

11 Common English Spelling Difficulties of Omani Learners

*Falah Mohammed Al-Jabri
Teacher of English, Batinah North Region*

1 INTRODUCTION

Cook (1999) claims that spelling errors are the most common type of mistake in the written work of learners of English. For Omani learners, spelling is a particular problem, partly because of the differences in the writing systems of Arabic and English as well as because in English the relationship between sounds and writing is not regular. And despite the fact that spelling is taught explicitly in the General Education Curriculum in Oman, for many learners spelling errors persist. The aim of this study was to go beyond this general awareness that spelling is a problem for Omani learners and to identify more specifically the kinds of spelling difficulties they have.

2 BACKGROUND

I have been teaching Grade 5 in General Education for 10 years. Over this time it has become clear to me that many learners at this level – 11-12 year olds in their second year of learning English – have considerable problems with English spelling. The main motivation for conducting this study, then, was to learn more about the kinds of spelling errors they make as I believed that this would put me in a better position to consider the kinds of support these learners need in order to spell more effectively.

3 SPELLING DIFFICULTIES

Spelling is the learner's ability to write a word correctly from memory. Effective writing depends on effective spelling and so understanding learners' spelling difficulties can help teachers support the development of learners' writing. Phenix (2001) believes that spelling difficulties can be divided into two categories: 1) linguistic, which are related to the nature of the language and 2) personal, which relate to the different stages of development learners go through. Phenix (2001) describes these stages as follows:

- pre-phonetic – learners use a mixture of pictures, shapes, letters or signs;
- semi-phonetic – learners use letter names to represent sounds;
- phonetic – learners use known sounds to write words and they become aware of word boundaries and leave spaces between words.
- visual – learners use most letters correctly, if not in the right order; they use vowels in every syllable.
- mature – learners use a full range of strategies to spell words and they are able to make analogies from known spelling patterns; they are able to recognise incorrect spellings.

Our goal as teachers, of course, is to enable learners to reach the stage where they are mature spellers.

Cook (1999) also discusses spelling difficulties and suggests three main problems which are single words, pronunciation-based, and spelling-correspondence problems. Single word problems come from the fact that English consists of many individual words and so learners have to study some words individually. Pronunciation-based problems occur when learners do not know the English sound system and therefore use the wrong letters. Spelling-correspondence problems, Cook argues, are “the most difficult aspects of English spelling for many students” (p.2). This is true for native speakers of English too – words are harder to spell when the sequence of letters has to be remembered because it does not correspond to the sounds.

Cook also highlights four types of spelling errors that learners of English commonly make. These are omissions (leaving letters out), substitutions (replacing letters with incorrect ones), transpositions (reversing the position of letters), and insertion/additions (including extra letters). With specific reference to Arabic, Cook suggests that the most common spelling errors relate to pronunciation and that this is shown through substituted vowels and phonological mistakes. Arabic learners’ problems in spelling English also stem from the differences between the writing systems of Arabic and English (e.g. no capitalisation in Arabic and generally regular correspondence between sounds and letters). These kinds of spelling problems which Arabic speakers have are discussed in more detail in Swan & Smith (1987) and Kharma & Hajjaj (1989). The former, for example, highlight problems Arabic learners of English have with the ‘mirror’ shaped letters (e.g. *p* and *q*) and comment on the difficulties which stem from the fact that Arabic is written from right to left (thus learners may write *crwon* rather than *crown*).

4 METHOD

4.1 Aims

The aim of this study was to describe the kinds of spelling errors made by Omani learners of English. The participants were a total of 146 boys (70) and girls (76) learning English in General Education Grade 5 classes in two rural schools in Oman. The learners were aged 10-11 and had started studying English the previous year. The boys were in two classes of 35 and taught by the same male teacher; the girls were in two classes of 38 and taught by the same female teacher.

4.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through spelling tests administered to these learners. After discussion with the teachers, it was decided that each learner should be tested on 10 words and that in each school the two different classes should be tested on a different set of words. Therefore, on the basis of my experience of the spelling difficulties Grade 5 learners have and of the

vocabulary covered in this grade, I chose 20 words and divided them into two groups of 10 as follows:

Group 1: school, four, knock, nose, walked, phone, visit, head, decision, meet.
Group 2: caught, cross, rubbish, peach, cycle, ball, dead, station, office, pull.

The learners in each class were given a copy of their ten words to study the day before the test. The teachers administered the tests during regular lessons and collected and returned learners' papers to me for analysis.

5 FINDINGS

5.1 Number of Learners Making Spelling Errors

The errors learners made on the spelling tests are analysed in Table 1 according to the four categories suggested by Cook (1999) and which I discussed earlier. An example of an error of each type found in the tests is also given. Of the 146 learners chosen for the study, four were absent when the tests were administered and so the percentages in the tables below are based on a total of 142.

