



*Full Length Research Paper*

# English Spelling Problems among Students at the University of Dongola, Sudan

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## Abstract

This study investigated English spelling errors made by first year students of Dongola University, including both vowel and consonant errors. This study was based on the assumption that the first year university students have a weakness in English spelling. The researcher carried out this study to discover the factors behind these problems. Unawareness of spelling rules and sound problems might be the cause. To deal with English spelling errors, two spelling tests (pre-and post-intervention) were administrated to two hundred students in two different faculties (Arts and Education), at Dongola University. The student's native language is Arabic, they have been studying English as the University requirement courses not specialized. Sampling procedure was taken from two different settings. A hundred first year students from the Faculty of Arts and another hundred students from the Faculty of Education. At the beginning, the pre- intervention test was given to the students in both faculties, during their first term of university without any explanations of spelling rules or English sounds. After the pre-test, the students in these faculties were taught a model spelling syllabus which was designed by the researcher for this purpose. After two months the students were given the post- intervention spelling test in their second term of university. Based on the test results, the main findings of the study were that spelling errors were noticeable in vowels, which were particularly poor. Students face difficulties with English sounds that do not exist in Arabic. Also, the study indicates that overgeneralization of spelling rules is a causative factor for the spelling errors committed. Based on an analysis of the results, it is recommended that a possible solution for the spelling problem involves teaching correct pronunciation, basic spelling rules and reminding the students of the exceptions to English spelling rules. Students should have a good grasp of these skills before reaching the secondary educational level. Thus, it is necessary to focus on spelling rules and English sounds in primary education.

**Keywords:** EFL, Spine (Sudan Practical Integrated National English), Series of Practical Courses in all Sudanese Schools.

## INTRODUCTION

Language is the mirror that reveals what is going on in the human mind. It is the audible behavior, which distinguishes man from other living things (Yule 2006:9). On the other hand, language is an acquired habit of systematic vocal and non-vocal activities representing meanings coming from human experience. People use spoken and written language in addition to other means of paralinguistic communication. English language is far from the ideal writing system, as anyone with spelling difficulties is well aware. In fact, English does not contain

a single instance of a two-way one-to-one correspondence – letter to sound and sound to letter (Norman 2000:39). In the present study, efforts will be exerted on dealing with the spelling errors in the context of English as a second / foreign language. The care given to this language results from its importance as a means of international communication, and its being widely used in science, technology, literature and etc. Mastering of the writing system of any language includes the ability to spell properly. Error in spelling may sometimes lead to

obscurity and these make comprehension virtually impossible. Spelling is important for everybody to communicate his/her idea. Correct pronunciation is important for conveying the right meaning of a written discourse. Bad spelling is a hindrance for the reader to get the meaning of written language. Spelling is very important in written language, and any mistake in spelling can affect the written product and may lead to misunderstanding. Therefore, correct spelling of vocabulary is essential to convey the intended meaning (Corder 1981:76). The study is concerned with a topic related to the written part of the language, namely the problems that face first year students of Dongola University in sounds recognition and use in English spelling, and how these problems can be solved. It has been noticed that English sounds cause a lot of problems to the first year students. Many of the spelling errors are due to these sound problems. So, students have a clear weakness in English spelling. English writing system based on word form and not pronunciation, and the relationship between sound and symbol is arbitrary not a clear relationship of one sound to one symbol. Therefore, students face difficulties with spelling. Many spelling errors are due to omission, addition, substitution and transposition of the sounds. Some students also fail to use the rules correctly, and rely on their tongue when they transmit ideas to a target language. The students language is Arabic. They were studied (SPINE) English language courses introduced in Primary and Secondary Schools in Sudanese Educational System. In Primary level English classes were given mainly in Arabic with little use of English. Classroom hours in the Primary School is only two lessons per a week, thirty minutes per a lesson. In Secondary School students were taken three to four English classes per a week, thirty minutes per a lesson. All the instructions at classroom by Arabic with little use of English Language. When they joined the University, they were studied English as one of the general courses introduced as requirements.

