

English Spelling and its Difficult Nature

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Abstract: Spelling is an important aspect of writing. Good spelling knowledge is the engine for efficient reading and writing. Without a doubt, English spelling is a complicated matter. To acquire competency in English spelling is hard for learners as there is no one to one correspondence between phoneme and letter. Many researchers prove that English spelling is complex while some intellectuals argue that English spelling has regularity. This study aims to show the difficult nature of English spelling through a discussion of these two contradictory arguments.

Key words: spelling, phonemes, writing skill

1 Introduction

English spelling is unquestionably a difficult matter in which many interrelated skills such as reading and writing are involved. It is not only complicated for the second language learners even the native speakers find it hard. English spelling is probably the most irregular of all alphabetic systems. Most modern languages with a few exceptions, such as Chinese and Japanese adopt the alphabetical principle for their writing systems. That means that a letter or letter combination stands for a particular sound. In certain languages such as Finnish, Spanish and Italian, we can usually predict the pronunciation of a word from seeing the spelling as well as predict the spelling of a word from hearing it pronounced. It means those languages have one to one correspondence with phonemes and letters unlike in English. We cannot guess English spelling from pronunciation or we cannot always predict pronunciation from spelling. Because English has many different ways of representing the same sound such as a sound can be represented by a letter or different letters or some letter combinations and the same letter or letter combination

as well can represent more than one sound. The reasons for this irregularity are complex and largely historical.

2 Literature Review

Significance of Spelling

One of the very important matters to consider with writing competency is spelling. One single misspelled word can change the entire meaning of the sentence. Cook (1997:474) elaborates that "... correct spelling is a sign of education; a spelling mistake is a solecism that betrays carelessness or plebeian origins". Good spelling knowledge is extremely important for effective word recognition, which can greatly enhance reading (Dina and Alia: n.d). Poor spelling causes drastic effects on reading and writing. Dina and Alia cite Shane Templeton and Darrel Morris (1999: 103) as "Orthographic or spelling knowledge is the engine that drives efficient reading as well as efficient writing". Poor spellers' focus is often on the mechanic of their spelling rather than on the thread of their ideas and expressions (Graves, 1983). Those who do not have proper spelling accuracy tend to make their writing simple and very short only because they are unfamiliar or unsure of how some words are spelled and this prevents them from expressing their thoughts and ideas more accurately and academically (Harrasi, 2012).

It is noticeable that apart from the negative effect on writing, poor spelling can also be a barrier to the reader; a paper that has a lot of spelling errors probably would hinder the reader to follow his thoughts of ideas (Bolton and Snowball, 1993). Children have difficulties in reading due to poor decoding (sounding out) or encoding (spelling) words. Compared to receptive

decoding skills, productive spelling performance in dictation is a better indicator of the quality of the students' word representations. All these statements reveal us the importance of getting mastery in spelling in respective language. To get mastery in English spelling one has to identify its evaluation, nature, rules and spelling differences between British and American English .

History of English Spelling

There was no particular spelling pattern pertaining to English before the printing machine was invented. Spelling varied more from writer to writer, according to their education and temperament. For example, Sir John Cheke has a system of spelling but it was not the same of his contemporaries. The English spelling developed along the lines laid down Mulcaster, Johnson and Edward Philips. Even though, there was a concern regarding standard spelling in the sixteenth century, during the period from 1500 to 1650 it was settled by spelling reforms (Baugh and Cable, 1996). After the emergence of Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, most words had fixed spellings by the nineteenth century.

The spelling in Old English was affected by the Norman Conquest of England when changes in culture, writing and language occurred in the eleventh century. The monks brought Church Latin to England and the Normans carried out French as the official language. Calfree (2005) mentions for the next two centuries, English took up many French words and made them more like English. While pronunciation was modified, spelling remained untouched.

