

# 17 Spelling Difficulties in Grade 4

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Spelling is an important aspect of writing (Forsyth, 1976) – it is necessary for the production of effective written communication. Another important educational reason for good spelling is that learners who spell correctly can express feelings and ideas more clearly than learners with poor spelling skills (Peters, 1985); good spelling can also increase learners' confidence in communicating with others in writing. My experience as a teacher of English suggests that even after three years of English my learners' spelling remains problematic. The Basic Education curriculum English For Me (EFM) helps learners spell through visual memorising but generally it does not approach spelling systematically and does not include a sufficient number of activities which help learners develop the spelling skills and strategies they need. The aim of this study is to examine my learners' spelling and to explore ways in which I might help them become better at this skill.

## 2 LEARNING TO SPELL

### 2.1 English and Arabic Spelling

Cook (1999), Kenworthy (1987) and Peters (1985) all note that English spelling is challenging because there is no direct relationship between sounds and letters. In English, words very often do not look like they sound. Some sounds are made up of two or more of letters, such as <th>, <ph>, while some letters can represent different sounds such as the letter <c>, which can be pronounced /k/ or /s/.

Arabic has only got eight vowels which are normally not written in Arabic script, while English has 22 written vowels; one aspect of the English writing of Arabic-speaking learners then is the omission of the vowels. Also, some English sounds like /v/ and /p/ are not present in Arabic; thus Arabic speakers have trouble spelling words with these letters.

Cook (2004) classified English spelling mistakes into five major categories; there is no reason to believe that these do not apply to Arabic learners of English too. The categories were insertion (including extra letters), omission (leaving letters out), substitution (replacing letters with incorrect ones), transposition (reversing the position of letters) and grapheme substitution involving more than two letters but only a single cause, for example when an equivalent sound is substituted for the correct form, as in 'thort' for 'thought'. I will consider these categories in analyzing my learners' errors in this study.

## **2.2 Teaching Spelling**

Peters (1985) notes two ways of teaching spelling. First is a multi-sensory approach, involving visual, auditory and kinaesthetic strategies. Roberts (2005: 5) supports this approach, saying that "a multi-stranded approach, combining emphasis on the sounds of words with the visual aspect and practising handwriting, can speed up learning". So, for example, teachers can give learners opportunities to see words, hear them, and write them. A second strategy involves explicit teaching; learners' attention is drawn to the form of words, to any difficult aspects of their spelling, and any spelling rules which apply are explained.

There is some debate in the literature about which skills, such as reading and writing, can support the development of spelling. There is little evidence that speaking and listening contribute to more effective spelling. Writing practice, when followed by feedback which directs learners' attention to spelling errors, can be productive in developing spelling ability. In terms of reading, Waller (2002) argues that it plays a vital role in improving vocabulary and developing other language skills like spelling. In contrast Peters (1985) notes that there are many people who can read well but who are poor spellers. Nonetheless, I believe that giving learners regular opportunities to see words in context can help them memorize the word pattern and this in turn will support their spelling.

## **3 METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Questions**

My main research question in this study was: what are the spelling difficulties that my Grade 4 learners face and how can I help them cope with these? I addressed these sub-questions:

1. Which words do my learners most frequently misspell?
2. What types of spelling errors do my learners make?
3. Do focused spelling activities help learners improve their spelling skills?

### **3.2 Participants**

For this study I worked with one Grade 4 class consisting of 26 learners (8 boys and 18 girls) aged between nine and ten. They had studied English for three years and knew vocabulary sets such as numbers, colours and days of the week. Although they had been writing in English for over three years some of them still had problems forming certain individual letters. The curriculum followed by these

learners was English for Me (EFM) Grade 4. The teacher's book for Grade 4 (p.xi) explains that "Children need to be trained to look at the words and memorise the visual pattern" because "this approach to teaching spelling helps children to see when a word does not 'look right'". EFM thus stresses a visual approach to learning spelling.

One of the EFM Grade 4 objectives in writing activities is to develop spelling strategies. As children are introduced to the concepts of spelling and the need to see words in order to spell them, they are introduced to the sound and word patterns as well as practising left to right direction and learning to join letters in words. Spelling is closely connected to handwriting practice. In each unit there is a double page spread giving children practice in joining letters of the alphabet. Two letters are practised each time. The aim of these pages is to develop the fine motor skills of cursive script and to encourage the correct joining of proportionally sized letters. Learners are encouraged to learn to spell words using the following procedure:

- Look at the word
- Cover the word
- Write the word
- Check the word

### 3.3 Data Collection

I selected vocabulary from Units 1 to 6 of EFM Grade 4B. The words were in sets: days of the week, colours, numbers, adjectives, Wh -function words and Th-function words (see Appendix for the target list of words). I went through five stages in assessing and trying to improve learners' spelling of these words.

The first stage consisted of a test in which I assessed how many of the words in my target list the learners remembered from the semester's work. In the test learners were given three possible spellings for each word in the target list and asked to cross out the two that were incorrect (e.g. Satarday, Saturday, Satday; redy, redd, red). In the second stage I marked this first test and analyzed their errors, especially the words they misspelled most frequently.

At this stage I introduced activities whose aim was to help learners improve their spelling of the words in the target list, especially those which were commonly spelled wrong. I did seven activities with the learners, over one month, with each activity focusing on one of the word sets in the target list. The activities were read and colour; listen and match; write the missing words; and find and write the missing letters. Three further activities were games: Pelmanism, Have you got, and the fishing game.