### **Statement of the problem**

English spelling performance of university students has recently been declining and has become a problematic area in the process of teaching English as a foreign / second language. It has been noticed that the first year student of Dongola University have a clear weakness in English spelling. These students make a lot of spelling errors, also it has been noticed that, they are incapable of performing even basic writing task. This problem is due to the fact that the students do not know the spelling rules, and English sounds recognition. Also, they are not familiarized with the correct pronunciation system.

### **Significance of the study**

The present study intends, among other few studies in the same field to investigate and analyze the English

spelling performance of Sudanese University students who have dealt with newly adopted syllabus, i.e. Spine (Sudan Practical Integrated National English). The importance of this study stems out from the importance of English language itself, especially in Sudan. English language has been up to recent times, one of a criterion for joining universities and higher institutions. It is the language of research, and a means of instrumental of a living. Moreover, it is the tool of science and technology and also, means of communication with other nations. Therefore, the significance of this study is due to the importance of correct pronunciation and spelling. Anyone who spells correctly, writes correctly and s/he reads correctly. This study is attempted to find the factors causing spelling problem for those, who work in the field of teaching English as a foreign or second language to avoid spelling error and to find solution to this problem. Also, it is useful to the teachers of English so as to be aware of the expected areas of difficulties and how they can address them, considering the method that help students to deal with them. Also, useful for inspectors, who can use the results in field work to draw teacher's attention to tackle English sounds as carefully and seriously for the benefit of students and for reinforcing spelling.

### **Objectives of the study**

The main objectives of this study:

- A. Reconsider the causes leading to the problem of misspelling, and to suggest a solution or treatment.
- B. Identify, classify and analyze the different spelling errors and the sounds that constitute the problematic areas for the first year students of Dongola University.
- C. Provides recommendations to help teachers improve their techniques of teaching spelling and help students overcome errors and mistakes.

### **Questions of the study**

- A. Are spelling errors due to irregularity of English?
- B. Are most of the spelling errors due to addition, omission, replacement or transposition of sounds?
- C. Are there ways that could help teachers to improve students' performance in English spelling?

### **Hypotheses**

This study is assumed that the problem under investigation is due to the following reasons:

- A. Most of the spelling errors are due to the English sound recognition and its use.
- B. There are problems facing students in English spelling rules, and English sounds.
- C. The possible solution of the spelling problem rests on, teaching correct pronunciation, the basic spelling rules and reminding the students of the exceptions that every language has.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The subjects of this study are two hundred (200) first year students enrolled in the academic year (2013 – 2014) in the Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education at Dongola University. They had studied English as a foreign language for the duration of seven years at Basic Level and Secondary Level.

In the first year at the University they studied English as the requirement not specialized course.

The procedures used to achieve the purposes of this study set into two main parts:

- (1) A theoretical framework which includes a literature review.
- (2) A practical part which includes:-
  - a) pre- intervention spelling test.
  - b) Teaching a model spelling syllabus designed by the researcher.
  - c) Post- intervention spelling test.
  - d) The spelling test was administrated the population chosen for the study.
  - e) The identification, classification and explanation of spelling errors of the chosen population.

### Population

The population of this study are Sudanese university students in the Northern State, at the University of Dongola. The population are composed of the students of the first year, in the first semester of the academic year 2013. The population are (420) students, girls and boys distributed at the Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education are the subject of the study, as follows: 180 students from the Faculty of Arts, (97) boys and (83) girls, and another (240) students of Faculty of Education, (108) of them are boys and (132) girls. All the students are homogeneous in terms of age, learning experience and level, but they are heterogeneous in terms of gender. Like all Sudanese students, they studied the Spine series since they were at Basic School. They started learning English at the fifth grade of Basic school level. So, these subjects had an average of seven years of formal instruction in English as a foreign language at school. The population under investigation are homogeneous in terms of their linguistic homogeneity and educational experience. But students' linguistic background might cause different problems in the process of learning English language. The purpose behind the choice of the first year students comes from the fact that, students have finished their secondary education after seven years of learning English as a foreign language. At the same time their task (spelling test) will prove whether the Spine series has provided an appropriate material which enable them to write clear readable language and to pronounce a word correctly. All the students under investigation have taken English as the requirements from the first semester. So, they faced some difficulties in

English language, particularly in English spelling. Although, they studied the same curriculum (Spine) in their schools, their standards are different in English spelling. This might be due to various factors, such as: Learning abilities, school circumstances, teachers, etc.

