orthography. For students to write well, they are expected to make a serious effort to understand and avoid spelling mistakes or errors, especially in a second language situation (Dada, 2015).

The English language has an irregular spelling system that even native speakers are not always sure of. This is because, as noted by Asudo and Marsh (2008), English is a language that employs many rules, oddities, and exceptions in its spelling. Many English words are not pronounced the way they are spelt, and this creates a big problem for learners of the language. Certain words sound the same in the English language. Such words include by/buy, sea/see, scene/seen, right/write, suit/soothe seize/cease, hell/hail, though/thou, among others.

Learning to spell correctly is not usually easy for many people, yet it is very important for all language learners. What determines a learner's

proficiency in the English language is the ability to spell correctly. According to Kuiper and Allan (2004), English language spelling seems straightforward in theory but turns out to be a little more complex in practice. They claim that many people find spelling difficult because the 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 the English language could be based on three reasons: interpreting words as sequences of sound segments rather than as continuous streams of sound; lack of connection between the written version of a word and the number of sound segments in the spoken version; and the seeming variation between the pronunciation between words having the same sequences of sound segments. Spelling errors are deviations from the rules of forming words (arranging letters to form words) which could occur in the form of replacing one letter with another, omission of letters, or wrong arrangement of the letters of a word (Oluwadare, 2012).

English language spelling is full of inconsistency. 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. Spelling errors fall under what Kato (2006) categorizes as mechanical errors which include punctuation, spelling and capitalization. According to Sumatra (2011), committing errors is a reflection of the cognitive activity of a learner and tells us a great deal about the internalized process of language production. This implies that students commit spelling errors due to a lack of competence in the target language.

Borrowings from different languages make spelling in English lack uniformity. While the spellings of some of these words are retained, others are modified. The difference between the spoken and written form contributes a lot to spelling errors among students of the English language since many words having the same sound(s) are spelt differently. In addition, carelessness on the part of the learners, mother-tongue interference and teachers' failure to teach spelling contribute to spelling errors in the writing of students (Gunyemi, 2014). Errors are classified into graphological, grammatical, lexical and semantic, as well as errors of omission, addition, selection and ordering. Error analysis should not just stop at identifying them but should include classifying them and giving an analysis/explanation for necessary corrections (Summaira, 2011). In light of this, the paper sets out to investigate spelling errors among final-year students of Government College, Lafia.

Conceptual Framework

Many concepts repeatedly come up in this study such as that by Corder (1971) who defines an error as a systematic deviation from the norms of the language being learned. Corder (1971) classifies errors into (1) errors of competence and (2) errors of performance. Errors of competence are the result

of the application of rules that do not correspond to the target language norm, while errors of performance are the outcome of mistakes in a language such as false starts or slips of the tongue which occur especially when a learner is suffering from stress, indecision, conflict, fatigue, among others. Errors of competence are further classified into inter-lingual errors and intra-lingual errors. Inter-lingual errors depend on linguistic differences between the first language and the target language and are traditionally interpreted as interference problems. On the other hand, intra-lingual errors relate to a specific interpretation of the target language and manifest themselves as a universal phenomenon in any language learning process.

The question that may arise is how to distinguish whether the deviation made by the students is caused by the limitation of the student's knowledge or students' lapses. Errors reflect gaps in the learner's knowledge; they occur because the learner does not know what is correct. Mistakes, on the other hand, reflect occasional lapses in performance; they occur because, in a particular instance, the learners are unable to perform what they know.

Error Analysis (EA) is one of the most influential theories of second language acquisition like Contrastive Analysis theory, whose major concern is the comparison of two or more languages or subsystems of language to determine both the differences and similarities between them. Contrastive Analysis regarded the influence of the mother tongue on all the levels of language: phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic in second language acquisition. Due to the weaknesses of Contrastive Analysis in its pedagogical implications, Error Analysis emerged as a more effective tool in the study of second language acquisition. The advocates of EA considered it important to distinguish between mistake and error, which are technically two very different phenomena.

Literature Review

The English language plays an important role in our everyday life in Nigeria. English is the tool used for the conduct of the official business of the government; it is the country's lingua franca and the language of convenience which helps to bring together the various ethno-linguistic groups in the country (Olagbaju, 2014). The English language is also the language of education from the upper primary schools to the higher institutions of learning in Nigeria as well as one of the core subjects in the Nigerian educational system. Therefore, the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are taught as components of the English language curriculum in Nigeria schools and success in the different skills is generally perceived to be a success in the language in senior school examinations organised by such bodies like the West African Examinations Council and National Examinations Council.

