

## Assessment of Common English Spelling Mistakes Among Junior Secondary School Students In Nigeria: The Need for Counselling

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### Abstract

One of the dominant and pervasive problems in Nigeria and Africa at large is the language. Language being a potent vehicle of transmitting cultures, values, norms and beliefs from generation to generation, remains a central factor in determining the status or nature of any nation. In Nigeria, English language is the official language of communication; it is referred to as "Lingua Franca". However, its knowledge is not sufficient. The goals of the article were to define the types of spelling mistakes in the English Language and the most dominant errors made by junior secondary school students, to find out what the level of students' performance in essays in terms of spelling is, and what the causes of spelling mistakes are among junior secondary school students. A conclusion was made that omission and addition of letters are the typical spelling errors, students' attitude towards the second language was found as the major reason of low level of spelling skills. Male students were found less successful than female students and spelling skills' level was found different according to private vs. state schools and urban vs. rural schools.

**Key words:** Spelling mistakes, counseling, essay-writing

### Introduction

One of the dominant and pervasive problems in Nigeria and Africa at large is the language. Language being a potent vehicle of transmitting cultures, values, norms and beliefs from generation to generation, remains a central factor in determining the status or nature of any nation. This informs the submission of Isayev (1977) that language is a nation's most obvious and most important identity. The dominant inference from Isayev's observation is that for national integration, cohesion and development, there must be a language acceptable to all in running a nation's affairs.

In Nigeria, English language is the official language of communication; it is referred to as "Lingua Franca". It is the most common official language. English language plays a vital role as an international language all over the globe in every field of life, especially in education. Books, magazines and newspapers written in English are available

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in many countries and English is the most commonly used language worldwide. English is being used as official language in developing countries such as Nigeria, that were colonized by the British; in these countries all official communication must be in English. This communication can be in either spoken or written form. For an individual to communicate effectively, he/she needs four major skills for language acquisition: listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Writing is an essential skill in the process of learning any foreign language. In speaking, no one needs to worry too much about the correct form of English, while in writing even one single misspelt letter can change the word meaning and create problems with communication. Hence, English words needs to be correctly written. In the popular view, correct spelling is a demonstration of intelligence (Fagerberg, 2006). Cook (1997) also says that effective spelling is important for users of a second language for effective written communication. It is however disheartening that many researchers are not paying attention to it.

In the same vein, Fagerberg (2006), states that English spelling is undoubtedly a difficult matter, and learners around the world face difficulties in getting the letters right. It is a fact that learning a second language cannot be separated from making errors. Native speakers of a particular language also make spelling mistakes. It has been observed that learners are still producing many spelling errors in their writing after a lot of teaching, training and practising at school. In some cases, wrong spelling leads to miscommunication between students and their teachers, even between writers and readers. Wrong spelling will no doubt result in wrong interpretation. Learners who spell correctly can express their feelings and ideas in a more meaningful way than those with poor spelling skills. Good spelling skills can also increase learners' confidence in communicating with others in the written form. Therefore, proper and adequate training should be given to students to encourage the use of correct spelling.

From Cook's (1997), point of view, unlike native speakers, nonnative learners of English who know only the oral form of the word may misspell it, therefore, this research survey focuses on spelling errors made by secondary school students. The poor performance of students in external examination such as WASCE and NECO examination has become a worrisome phenomenon in the education sector. According to Adesulu (2015), out of the 1,593,442 candidates who sat for WASCE GCE in 2015 only 616,370 representing 38.68% of the candidates who sat for the examination passed the English Language module.

The poor performance of students in the English language in this exam is a reflection of the fact that students are not well equipped in it right from junior classes, especially in the written form which they will use to answer questions in the English exam and other subjects. Considering the prominent role of the English Language in the academic performance of any student, the research investigated the causes of spelling errors among learners of the English Language.

## Research Questions

The following research questions were generated to guide the study:

1. What are the types of spelling mistakes in the English Language and the most dominant errors made by junior secondary school students?
2. What is the level of students' performance in essays in terms of spelling?
3. What are the causes of spelling mistakes among junior secondary school students?
4. Is there any significant difference between the performance of male and female junior secondary school students in terms of spelling?
5. Is there any significant difference in the performance of students on spelling on the basis of the school attended?

## Methodology

In this study is descriptive method because it is a valid method for researching specific subjects. The target population for this study is all JSS3 students and English teachers in both public and private schools in Osogbo metropolis of Osun State. Simple random sampling was used in selecting two public and two private schools from junior secondary school. Twenty five (25) students and five (5) teachers were randomly selected from each school, totally 100 students and 20 teachers. The researcher employed two data collection instruments: questionnaire for the teachers and achievement test on the English language for the students. The teacher's questionnaire contained two parts: section A obtained demographic information of teachers such as gender and experience, and section B of the questionnaire consisted of 10 items assessed by a 4-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Strongly Disagree, Disagree) on causes of spelling errors in written English. Also, the students were given two essay topics - "My birthday journey" and "My last holiday" - to be choose one.