### Sample of the study

The study investigates the performance of English spelling of 200 students selected randomly from the first year at the University of Dongola distributed at the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Education. They have been chosen to represent the 420 population of the study. These students were given spelling test that consisted of 50 words, and were ordered to listen to the teacher dictating the word twice and then, they started to write the word. The spelling test has taken 35 minutes class session. Before the students started spelling test, the researcher made the necessary instructions. The students were asked to take the spelling test seriously and they were also, told that the spelling test has both educational and linguistic aims.

### Instrument

The researcher investigated the methods of the data collection gathered from some of the previous studies, so as to find the most appropriate ones, which would work effectively in giving the required data results. Considering the mentioned methods of data collection of the previous studies, the researcher has found that questionnaires for both teachers and students will not be useful in this study. The researcher's argument is that: a) The students are not aware of their problems and what kind of difficulties they find in listening to English sounds. b) The researcher focuses on teaching a model spelling syllabus and classroom techniques in dealing with spelling problems. Besides, it is difficult for the students to be involved in such method, because of practical reasons. Therefore, the researcher avoided using these two methods (questionnaire and interview) in collecting data for the study. While this study concentrates on "Problems of university students in English spelling", the researcher has found that English spelling test is the most appropriate tool for data collection. Its appropriateness comes from the simple reason that an English spelling test practically students in a situation to recognize English sound and to write.

### Procedure of Data Collection

To investigate the problems of the first year students in English spelling in university, 200 students from the first year at Dongola University were chosen as a sample of this study. They were taken from two different settings, 100 students from first year at Faculty of Arts and another 100 students from first year at Faculty of Education. The data were collected by using (pre-spelling test and post-

**Table1. The population**

Faculty	Male	Female	Total
Faculty of Arts	97	83	108
Faculty of Education	108	132	240
	<b>205</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>420</b>

**Table 2. Spellint Test**

No.	Word	No.	Word	No.	Word
1	Prompts	18	Earthworm	35	Leisure
2	Easel	19	Theirs	36	Over
3	Bottle	20	Optimistic	37	Resolvable
4	Intellect	21	Spiritual	38	Owl
5	Twelfth	22	Apartment	39	Church
6	Oil	23	Zoologist	40	Jealous
7	Armistice	24	Eighteenth	41	Withering
8	Conceive	25	Chauffeur	42	Psychology
9	Ambassador	26	Island	43	Queen
10	Government	27	Handkerchief	44	Knock
11	Almighty	28	Discrimination	45	Ballet
12	Photograph	29	Measure	46	Fern
13	Upwards	30	Eardrum	47	Laugh
14	Vision	31	Napkin	48	Supersede
15	Ooze	32	Aircraft	49	Should
16	Through	33	Yoghurt	50	Weigh
17	Estimation	34	Pure		

**Table 3. Comparison between pre- and post-intervention spelling test (Faculty of Arts)**

	Pre-intervention spelling test		Post-intervention spelling test
1	The total errors were 3561.	1	The total errors were 3048.
2	The vowel errors were 2222.	2	The vowel errors were 1915.
3	The consonant errors were 1339.	3	The consonant errors were 1133.
4	The percentage of the total errors was 71.22%.	4	The percentage of the total errors was 62%.
5	The percentage of the vowel errors to the total errors was 62.8%.	5	The percentage of the vowel errors to the total errors was 62.4%.
6	The percentage of the vowel errors to the total number of words was 44.4%.	6	The percentage of the vowel errors to the total number of words was 38.3%
7	The percentage of the consonant errors to the total errors was 37.6%.	7	The percentage of the consonant errors to the total errors was 37.2%.
8	The percentage of the consonant errors to the total number of words was 26.8%.	8	The percentage of the consonant error to the total number of words was 22.7%.

spelling test). The pre-test was given to the students at Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education. The total number of students were two hundred. At the beginning, the pre-test has been given to the students in both faculties without any explanation of spelling rules or English sounds.