Anyhow, a word like *ambiance* which has the French spelling with an *a*, remained unchanged in American English while it has been changed as *ambience* in British English (Robbins, 2005). Due to the ability of accepting loan words from several other languages besides French and Latin, English orthography and vocabulary have been expanded. Borrowing and loan words are among the influences that affect spelling varieties in English even today. The Great Vowel Shift, which began in the fifteenth century, is another reason for changes in spelling. For example the /e:/ had changed into /i:/ as in *seed* and /i:/ had changed into the diphthong /ie/ as in *mice* (Fagerberg,

2006). Some of the Latin words had also changed into English as *dette* became *dept* and *iland* became *island* in the sixteenth century (Yule, 2006).

Many institutions emerged to reform spelling for example in 1883 the American Philological Association recommended the implication of a long list of new spellings approved by English society and established Spelling Reform Associations in both countries. In 1898, the National Education Association adopted twelve simplified spellings. In 1906 Simplified Spelling Board, which published a journal named *Spelling* time to time until 1931, was organized in the United States (Baugh and Cable, 1996). In this line, American spelling reformer Noah Webster was successful in revising a form like British English *honour* into *honor*. His proposed revision of *giv* for *give* and *laf* for *laugh* were in lines that were not accepted (Yule, 2006).

Nature of English spelling

Baugh and Cable (1996) mention that writing is recording of speech and spelling best combines simplicity with consistency and in alphabetic writing, the same sound is regularly represented by the same character and a given character always represent the same sound. None of the European languages including English fully accomplishes this ideal. The English alphabet comprises 26 letters including 24 separate consonant phonemes and 14 to 20 vowels, depending on various dialects, which proves that there cannot be a correspondence between letters or graphemes and sounds (Dina and Alia, n.d).

The main complexity in English orthography is the spelling of vowel sounds (Rollings, 2004). The same combination of letters can construct different sound and different combination of letters can give the same sound or pronunciation in English. For example, in the combination of letters *ou* in *through*, *loud*, *rough* and *famous* there are different pronunciation for the same combination. At the same time a single long vowel phoneme /i:/ can be spelt in diverse ways as in *believe*, *receive* *machine*, *be*, *see*, *seat*, *key*, and *phoenix*. Conversely, the symbol or grapheme *a* in *father*, *hate*, *anchor*, *ate*, *all*, *are*, *hat*, and many other words has nearly a score of values (Baugh and Cable, 1996).

The same diversity in consonant is very confusing to the language learner. For instance, the /k/ sound is

represented by *k*, *c*, *ck*, or *ch*, depending on where it occurs in the word as in *kite*, *cat*, *duck*, *Christmas*, etc. As well as, the grapheme combination of **gh** has three different pronunciations as in *though*, *enough* and *ghost* (Dina and Alia, n.d). Moreover, the phoneme /f/ is represented by a grapheme or grapheme combinations as in *far*, *laugh* and *pharmacy*. English has a dozen spellings for the sound **sh**(/ʃ/): *shoe*, *sugar*, *issue*, *nation*, *suspicion*, *ocean*, *nauseous*, *conscious*, *chaperon*, *schist*, *fuchsia*, *pshaw* (Baugh and Cable, 1996). In addition, English has more phonemes than grapheme, such as the grapheme *s* can represent the sound /s/ as in *sun* and /ʃ/ as in *sugar*.

The way a word is stressed is another characteristic of the difficult English spelling. In both words **courage** and **courageous** the initial spelling is same but they are not pronounced in the same way. An important factor affecting spelling accuracy of learners is that, since the 15th century, the pronunciation of spoken English has undergone substantial changes. For instance, although English does not have the pronunciation of the initial **k** sound or the internal **ch** sound, those letters are still included in the contemporary spelling of the word *knight* as the spelling of written English was largely fixed in the form that was used when printing was introduced (Yule, 2006).

English spelling has many homophones. A homophone is a word that is the same as another word but it differs in meaning. The words may be the same, such as (flower) and (past tense of "rise") or differently, such as, and or weather or whether. Due to the homophones, learners confuse to select the correct spelling in writing a discourse act.