**Table 1:** Gender Cross-tabulation

Gender	Teachers		Students		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	9	45.0	43	43.0	52	43.3
Female	11	55.0	57	57.0	68	56.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 1 presents the gender distribution of the respondents. It shows that 52 males (teachers and students) representing 43.3% participated in the study while 68 females (teachers and students) representing 56.7% took part in the study.

**Table 2:** Teaching Experience of the Teachers

Years	Frequency	Percent
1 - 5 years	3	15.0
6 - 10 years	4	20.0
11 - 15 years	9	45.0
16 years and above	4	20.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 2 presents the distribution of the teachers by teaching experience. It can be seen that 3 (15%) out of the total number of the teachers have been in service for 1 to 5 years while 9 teachers representing 45% have been teaching for 11 to 15 years.

**Table 3:** Age Distribution of the Students

Age	Frequency	Percent
10 years	2	2.0
11 years	18	18.0
12 years	14	14.0
13 years	22	22.0
14 years	27	27.0
15 years	13	13.0
16 years	2	2.0
17 years	2	2.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 3 shows the age distribution of the students. It can be seen that 18 students representing 18% of all the students are 11 years old while 22 students representing 22% are 13 years old. The table also reveals that 27% of the students are 14 years old.

## Results

**Research Question 1:** What are the types of mistakes and the most dominant errors?

**Table 4.** Types of mistakes made by students

	<b>Types of spelling mistakes</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1	Omission of letters	21	21.0
2	Addition of letters	19	19.0
3	Reversal of letters	13	13.0
4	Past tense (irregularities)	10	10.0
5	Mispronunciation	6	6.0
6	Wrong format	12	12.0
7	Wrong punctuation	10	10.0
8	Wrong article	9	9.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 4 reveals the spelling mistakes' analysis results (based on students' essays). The results show that the majority of mistakes deal with spelling (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> types of mistakes, totally 53% of all mistakes): 21% of the students made errors related to omission of letters, 19% - to addition of letters, 13% - to reversal of letters.

**Research Question 2:** What is the level of students' performance in essays in terms of spelling?

**Table 5.** Performance of students in the essays based on spelling errors analysis

<b>Grade (out of 10)</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
0	2	2.0
1	5	5.0

2	7	7.0
3	4	4.0
4	9	9.0
5	26	26.0
6	28	28.0
7	18	18.0
9	1	1.0
10	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 5 shows that 27 students (27%) scored from zero to four, 25 students received 5 points, 28 students -6 point, 18 students – 7 points and 1 student – 9 points (the scores were awarded according to the number of spelling mistakes) .

**Research Question 3:** What are the causes of spelling mistakes among junior secondary school students?

**Table 6.** Causes of spelling mistakes among junior secondary school students

/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mea n	S.D
	Influence of the first language	20 100%	- -	- -	- -	4.00	.00
	Lack of knowledge of rules	7 35%	7 35%	6 30%	- -	2.75	1.25
	Incomplete application of rules	5 25%	11 55%	2 10%	2 10%	2.95	.88
	False concepts	7 35%	11 55%	- -	2 10%	3.15	.87
	Learning environment	8 40%	6 30%	2 10%	4 20%	2.90	1.16

	Lack of teaching aids	- -	12 60%	4 20%	4 20%	2.40	.82
	Communication strategy	9 45%	8 40%	2 10%	1 5%	3.25	.85
	Inadequate classroom facilities	- -	7 35%	6 30%	7 35%	2.00	.85
	Student's attitude towards learning of 2nd language	16 80%	2 10%	2 10%	- -	3.70	.65
0	Mispronunciation of words	10 50%	8 40%	2 10	- -	3.40	.68

Table 6 presents the analysis of research question 3. Items 1 – 10 of the teachers' questionnaire were used to answer this research question. It can be seen that all teachers (100%) agreed that influence of the first language is one of the causes of students' spelling errors, while 80% of them indicated that incomplete application of rules is another cause. The table also reveals that 98% and 97% of the teachers agreed that false concepts and communication strategy are also the causes of students' spelling errors respectively. It can also be seen in the table that 98% of the teachers opined that students' attitude towards learning the second language and the mispronunciation of words are also some of the major causes of students spelling errors in English Language.

**Research Question 4:** Is there any significant difference between the performance of male and female junior secondary school students in terms of spelling?