After the pre-test, the students in these faculties (Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education) were taught a model syllabus which is designed by the researcher for this purpose. The students were taught spelling rules, such as: the rule that distinguishes between (ie – ei), doubling a final consonant, dropping a final (e) and

different between British and American spelling. Also, different sound were explained to them, and draw their attention to irregularity of pronunciation system. Up on the completion of this model syllabus, the students will be able to deal with rules that were given to them, besides, compare the English sounds, recognize spelling patterns and read any given passage correctly. To analyze and evaluate spelling errors, the researcher taught the model syllabus mentioned above. Drills and activities were given to the students so as to make them familiar with the rules that were given to them. Teaching of this syllabus (model syllabus) has taken two months, thirty minutes per a

**Table 4. Comparison between pre- and post-intervention spelling test (Faculty of Education)**

Pre-intervention spelling test		Post-intervention spelling test	
1	The total errors were 3428.	1	The total errors were 2833.
2	The vowel errors were 2312.	2	The vowel errors were 1761.
3	The consonant errors were 1116.	3	The consonant errors were 1072.
4	The percentage of the total errors was 68.4%.	4	The percentage of the total errors was 56.7%.
5	The percentage of the vowel errors to the total errors was 67.5%.	5	The percentage of the vowel errors to the total errors was 62.2%.
6	The percentage of the vowel errors to the total number of words was 46.2%.	6	The percentage of the vowel errors to the total number of words was 35.2%.
7	The percentage of the consonant errors to the total errors was 32.6%.	7	The percentage of the consonant errors to the total errors was 37.8%.
8	The percentage of the consonant errors to the total number of words was 22.3%.	8	The percentage of the consonant errors to the total number of words was 21.4%.

**Table 5. Comparison between post-intervention test (Faculty of Arts) and post-test (Faculty of Education)**

Post-intervention spelling test Faculty of Arts		Post-intervention spelling test Faculty of Education	
1	The total errors were 3048.	1	The total errors were 2833.
2	The vowel errors were 1915.	2	The vowel errors were 1761.
3	The consonant errors were 1133.	3	The consonant errors were 1072.
4	The percentage of the total errors was 60.7%.	4	The percentage of the total errors was 56.7%.
5	The percentage of the vowel errors to the total errors was 62.8%.	5	The percentage of the vowel errors to the total errors was 62.2%.
6	The percentage of the vowel errors to the total number of words was 38.3%.	6	The percentage of the vowel errors to the total number of words was 35.2%.
7	The percentage of the consonant errors to the total errors was 37.2%.	7	The percentage of the consonant errors to the total errors was 37.8%.
8	The percentage of the consonant errors to the total number of words was 22.9%.	8	The percentage of the consonant errors to the total number of words was 21.4%.

lesson every week. There is only one English class per a week in the first year, two hours per a week. Spelling syllabus was given to them only in English. It is an extra activity of the class as the part of the lesson. After two months the students were given the spelling test (post-test) in the second semester. The dictation of the test has taken thirty minutes. The test contained 50 words. These spelling words contained examples of spelling rules and consonant clusters. Besides, consonants, pure vowels and diphthongs in different positions, and different vowels in initial, in middle and at the final position of the words.

After two tests (pre- and post-intervention), the papers were collected, then carefully marked. The marks of each test were jotted down separately, then a comparison was done between the students' performance in the two tests. The errors in the spelling test were categorized into two major categories, consonants and vowels. The percentage of each category was calculated to show their relative frequency.

### Spelling Test

The spelling test was prepared by the researcher. It was carried out in the following way: The spelling test consisted of 50 words with the vowel in different

positions, at the initial, in the middle and at the final position of the word, consonant, and words with problem areas in English spelling. For the sake of clarifying all sides of the problem, different types of vowels (short, long and combined vowels), and different types of consonants were used. Besides, different types of words which are used in everyday English and words with spelling rules such as: words with (ie) or (ei), words ending in (-y), doubling consonants and nouns take (-es) to form the plural were used. The words of spelling test were chosen from students' course book.