A distinguished French scholar has mentioned that English has preserved thousands of borrowed words and the spelling of those words have been in their original language, therefore, the foreigner finds it hard to recognize the word and to spell it easily (Baugh & Cable, 1996).

Spelling variations between British and American English is a that originated from the brought to England by and/or settlers from various parts of what is now known as northwest and the . It began the language of the ruling power through a

series of incidents for a long period in England. Then it was spread all over the world due to several reasons. Therefore, there are varieties of the English language such as British English, RP (Received Pronunciation), American English, Australian English, Indian English, Sri Lankan English etc. Further, there are several dialects in each country, which vary from states to states and province to province. Among them, some of them are standard varieties while others are not. However, there is pronunciation dissimilarity pertaining to each variety, concerning the spelling; both British and American English spellings are accepted by all. In the case of Sri Lankans, we very often utilize British English.

Noah Webster (1758-1843) who was born in Hartford, Connecticut, America is considered as the father of American spelling. Webster was dissatisfied with the English schoolbooks when he was a teacher; this led him to publish three elementary books in English. His *The American Spelling Book* (1784) is a milestone in the development of spelling changes in American spelling. Baugh and Cable (1996) mention that Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* published in 1828 in two volumes, is distinctly an American thing developing along its own line. He is the person responsible for many American spelling like **honor** and **fiber** "... the majority of the distinctively American spellings are due to his advocacy of them and the incorporation of them in his dictionary" (Baugh and Cable, 1996:363).

There are a number of differences between British and American English from the fit settlement of America. Baugh and Cable (1996:363) refer to Mencken (1936) who states that it is common to observe a slight difference between American English and British English. For example, British English mostly has the ending **our** in words like **honour**, **colour**, **favour** and **flavour** whereas in American English these word are written without **u** as in **honor**, **color**, **favor** and **flavor** (Fagerberg, 2006), (Baugh and Cable, 1996).

"The differences often pass unnoticed, partly because a number of English spellings are still current in America, partly because some of the American Innovations are common in England, and in general

because certain alternatives are permissible in both countries.'

Consequently, the document given by Baugh and Cable (1996:363) is very crucial in resolving the challenge in variations.

Contradictory arguments among scholars

The nature of English spelling explains us how difficult the English spelling system is. However, some intellectuals argue that English spelling has more frequency. Hook (2002) says that English spelling is very regular and not particularly hard to learn. Educationalists who write on the topics of phonics and English spelling repeat the same. Dewey (2003) cites Hanna (1960) who states that we can guess with 75% accuracy the dictionary spelling for each phoneme with 4 guesses and Flesch (1956, 1983) who says that English has a highly regular orthography or is 97% phonemic according to his research. Spaulding (1964) uses 70 phonograms and 26 exception rules to arrive at her high estimate for English regularity. Dewey (1970) claims that English spelling is very regular. These studies explain us that those intellectuals try to show the regularity of English spelling.

Again, though Rollings (2004) agrees that English orthography is irregular he mentions it is easier than other alphabetic languages and a person learning Chinese has to learn thousands of different characters whereas English only needs to have the knowledge of 26 letters.

Opposing to this argument what Bett (2003) proves is very much important to show the difficult nature of English spelling. He mentions that the regularity of English has been estimated as 7%. He cites Yule (2003) and Dewey (1978) that all estimating depends on how you define the regular and how you measure it. One measure of phonemicity or regularity is the number of phonemes divided by the number of spellings. Spanish has 24 phonemes and 29 ways to represent them. This makes the Spanish writing system 83% regular. If the regularity of English were measured the same way, it would be only 7% regular. According to Dewey (1970), English has 41 phonemes and 561 ways to represent them $41/561=7\%$. French: $30/130 = 23\%$. If such regularity represented the relative ease with which an orthography is learned, then Spanish

would be 11.9 times easier than English. 'Children would be able to learn to read and write in this orthography over 10 times as fast as they could learn English' (Bett, 2003:1).