**Table 7.** Summary of T-test analysis on the difference between the performance of male and female junior secondary school students in terms of spelling

Gender	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	D F	T	Sig.	Remark
Male	4 3	4.27 9	2.11 9	98	3.610	.00	Significan t
Femal e	5 7	5.54 3	1.37 6				

\*Denote significance at  $P < 0.05$

Table 7 presents the results of the difference between the performance of male and female junior secondary school students in terms of spelling errors in the English Language. The results reveal that there is a significant difference between the performance of male and female junior secondary school students in terms of spelling errors ( $t = 3.61$ ,  $df = 98$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This implies that the performance of male junior secondary school students ( $M = 4.28$ ) on spelling errors analysis in English Language is significantly lower than their female counterparts ( $M = 5.54$ ). Hence, there is a significant difference between their performances.

**Research Question 5:** Is there any significant difference in the performance of students on spelling errors analysis in English Language on the basis of school attended?

**Table 8.** Summary of Analysis of Variance on the significant difference in the performance of students in terms of spelling on the basis of school attended

Source: School attended	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Decision
Between Groups	77.661	4	19.415	7.195*	.000	Significant
Within Groups	256.339	95	2.698			
<b>Total</b>	<b>334.000</b>	<b>99</b>				

\*Denote significance at  $P < 0.05$

Table 8 reveals the result of the difference in the performance of students on spelling errors on the basis of school attended. The result shows that there is a significant difference in the performance of students on spelling errors analysis in English Language on the basis of school attended ( $F_{(4,95)} = 7.20$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This implies that the performance of students on spelling errors is significantly different on the basis of school attended. Hence, their performance varied across schools.

## Discussion

The findings of the study in table 1 dealing with the types of spelling mistakes and the most dominant errors made by junior secondary school students in English Language showed that omission of letters is the most dominant type of error with 21% of the students supporting the idea, followed addition of letters - 19% students, error of reversal of letters - 13% of the students. This is followed by wrong essay format - 12% of the students naming it, and past tense irregularities error - 10% of the students naming it. However, errors of omission of letters and addition of letters are found to be the most dominant errors committed by the students in the English Language. The findings of the study is in line with the observation of Spinelli (2002) that there are many reasons for students to

underperform in school. These include spelling/reading disability, learning disability, a poor socio-cultural environment, and environmental causes, etc.

Another finding of this study as shown in table 3, the causes of spelling mistakes among junior secondary school students revealed that all respondents agreed (100%) that influence of the first language is one of the causes of spelling errors, 25% of the respondents agreed that incomplete application of rules is one of the causes of spelling errors. 35% of the respondents also agreed that false concepts is one of the causes of spelling errors, while 40% and 45% of the respondents agreed that learning environment and communication strategy are some of the major causes of students' spelling errors in English Language. It was also revealed that students' attitude towards learning the second language and mispronunciation of words are other causes of students spelling errors in English Language. This finding is in agreement with the position of Fagerberg (2006) that English spelling is undoubtedly a difficult matter, and learners around the world have trouble getting the letters right. It is a fact that learning the second language cannot be separated from making errors.

The results of this study also showed that there is a significant difference between the performance of male and female junior secondary school students in terms of spelling errors. Hence, there is a significant difference between their performances. The result supported the Adesulu's (2015) finding that "poor spelling is the major cause of the poor academic performance of the candidates".

Further, the results showed that there is a significant difference in the performance of students on spelling errors analysis in English Language on the basis of school attended. This implies that the performance of students in terms of spelling is significantly different on the basis of school attended. Hence, their performance significantly varied from one school to another.

## Conclusions

1. It was seen from this analysis that omission of letters and addition of letters are the most dominant errors committed by Nigerian students in the essays.
2. It was seen from the study that 98% of the teachers opined that students' attitude towards learning the second language and mispronunciation of words are also some of the major causes of students' spelling errors in the English Language.
3. It was revealed that the performance of male junior secondary school students in terms of spelling errors is significantly lower compared to their female counterparts. Hence, there is a significant difference between their performances:
4. It was shown that the performance of students in terms of spelling is significantly different on the basis of school attended, in private schools better than in public ones, in urban schools better than in rural ones. Hence, their performance varied across schools.

## Recommendations

- Guidance services centres should be established in secondary schools.
- School counsellors in collaboration with school authority should organize orientation programmes for new teachers. This will equip them with the skills to identify the areas of students' weakness and the kind of remedial programme to put in place.
- Government should employ qualified English teachers in secondary school based on merit.
- School counsellors in collaboration with school authorities should always encourage English teachers to take part in in-service training.
- School counsellors in collaboration with school authorities should organize seminars and capacity workshops on pedagogical content knowledge for English Teachers.

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