Writing skills are very important for students. Writing correct spelling adds to the quality of the overall written text. The study of learners' spelling errors provides an opportunity to understand and facilitate the learners' spelling difficulties (Al-zuoud & Kabilan, 2013). Writing well can be very problematic for both native and non-native students. Based on an analysis of errors in the writing of learners of English from a range of countries, Cook (1999) concludes that English spelling errors can be classified into four main types of spelling errors, namely, omission, substitution, transposition and insertion errors. This study aims to assess spelling errors in the essays of final-year students of Government College, Lafia. In addition, the study investigates the cause of spelling errors, types of spelling errors found in the essay writing of the final-year students, as well as the influence of spelling errors on final-year students of Government College, Lafia.

Empirical Studies

Many works have investigated the phenomenon of spelling errors in different contexts. One of the foundational works on this subject is Cook (1997). The paper compares the spelling of adult L2 users of English with native L1 users, both children and adults, using data from the 1993 NFER survey of L1 children, from the 1980 Wing and Baddeley corpus, from a UK university EFL test for overseas students and from work by overseas students in England. An overall comparison showed similar error rates in L1 children and L2 adults and a similar distribution of errors in both L1 adults and children and for L2 users across the familiar categories of letter insertion, omission, substitution and transposition, apart from a lower proportion of omission errors for L2 users. A detailed comparison found that, while some errors were particular to certain groups, such as "l" and "r", and epenthetic "e" from Japanese, others were common with all users, such as consonant doubling, vowels representing schwa and digraph reversals "hg". The study concludes that many of the errors reflect problems with sound/letter correspondences, some with individual words, such as *asbicos*.

Al-zuoud and Kabilan (2013) examine spelling errors in the written compositions of 43 Jordanian students of English at a university. They analyse a total of 228 spelling errors that occurred in 43 written papers and subsequently categorise them into four types according to Cook's classification a) omission, b) substitution, c) insertion, and d) transposition. The results indicated that the most frequent spelling errors were substitution and omission errors.

In the same vein, Iyere (2013) appraises students' errors in English compositions and their implications for the open and distance learning classroom. The paper reports the findings of an investigation of lexical errors in the Open and Distance Learning students' essays at the National Open

University of Nigeria (NOUN). The study made use of tagged sample essays to find out the frequency and types of lexical errors in different registers of guided writing administered to randomly selected 300 and 400-level students undergoing the B. A. English programme at the university. These categories of students were selected because the university's regulation stipulates that all their examinations have to be manually written. The findings of the study reveal that ODL students in the B.A. English programme in NOUN committed lexical choice errors more than lexical form errors. The lexical choice includes individual and combined choices of lexical items. Lexical form involves derivational and spelling errors. The study postulates that simplification and over-generalization errors might be made by any language learner based on low L2 proficiency.

A similar study was carried out by Okeke and Tochukwu (2014) on spelling-pronunciation errors among students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The study observed that in most African countries where English is used as a second language, spelling-pronunciation errors are noted among students. By adopting a descriptive survey research method and the error-analysis tool of Applied Linguistics in language teaching, the paper investigates the spelling-pronunciation errors of students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. It is observed from the findings of the paper that a greater percentage of the spelling-pronunciation errors discovered in the students' speech are not based on mother-tongue interference; rather, they are based on graphological irregularities prevalent in the English language because of the lack of one-to-one correspondence between the English letters/alphabets which are 26 and the phonetic symbols which are 44 in Standard British English. These errors inhibit effective communication and draw second-language learners backwards in attaining a native-like competence in the target language. The paper recommends that second-language learners should be exposed to adequate auditory as well as articulatory experience in the classroom teaching with various teaching facilities like tape-recorder, radio, and others at an early stage in the learners' careers.

Yusuf (2017) assesses common English spelling mistakes among junior secondary school students in Nigeria with the role of counselling to deal with the issue. The objectives of the paper were to define the types of spelling mistakes in the English language and the most dominant errors made by junior secondary school students as well as find out the level of students' performance in essays in terms of spelling and what the causes of spelling mistakes are among junior secondary school students. The study concludes that omission and addition of letters are typical spelling errors, and students' attitude towards the second language was found as the major reason for the low level of spelling skills. Male students were found less successful than female students, among others.