### The Results of Spelling Errors

This section presents the results of the field work of the study. The tables below show the results of the first year students of University of Dongola ( Faculty of Arts, pre- and post- spelling test and Faculty of Education, pre- and post- spelling test). They are shown through figures and percentages. First year students at Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education were given the pre-intervention spelling test without any explanation of spelling rules, or exercises in English sounds. The same spelling test (post-test) was given to the first year students at both faculties, but this time the students were taught a model

syllabus which is designed by the researcher for this purpose. They were taught spelling rules, differences between British and American spelling and also, different sounds were explained to them, to draw attention to irregularity of the English pronunciation system.=

### **The result of pre-intervention spelling test (Faculty of Arts)**

For the first year students of Faculty of Arts, the total errors of pre-spelling test were 3561. The consonant errors were 1339, and vowel errors were 2222. The total number of words for spelling  $50 \times 100 = 5000$  words. The total percentage = 100%. The percentage of the total errors  $3561 \times 100 \div 5000$  was = 71.2%. The percentage of the vowel errors to the total errors was  $2222 \times 100 \div 3561 = 62.4\%$ . The percentage of the vowel errors to the total number of words was  $2222 \times 100 \div 5000 = 44.4\%$ . The percentage of the consonant errors to the total errors was  $1339 \times 100 \div 3561 = 37.6\%$ . The percentage of the consonant errors to the total number of words was  $1339 \times 100 \div 5000 = 26.8\%$ . For the first year students of Faculty of Arts, the total errors of post-spelling test were 3048. The vowel errors were 1915, and the consonant errors were 1133. The total number of words for spelling  $50 \times 100 = 5000$  words. The percentage of the total errors was  $3048 \times 100 \div 5000 = 62\%$ . The percentage of the vowel errors to the total errors was  $1915 \times 100 \div 3048 = 62.8$ . The percentage of the vowel errors to the total number of words was  $1133 \times 100 \div 5000 = 38.3\%$ . The percentage of the consonant errors to the total errors was  $1133 \times 100 \div 3048 = 37.2\%$ . The percentage of the consonant errors to the total number of words was  $1133 \times 100 \div 5000 = 22.7\%$ .

### **The result of pre-intervention spelling test (Faculty of Education)**

For the first year students of Faculty of Education, the total errors of pre-spelling test were 3428. The vowel errors were 2312, and consonant errors were 1116. The number of words for spelling  $50 \times 100 = 5000$  words. The total percentage = 100%. The percentage of the total errors was  $3428 \times 100 \div 5000 = 68.4\%$ . The percentage of the vowel errors to the total errors was  $2312 \times 100 \div 3428 = 67.5\%$ . The percentage of the vowel errors to the total number of words was  $2312 \times 100 \div 5000 = 46.2\%$ . The percentage of the consonant errors to the total errors was  $1116 \times 100 \div 3428 = 32.6$ . The percentage of the consonant errors to the total number of words was  $1116 \times 100 \div 5000 = 22.3\%$ .

### **The result of post-intervention spelling test (Faculty of Education)**

For the first year students of Faculty of Education, the total errors of post-spelling test were 2833. The vowel

errors were 1761, and consonant errors were 1072. The total number of words for spelling  $50 \times 100 = 5000$ . The total percentage = 100%. The percentage of the total errors was  $2833 \times 100 \div 5000 = 56.7\%$ . The percentage of the vowel errors to the total errors was  $1761 \times 100 \div 2833 = 62.2\%$ . The percentage of the vowel errors to the total number of words was  $1761 \times 100 \div 5000 = 35.2\%$ . The percentage of the consonant to the total errors was  $1072 \times 100 \div 2833 = 37.8\%$ . The percentage of the consonant errors to the total number of words was  $1072 \times 100 \div 5000 = 21.4\%$ .

## **COMPARISON OF THE RESULTS**

These are comparisons of the results between pre-spelling test and post-spelling test which were carried out before and after the model syllabus was taught by the researcher. The pre-intervention test was given to the first year students of University of Dongola (Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education) without any explanation of spelling rules and English sounds. The post-intervention spelling test was given to them, but this time after explanation of spelling rules, English sounds and students were given some sounds practice through the model syllabus. The differences were shown in the tables above.

## **SUMMARY**

The study shows that, the spelling causes difficulty to the first year students of Dongola University, who represent the first year students at the Faculty of Arts when compared to the first year students at the Faculty of Education. Their inability to recognize the correct sound affects their performance in the spelling test. The spelling test which were prepared for them reflected this fact. The spelling performance of the students indicated that, the students commit spelling errors of letter omission, addition, transposition and substitution. These errors were attributed to the irregularity of English spelling, ignorance and incomplete application of rules. Besides, they tend to overgeneralization the rule, in addition to lack of training and carelessness of the students. Moreover, the differences in the sound and spelling system of English a main source of students spelling errors. Examples mentioned from students spelling test papers proved this, besides the interference of mother tongue.