Table 1: Number of learners making spelling errors

Type of error	No. of Learners	Actual word	Example
Insertion	41 (28.9%)	school	School
Omission	109 (76.8%)	cross	Cros
Substitution	109 (76.8%)	cycle	Sykle
Transposition	28 (19.7%)	knock	Nkock
No errors	33 (23.2%)	phone	Phone
Absent pupils	4	-----	-----

109 (76.8%) learners committed at least one error in their tests. The types of errors committed by the largest number of learners were omission and substitution, while errors of transposition and insertion were present in the work of smaller proportions of learners. These findings support what the literature says about substitution errors being the most common type of spelling error Arabic learners make.

5.2 Frequency of Different Types of Errors

Table 2 summarises the frequency with which the four types of errors listed in Table 1 occurred. There were 887 errors in total out of 1420 words (142 learners multiplied by 10 words). Therefore, 62.5% of all the words written in the tests were incorrect. Of these, substitution errors were by far the most common, accounting for almost 58% of the total number of spelling errors. Transposition errors were the least common, amounting to less than 7% of the total.

Table 2: Frequency of different types of spelling errors

Type of error	Frequency
---------------	-----------

Insertion	62
Substitution	512
Omission	275
Transposition	38
Total	887

5.3 Specific Kinds of Errors

Table 3 analyses the kinds of errors made by the learners in the spelling tests in more detail. It lists eleven specific difficulties which these learners seemed to have.

Table 3: Specific kinds of spelling errors

Type of difficulty	No. of Learners	Test Item	Example of Error
Homophones	63 (44.4%)	four	for
Doubled letters	97 (68.3%)	rubbish	rubish
Ways of writing sound /k/	77 (54.2%)	school	skool
Ways of writing sound /z/	72 (50.7%)	visit	vizit
Differentiate /p/ from /b/	53 (37.3%)	pull	bull
Silent letters	109 (76.8%)	knock	nock
Ways of writing sound /t/	74 (52.1%)	walked	walket
Ways of writing sound /f/	84 (59.2%)	phone	fone
Ways of writing sound /s/	94 (66.2%)	office	offise
Differentiate /f/ from /v/	36 (25.4%)	visit	fizit
Vowels	77 (54.2%)	peach	peech
No Difficulties	33 (23.2%)	caught	caught
Absent Pupils	4	-----	-----

These figures show that silent letters were a problem for 76.8% of the learners. Double letters and the sound /s/ were also problematic for many learners. Distinguishing between /f/ and /v/ was not a major source of difficulty, although over 25% of the learners still made errors of this kind.

6 DISCUSSION

The results of this study were based on tests containing ten words administered once to learners in four Grade 5 classes. Longer tests, using different words, and administered to different learners, by other teachers and under different circumstances, may of course yield different results. However, this study does highlight some findings which I believe are of interest to teachers of English in Oman.

Although thirty-three learners got all of the words on the spelling test right, there were also several learners who got them all wrong; most learners, though, were somewhere in between these two extremes. The way the learners performed here was fairly typical of Grade 5 learners I have taught

over the years, though it has been very useful for me to be able to describe the kinds of errors they made, both generally (Tables 1 & 2) and more specifically (Table 3).

Generally speaking, substitution errors emerged here as the most common type of spelling error. That is, the most common spelling error made by the learners in this study was to replace one or more letters in the test item with one or more incorrect letters. Looking more specifically at the kinds of errors the learners made, silent letters were clearly a major source of difficulty. This is not surprising given that there is no sound-letter correspondence for silent letters. Knowing how to spell words with silent letters means being able to memorise them and to recall them from memory when they are needed in writing. Over 75% of the learners in this study had problems of this kind.

The problems learners had with homophones here reflect a similar challenge, as the sound of the word on its own does not indicate which of two or more possible spellings is required. To correctly spell homophones, learners also needed to understand the sentences in which the word occurred in the test. Learners' difficulties with certain sounds, such as /k/, are further evidence of the challenge the lack of sound-spelling correspondence in English presents. In the test items, for example, the sound /k/ appeared in four different forms (school, knock, cross, kite). Double letters were another source of difficulty, as English pronunciation often does not indicate that a letter occurs twice.

7 CONCLUSION

Learning to spell is something all our learners need to do. As a result of this study I am now more aware of the kinds of spelling errors my Grade 5 learners are likely to make and thus I feel in a better position to provide them with the support they need to become better spellers. I hope that teachers who read this work will feel that it also gives them some ideas about how they might learn about the spelling difficulties of their own learners of English.

REFERENCES

Cook, V. J. (1999) *Teaching spelling*. Retrieved 17 May 2002 from <http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~vcook/OBS2O.htm>.

Kharma, N. and Hajjaj, A. (1989) *Errors in English among Arabic Speakers: Analysis and Remedy*. Harlow: Longman.

Phenix, J. (2001) *The Spelling Teacher's Handbook*. Dunstanble: Folens Publishers.

Swan, M. & Smith, B. (1987) *Learner English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.