In “Spelling Difficulties Faced by Arab Learners of English as a Foreign Language,” Alenazi (2018) highlights the difficulties Arab learners of English encounter when spelling English words. It describes some spelling approaches, such as the whole word approach, phonics approach, invented spelling approach, traditional approach and morphemic approach. It discusses the different kinds of spelling errors often made by Arab learners and suggests ways to help learners to improve their spelling skills.

Gbelekale (2019) undertakes a contrastive analysis of spelling errors among students of selected junior secondary schools. This research analyses the spelling errors among students of selected junior secondary schools in Ijebu Ode local government area of Ogun State. The study employs a qualitative approach. The data for the study were obtained using test tools (essay writing and dictation) and questionnaires. In all, sixty participants (both males and females) were used for this study. The theory of error analysis was used for the identification, classification and interpretation of data as well as the conclusion. The result identified six types of errors namely: omission, addition, substitution, inversion, pronunciation and miscellaneous out of which omission errors were committed the most. Findings revealed that students in junior secondary schools had a problem with spelling which could be attributed to their poor performance at the basic education level, low level of proficiency in L2, mother tongue interference, among others. The study, therefore, provides pedagogical suggestions that could help the second language teacher to solve these problems. However, it should be noted that this research only examines spelling errors at the junior secondary level of education and therefore suggests that further research be conducted to investigate spelling errors in other levels of education, such as senior secondary schools and tertiary institutions which were not captured in this study. It then concludes that lexical errors are a natural and a necessary phenomenon in language teaching and learning and they benefit learners immensely, especially as they will try to avoid committing such errors in subsequent writings. Indeed, teachers should not prevent students from making errors but should always find ways to identify and correct them in the ODL classroom.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts David Ausubel’s Theory of Meaningful Learning. He puts forward the concept that the construction of new knowledge is facilitated by the availability of prior ideas in the cognitive structure. A key idea in Ausubel’s learning theory was that new knowledge will mean something to a learner and will be remembered when it is connected to pre-existing knowledge (i.e. what is already known by the learner). The presence

of relevant, clear and stable prior experience in the learners' cognitive structure facilitates meaningful learning.

Ausubel (1963) introduces the concept of the subsumption model as a pedagogical device in which central and highly unifying ideas are stated in terms of what is already familiar to the learners to which the learner can relate new ideas by subsuming. Ausubel argues that when current knowledge interacts with relevant background knowledge in the cognitive structure and is assimilated, it forms a new knowledge structure. This new knowledge, based on cognitive structure, developed through the process of meaningful learning, thereby becoming more complex and helping students to solve problems. Ausubel proposes the use of advanced organizers in the absence of prior knowledge by the learner. These advanced organizers now serve as prior knowledge or the pre-acquired ideas that will be a link between a new concept to be learnt and the prior knowledge present in the learner's cognitive structure.

Ausubel (1963) distinguished two types of learning rote and meaningful learning. According to Ausubel (1963), when one encounters completely new unfamiliar materials then rote learning, as opposed to meaningful learning, takes place. Ausubel's (1963) theory is, therefore, concerned with how an individual learns a large number of meaningful materials from verbal or textual presentations in a school setting. This study, therefore, uses Ausubel's (1963) theory of meaningful learning to see if it will enhance the analysis of the spelling ability of final-year students in secondary school at Government College, Lafia, Nigeria. Aren't there recent theories that can be employed to solve the problem this paper is addressing?

Methodology

The study used a descriptive survey. This research design was adopted for this research because of the large data involved. As a result, not all the subjects or items in the population could be studied. Hence, the survey design selects a sample from the population using random sampling. The focus of this research was on the assessment of spelling errors among final-year students in Government College, Lafia. The target population for this study covered final-year students, principals and teachers of the English language at Government College, Lafia, totalling.....?. This population was chosen because, apart from the students' desire to write good English, the staff of the school were also surveyed to understand their efforts in teaching the students. After all, it was assumed that they would know more about the factors and the hindrance to writing the correct form of English by the students.

The instruments used for data collection for this research were tests and oral interviews. The items developed in the interview relate directly to the assessment of spelling errors among final-year students in Government College, Lafia. The students were asked to write a test of 360 words long

within 50 minutes on the topic, “My Last Holiday Experience.” This was a narrative essay and previous knowledge indicated that the students had been introduced to the narrative essays before.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Cook (1971) classifies spelling errors into omission, substitution, insertion, and transposition. Therefore, this analysis classifies the errors according to omission, substitution, insertion, and transposition.