Following these activities I administered a second test, and this was Stage 4 of the study. Learners were given a list of the words and asked to prepare. The spelling test had three parts, each with 15 words. I decided to divide the target list into three groups so that each test had words from each unit of the course book. This is the procedure I used for these three spelling tests:

- I said the word once.
- I said the word once in the context of a sentence.
- I repeated the word twice.

For example: 1. Saturday. My father bought a goat on Saturday. Spell Saturday. Saturday.

In the final stage of the study I compared the results of the first and second tests to determine if there had been an improvement in learners' knowledge of the target vocabulary.

## 4 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Spelling Pre-Test

The pre-test consisted of 45 sets of three words. Each set contained the correct spelling of a target word and two incorrect spellings of the same word. Learners had to cross out the wrong spellings and 26 learners did the test.

*Table 1: Proportion of errors on spelling pre-test for each word set*

	Errors	%
Days of the week	47	25.8
Colours	77	26.9
Adjectives	42	26.9
Numbers	61	21.3
Wh- words	51	39.2
Th- words	17	13.1
Total	295	25.2

Overall 295 incorrect answers were provided on this test. The overall mean number of errors per learner was 11.4. The mean number of errors for boys was 15.6, while for girls it was 9.4. Girls, therefore, did better than boys on this test.

In terms of the vocabulary learners misspelled most frequently, Table 1 lists the percentage of incorrect answers for each of the word sets on the test. An incorrect answer was that where the correct spelling was actually crossed out as incorrect. As this table shows, the group where most errors were present was wh- words. Th- words were those where the lowest proportion of errors was made.

In terms of individual words, Table 2 shows the most commonly misspelled items.

*Table 2: Most commonly misspelled words on pre-test*

Word	No. of times wrong
Wednesday	17
taller	12
Thursday	11
who	11
why	11
five	10
what	10
where	10

## 4.2 Spelling Post-Test

The post-test consisted of 47 words. I said each word once, read it out in a sentence, then repeated it again twice in isolation. Learners then had to write the word. 26 learners completed the test, eight boys and 18 girls. Overall 294 incorrect answers were provided on this test. The overall mean number of errors was 11.3. The mean number of errors for boys was 14.1, while for girls it was 10.1. Girls, therefore, again did better than boys on this test.

*Table 3: Proportion of errors on spelling post-test for each word set*

	Errors	%
Days of the week	43	23.6
Colours	74	25.9
Adjectives	60	28.8
Numbers	58	20.3
Wh- words	44	33.8
Th- words	15	11.5
Total	294	25.1

In terms of the vocabulary learners misspelled most frequently, Table 3 lists the percentage of incorrect answers for each of the word sets on the test. An incorrect answer was that where the correct spelling was actually crossed out as incorrect. As this table shows, the group where most errors were present was again wh- words. Th- words were also once more those where the lowest proportion of errors was made.

In terms of individual words, Table 4 shows the most commonly misspelled items on the post-test.

*Table 4: Most commonly misspelled words on post-test*

Word	No. of times wrong
eight	13
white	11
where	11
Wednesday	10
orange	10
purple	10
yellow	10
tallest	10
slowest	10
when	10

## 5 DISCUSSION

The results of this study do not provide evidence that suggests that the activities I did with the learners to improve their spelling had any significant effect. The overall mean number of errors on the pre-test was 11.4 while on the post-test it was 11.3. By gender, the mean number of errors for boys were 14.1 on the pre-test and 15.6 on the post-test, while for the girls the figures were 10.1 and 9.4. Thus while the boys performance became worse, that of the girls improved. As noted, too, the girls performed better on both tests. What these data suggest is that the seven activities I did with these learners to boost their receptive knowledge of the spelling of 45 target words did not make much difference. This is clearly a disappointing result. There were fewer errors on the adjectives set in the second test but the percentage of errors increased in all other categories. Overall, 25.1% of answers were incorrect in the first test, while 25.2% were in the second test. The overall level of performance is of course encouraging, with learners getting around 75% of the answers right on both tests.

In terms of the kinds of words the learners found difficult, wh- words were the set on both occasions where the highest proportion of errors were made. In terms of the individual words the learners got wrong, there was some variation between the two tests though some words ranked high (in terms of being misspelled) in both. Two were Wednesday and where.

### 5.1 Limitations

The nature of the tests I used in this study may have influenced the results. In particular, the second test may have been harder as it required learners to listen and write down the words; in the pre-test they had to identify the correct spelling from the three given as thus no production was required. If indeed the second production test is considered harder than the first receptive one, the similarity in the results of the pre- and post-tests may in fact represent an improvement in the learners' spelling. Using tests of equivalent difficulty would have allowed comparisons between the two tests to be made more easily.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This study highlights the challenges that we face as teachers when we want to provide quantitative evidence of the effectiveness of our teaching. The results of this study suggest that the activities I did with my learners to improve their spelling did not have much impact and from a research point of view I must accept that, even though as a teacher I believe that learners did benefit from the work we did. Despite the outcome of this study, it has given me the opportunity to deepen my understanding of issues in the learning and teaching of spelling and increased my awareness of the kinds of spelling difficulties my learners have. This work has also, of course, allowed me to develop as a researcher.

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## APPENDIX: TARGET VOCABULARY

Word Group	Target Words
Days of the week	Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday
Colours	red, yellow, pink, green, purple, orange, blue, black, grey, brown, white.
Adjectives	taller, tallest, shorter, shortest, faster, fastest, slower, slowest
Numbers	zero, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten
WH-words	who, what, where, when, why
TH-words	the, then, that, there, this