## **Findings**

With referring to the analysis of students' spelling papers, the study reached the following findings:

1. In the Faculty of Arts, the percentage of the total errors in post-test was 61%, the percentage of the vowel errors to total was 62.8%, and the percentage of the consonant



errors to total errors was 37.2%.2. In the Faculty of Education, the percentage of the total errors in post-test was 56.7%, the percentage of the vowel errors to total errors was 62.2%, and the percentage of the consonant errors to total errors was 37.8%. While in the pre-spelling test, where, there were no sound explanations and spelling rules, the number of errors were great in both Faculties. This proved that the first year students have a clear weakness in spelling.

3. In the Faculty of Arts, the percentage of the total errors in pre-spelling test was 71.2%, the percentage of the vowel errors to the total errors was 62.4%, and the percentage of the consonant errors to the total errors was 37.6%.

4. In the Faculty of Education, the percentage of the total errors in the pre-spelling test was 68.6%, the percentage of the vowel errors to the total errors was 67.5% and the percentage of the consonant errors to the total errors was 32.5%.

5. Spelling errors that are committed by the students are particularly noticeable in vowel sounds which appeared to be very poor.

6. Students face difficulties with English sounds that do not exist in Arabic language.

7. The study indicates that over application of spelling rules and overgeneralization are found to be factors for spelling errors committed.

8. The students are not aware of their problems and what kind of difficulties they find in writing English sounds.

9. The study reveals that spelling errors are due to the omission, replacement and addition of vowel sounds.

## Solutions

Based on the results obtained in this study, and the discussion, analysis and the findings of the study, I recommend the following:

1. The possible solution to the spelling problems rests on teaching the basic spelling rules, correct pronunciation and reminding the students of the exceptions that every language has. At the same time teachers should take this area seriously. Students should be exposed to authentic materials and a lot of training and practice, because spelling is a skill that is learnt and mastered by much constant repetition (Macline 2001:52).

2. Teachers should be well trained in problem areas of spelling and phonetics and work continuously to improve students spelling by using such books as: (*Better English Pronunciation, Tree or Three? And Ship or Sheep?*)

3. Flash cards, wall- charts, cassettes, CDs and handwriting which has been designed to accompany first year syllabus ( Spine 4 ) should be used extensively.

4. Much concern should be devoted to the teaching of vocabulary, because it represents an essential element in language teaching from early stage of learning process. Teachers and course designers should concentrate on this area with much concern and emphasis.

5. For achieving what has been mentioned, continuous

field training particularly for new teachers should be considered.

6. It is the responsibility of English teachers and syllabus designers to integrate all skills and sub skills to secure the student's writing competence.

I conclude that, the study reveals that the spelling constitute a real problem among students at the University of Dongola. As Macline (2001:310) says: "English spelling is difficult and irregular, but some rules work almost all the time". This is due to the nature of English spelling system. There is no one to one correspondence between sound and letter. Letters do not highly represent the speech sounds, for example, the letter "a" represents different sounds as illustrate below:

/ei/ as in cake /keik/, table /teibl/.

/ɔ:/ as in saw /sɔ:/, tall /tɔ:l/.

/e/ as in many /meni/, ate /et/.

/a:/ as in calm /ka:lm/, bar /ba:/.

Another example is that one sound can be represented by more than one letter, the vowel sound /i:/ can be represented by:

(ea) as in tea /ti:/, repeat /ripi:t/.

(ie) as in chief /tʃi:f/, believe /bili:v/.

(ei) as in conceive /kənsi:v/, seize /si:z/.

Also, one can notice that one combination of letters is used to represent different sounds, the combination of letters (ough) represents sounds such as:

/au/ as in bough /bau/, plough /plau/.

/u:/ as in through /θru:/.

/əu/ as in though /θəu/.

The study also indicates that, vowel errors are a major area of difficulties among the students at the University of Dongola.

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