Omission Errors

Omission-based errors are made by students when deleting or leaving out a letter from words as a result of ignorance of the correct word spelling. Students are not able to memorize the spelling of words as they do not practise writing and/or they spell as they pronounce words. For example, the following are a few examples of omitting silent sounds in the scripts of the students:

Table 1: Omission of Silent Consonant Alphabets

Omission	Error	Word
1.	Rite	Write
2.	Troble	Trouble
3.	Now	Know
4.	Word	World
5.	Forein	Foreign
6.	Wich	Which
7.	Lisen	Listen
8.	Acommodate	Accommodate
9.	Transpot	Transport
10.	Weding	Wedding

Source: Fieldwork, 2022

From table 1, students’ spellings are found to be in the omission of letters. The table shows that words with silent letters are omitted in students’ spelling. For instance, in words like “which”, the silent “h” is omitted. Also in “write” “w” is sometimes omitted and is written as “rite”. Also words like trouble, the “u” is omitted to be “troble”. Nevertheless, in the word “world” the letter “l” is omitted.

Table 2: Omission of Vowel Letters

Omission	Error	Word
1.	Hav	Have
2.	Befor	Before
3.	Phobe	Phoebe
4.	Hid	Hide
5.	Languag	Language
7.	Killd	Killed
8.	Rolld	Rolled

Source: Fieldwork, 2022

Table 2 shows that the students omitted the letters “e” and “s” as well as “p” in their writing. For instance, in words like *marred*, *killed*, *phoebe*, etc. letter “e” is omitted. Silent letters especially are omitted.

Further, mistake based on consonant doubling is another problem faced by students in spelling. For example:

Table 3: Omission of Letters from Words with Double Letters

Omission	Error	Word
1.	Swiming	Swimming
2.	Diging	Digging
3.	Hopeles	Hopeless
4.	Begining	Beginning
5.	Biger	Bigger
6.	Comitee	Committee
7.	Skiled	Skilled

Source: Fieldwork, 2022

Table 3 shows that students omit double letters. When letters are doubled in a word, students tend to omit some letters. For instance, in words like “committee” students omit “t” in “swimming” the letter “m” is omitted. In the word “begging” the letter “g” is omitted. In the word “hopeless” letter “s”. These findings are in agreement with Aquel's conclusions which indicate that omission-based errors are caused by the divergence of orthography in English. Besides, the interference of the first language (LI) is also found as one of the significant reasons for omission spelling errors.

Insertion Errors

This type of error refers to inserting an extra sound in a word. These misspelt words would be due to the lack of knowledge of English language spelling. For instance, students insert /e/ vowel sounds where it is not needed, such as “frome” for “from”. Further, some students keep /e/ sound when

adding -ing to a verb, such as “haveing” instead of “having”, “takeing” instead of “taking” and “writeing” instead of “writing”. Insertion of “h” is also another type of error made by the students, such as “reatch” instead of “reach”. – “mutch” instead of “much” and “lunch” instead of “lunch”. This finding is asserted by Albalawi (2016), where the reason behind these errors is due to students’ weakness in spelling

Substitution Errors

This type of error occurs when one or more sounds are replaced by one or more different sounds. This study indicates that substitution errors have a high rate among other spelling errors. Having analysed the substitution errors of the students in spelling, it was discovered that the major spelling problem is silent sounds, which have no sound-letter correspondence. Below are a few instances of substitution errors in spelling:

Table 4: Substitution Errors

Substitution	Error	Word
1.	Classez	Classes
2.	Mozes	Moses
3.	Vizits	Visits
4.	Azume	Assume
5.	Friendz	Friends
6.	Still	Steal
7.	Wick	Weak
8.	Waw	Wow
9.	Compliment	Complement
10.	Abzence	Absence
11.	Advise	Advice
12.	Dais	Days

Source: Fieldwork, 2022

From Table4, the students substitute the letter “a” with “I” in the word “has”. Also in the word “put” the letter “o” and replace the letter “u”. In words like “omission” the letter “s” is substituted for “t”. Also, in the word “word” most students substitute the letter “o” with the letter “a” etc. These errors show students’ lack of knowledge of the vowel alphabet.

Table 5: Consonant Substitution Errors

Substitution	Error	Word
1.	Kool	Cool
2.	Bet	Bed
3.	Pot	Bot
4.	Bazic	Basic
5.	Kanser	Cancer
6.	Foto	Photo
7.	Drag	Dlag

Source: Fieldwork, 2022

In Table 5, students substitute the letter “s” with “z”. In words like “classes” to “clazzes”, “Moses” to “Mozes”. Again, students substitute the letter “r” with “l” and vice versa. In words like “lion” to “rion” “red” to “led”. The table also shows that students misspelled “book” to “buk”, “deep” to “dip”, “wow” to “waw” etc. This is mainly the way they pronounce certain words that affect their spelling and writing skills.