Further, the preface of the Penguin Spelling Dictionary depicts that English is a difficult language to spell correctly and not only for the foreigner, native speakers too, find it hard (The Penguin Spelling Dictionary, 1990). Same opinion was expressed by many researchers such as Waller (2002:13-15), Yule (2006:25), Baugh and Cable (1996:12), Al-Harrasi (2012:1), Dina (n.d:2), Fagerberg (2006:2) and Upward (1988).

Having these two contradictory ideas, this paper attempts to add more value to the thought that English spelling is difficult. English does not have one to one correspondence between letters and phonemes, having too much redundant letters and the way a word is stressed are the main reasons for that difficulty.

3 Methodology

This paper is based only on the secondary data. The researcher proves that English spelling is difficult contradictory to the argument that English spelling is regular and ease. To provide evidence, the arguments related to simplicity and difficulty of English spelling were discussed. Then the researcher suggests some ideas to overcome the issue.

4 Discussion

It is obvious to say that English spelling is very much difficult according to Baugh and Cable (1996:12), Al-Harrasi (2012:1), Yule (2006:25), Waller (2002:13-15). Further, the English Spelling Society (**tess**)'s publication, *Guide to English Spelling* points out that the English speaking child takes up to three years longer to learn to read and write proficiently compared with those whose maternal tongue is another. In addition, adult illiteracy is stubbornly high in the English Speaking World; it is not simply a characteristic of the British education system. Again, it mentions that though the '**tess**' does not advocate any particular alternative spelling system at present, it is trying to make people aware of the economic and

social costs of traditional English spelling. If people fully realise the extent of these costs, they will be more open to the interest of change to something less irregular and more predictable, so that English speakers may enjoy the benefits of those languages, which have developed less eccentrically. It is notable to consider Baugh and Cable's (1996:13) opinion that still there is a challenge '... whether the extension of English in the future will compel us to consider the reform of English spelling from an impersonal and indeed, international point of view'. Therefore, the willingness of 'tess' for a reformation is very much precious according to the current need.

In this concern, to get mastery in English spelling, 'The Rules of Spelling' extracted from *The Penguin Spelling Dictionary* (1990) and 'Summary of Spelling Rules and Generalizations' as given in *Spelling Skills Builder* (2004) are listed below:

1. Normally nouns are pluralized by adding **s** and for nouns ending in **s, x, z, ch, or sh** **es** is added. These are the regular inflections
2. In the case of irregular inflections:
 - a. Nouns of Latin origin ending in **a**, especially in scientific or technological usage, usually have the plural ending **ae** (e.g. alga/algae)
 - b. Such nouns ending in **ma** always have the plural ending **mata** (e.g. stoma/stomata)
 - c. Nouns ending in **f** either from regular plurals (e.g. chief/chiefs) or have the plural ending **ves** (e.g. calf/calves)
 - d. Most nouns end in **fe** from regular plurals (e.g. safe/safes) but a few have the plural ending **ves** (e.g. wife/wives)
 - e. Nouns ending in **i** usually form regular plurals but a few have the plural ending **ies** (e.g. chilli /chillies)
 - f. Nouns ending in **is** either form regular plurals (e.g. iris/irises) or having the plural ending **es** (e.g. basis/bases). Some scientific and technical nouns have the plural ending **ides** (e.g. apsis/apsides)
- g. Most nouns ending in **o** either form regular plurals (e.g. photo/photos) or have the plural ending **oes** (e.g. potato/potatoes).
- h. Some nouns of Greek origin ending in **on** have the plural ending **a** (e.g. criterion/criteria)
- i. Nouns of Latin origin ending in **um**, especially in scientific or technical usage have the plural ending **a** (e.g. stratum/strata)
- j. Nouns of Latin origin ending in **us** especially in scientific or technical usage have the plural ending **i** (e.g. fungus/fungi)
- k. Though many nouns ending with **x** have the regular plurals some scientific or technological usages have the plural ending **ces** (e.g. appendix/appendices)
- l. Nouns ending in **y** preceded by a vowel, form regular plurals (e.g. donkey/ donkeys). If they are preceded by a consonant or **qu** have the ending **ies** (e.g. family/ families; colloquy/colloquies).
- m. Some nouns remain the same in their plural form (e.g. deer/deer;sheep/sheep)
- n. Some nouns are always plural (e.g. clothes, police, scissors)
- o. In compound nouns normally the last word is pluralized (e.g. travel agents, boyfriends)
- p. Some nouns change the spelling to form the plural (foot/feet; mouse/mice)
3. Verbs which are in regular inflections spelled as follow:
 - a. The third person singular is formed by adding **s** or for verbs ending in **s,x,z,ch, or sh** by adding **es** (e.g. sit/sits; wash/ washes)
 - b. For words especially verbs ending in **e** preceded by a consonant, the **e** is dropped before adding **ing, ed** or a suffix beginning with a vowel. (e.g. describe/describing/ described;receive/receiving/received; survive/survival; fortune/fortunate)