The examples given include the students' substitution of “z” instead of “s” “f” instead “ph” “b” instead “p”, “k” instead of “c” and “s” instead of “c”. For example in, words. These findings show the spelling problems faced by the students in terms of substitution errors. For example in words like Photo, the letter “p” is substituted by the letter “f”. In the word cancer, the letter “c” is omitted from to letter “k”. Also in “bed” students writes “bet” instead.

Transposition Errors

This type of error includes errors made as a result of misordering the sounds of English. The study reveals that transposition is one of the spelling problems encountered by students. For example, misordering the vowels occurs in words like “frend” instead of “friend” “there” instead of “their”. These transportation mistakes are because of lack of competence and the correct perception of the right form or rules in addition to the little exposure to the English language.

Discussion

The data presentation and analysis show that students omit some letters from words. Students could remember words but not the spelling. As a result, they write as they pronounced the words. Omission of silent letters like: “rite” instead of “write”; “wok” instead of “walk”; “foreign” instead of “foreign”, “tak” instead of “talk”; “wite” instead of “white”. Also, omission of the phoneme /e/ at the end of the words like “lik” instead of “like”, “fin” instead of “fine”, “writ” instead of “write”. Again, students commit the error of

doubling consonants such as “hidin” instead of “hiding”, “comming” instead of “coming”,

The findings of this study show that the students’ spelling pattern follows the pronunciation pattern. In other words, the students tend to write what they pronounce, so they delete any English letter that is not pronounced. This type of error can be attributed to poor phonological awareness skills. The findings of this study indicate that the reason for the omission of spelling errors is the discrepancy between English orthography and pronunciation. The results obtained in this study show that mother-tongue interference is one of the main causes of omission spelling errors.

Also, the study found that students substitute letters. In analysing the learners’ substitution spelling errors, the researcher found that silent letters were a major source of difficulty because there is no sound-letter correspondence for silent letters. In vowel substitution, the researcher found that students make the following errors “hepful” instead of “helpful”; “laif- instead of life”; “gyel” instead “girl”. Also, students make regular past tense substitution errors with [k] with [t] in words such as “luk” instead of “looked”; “talkt” instead of “talked”. In the above two examples, the students substitute [d] with [t].

In the above examples, the students substitute [s] with [ʃ]. Consonant substitution errors like “mashin” instead of “machine”. The findings show that students of Government College Lafia suffer from the error of substitution. This study also found out that students of Government College Lafia commit errors of insertion, such as “ritch” instead of “reach”; “mutch” instead of “much”. The study attributes the cause of the above errors to poor knowledge of spelling conventions.

The study also found that students commit transposition errors such as “frend” instead of “friend”; “there” instead of “their” and mistake “their” for “there.” The study attributes the above transportation errors to the lack of competence and the right intuition of the correct pattern or rule, as well as limited exposure to spoken and written English. The findings show that the cause of spelling errors among final-year students in Government College, Lafia is a result of mother-tongue interference. For instance, some students child misspell the word “lion” as “rion” and “red” as “led”, very common Tiv speakers, where /l/ and /r/ do not appear as distinctive phonemes but as allophones of the same sounds. In this interference, “r”, and “l” are used interchangeably. Also, the lack of practice among students makes them commit spelling errors. Among other speakers of Hausa, “p” and “f”, “b” and “v” are always used interchangeably.

The study found that students commit different types of spelling errors. These errors are omission, substitution/addition, transposition errors and insertion errors. In omission errors, the study found that students omit silent

letters. In “stopped,” the second letter “p” is omitted. In insertion, students commit errors by inserting a letter where it is not required.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the common types of spelling errors made in the essays of the students of Government College, Lafia. The errors of omission, insertion, substitution and transposition were found in their essays. The study revealed that learners spelt these words in their writings based on how they pronounced them. Accordingly, L1 interference is not the only source of spelling errors. In a nutshell, the spelling errors found in the written tests could be attributed to the inability of learners to recall the correct spelling of words. From students’ essays the influence of spelling errors on final-year students of Government College, Lafia was identified and discussed. Students commit these errors because they lack knowledge of writing skills.

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