4. Irregular inflections are considered in this way:
- a. In monosyllabic verbs ending in a consonant preceded by a single vowel, double the last consonant before a suffix beginning with a vowel (e.g. sit/sitting; pat/patting/patted; run/running/runner)
 - c. When a word has more than one syllable and the final syllable is accented or stressed then the final consonant is doubled before adding a suffix beginning with a vowel (e.g. forgot/forgotten; regret/regrettable; occur/occurrede. When a word has more than one syllable and the final syllable contains two vowels then the final consonant is not doubled before adding a suffix beginning with a vowel. (e.g. appear+ance/appearance; complian+ed/complained)
 - f. Words ending in *l* following a single vowel pronounced separately usually double the *l*. (e.g. marvel+ing/marvelling; travel+ed/travelled)
 - g. Retain the *e* in words that might be mistaken for another word when adding an *ing* for verbs ending with *e*. (e.g. canoeing/dyeing)
 - h. Words ending in *ie* drop the *e* and change the *i* to *y* when the suffix *ing* is added. (e.g. die/dying; tie/tying; lie/lying)
5. Common rules:
- a. Write *i* before *e* except after *c* when the sound is *ee* (i:). (e.g. believe/yield but receive) When the sound is not *ee* it is *ei*. (e.g. weight, height, neither, either)
 - b. Words ending in *y* preceded by a consonant usually change the *y* to *i* before any suffix, except one beginning with *i*. (e.g. beauty+ful/beautifully; mercy+less/merciless; cry+ing/crying; study+ing/studying)
Exceptions: shyness, ladylike, babyhood, wryly.
 - c. When a word ends in *ic* add *al* before adding *ly*. (e.g. magic+al/magically; music+al/musically)
 - d. When a word ends in *ic* add *k* before adding *ed*, *er*, *ing*, or *y*. (e.g. florid+ing/floricking; panic+ed/panicked)
 - e. For adjectives or nouns ending in a silent *e* the *e* is usually, but not always, retained before adding a suffix beginning with a consonant. (e.g. pale/palely; rude/rudely) Exceptions include true/truly; whole/wholly; argue/argument.
- Getting practice with these rules will enhance one's spelling accuracy. inh Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

5 Conclusion

It is obvious that English Spelling is very difficult as there is no one to one correspondence between letter and phoneme, ability to accept loan words and borrowing from other languages, the way a word is stressed in English and homophone confusions. Though some intellectuals argue that English Spelling is regular, it is evident that English has a difficult spelling system as many intellectuals claim that it is hard not only to second language learner but also to native speaker. Getting more practice with reading and writing and acquiring fluency in spelling rules will help obtain competency in spelling.

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