

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Investigating factors contributing to grade nine students' spelling errors at Don Bosco High and Preparatory School in Batu

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**This study investigates the causes of grade nine students' spelling errors at Donbosco High and Preparatory School in Batu, Ethiopia in 2009/2010. Fifty-two students were included in the study using simple random sampling techniques, and ten teachers who taught other subjects in English were selected using availability sampling. The research revealed that the origin of English Language words is one of the causes for the students' failure to spell words correctly. That means, since some of English vocabularies were borrowed from other languages such as Anglo Saxon, Roman, Norman-French, Latin and Greek, they lack uniform and consistent spelling rules. Besides this, the discrepancy between the pronunciation and written form of many English words along with less emphasis given to the spelling lesson contributed a lot to the students' spelling errors. The study suggested that teachers should teach and motivate the students to learn the correct spelling. In addition, they should give reward to students for their correct spelling. Moreover, students should give attention to learn the correct spelling of English words. It is important to expose students to spelling rules and practice exercises in their text books to help them learn correct English spellings.**

**Key words:** Spelling errors, written communication, English, inattention, overgeneralization.

## INTRODUCTION

People learn language to communicate with others. Communication can be in either spoken or written. A person who wants to communicate through writing should have adequate content and correct forms of English words for effective writing. Knowing these (grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc) helps the readers understand the writing materials well. Thus, the writer has to know how to say and what to say in his writing. When he writes, he has to use the right form. The use of correct spelling brings good communication between the writers and the readers. Wrong spelling brings communication breakdown between the writers and the readers. The

readers who are reading wrongly spelt words may understand the word in a wrong way and he may be confused to understand the message of the writers. Therefore, knowing and using the correct spelling of words help to create good communication between writers and readers. It is important for a person to know how to spell English words. A person who does not know how to spell English words commits spelling errors that can cause communication breakdown. Poor spelling can impede educational achievement, employment opportunity, interpersonal relationships, and self-esteem Moats (1991). Similarly, learning to spell correctly is not easy for most, but it is important for all, especially with increased competition for good jobs. Even general readers make judgments about a person's intelligence and level of education based on spelling. Poor spelling on a resume can offend an employer and cost an otherwise-qualified

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candidate a job! ([www.susancanthy.com](http://www.susancanthy.com)).

### **The importance of learning the spelling of words**

English has an alphabetic writing system based on the Roman alphabet that was brought to Anglo Saxon England by Christian missionaries and church officials in the 600s (Kemmer, 2009). Alphabetic writing systems are based on the principle of representing spoken sounds segments, specifically those at the level of consonants and vowels, by written characters, ideally one for each sound segment. He also explained that the Roman alphabet, being designed for a language with a very different phonological system, was never perfectly adapted for writing English even when first used to represent Anglo-Saxon. He further elaborated that norms of writing words consistently with an alphabetic character set are collectively called orthography. Consistency in writing was never absolute in Anglo- Saxon because the whole system was new and norms for writing words in a consistent way took time to develop (Kemmer, 2009). It is not easy for writers to remember a single orthographic representation, called a spelling, for a word; yet this is what is required for standardization, unless there is a perfect one- to-one correspondence between phonemes and graphemes, which is an ideal rarely reached with alphabetic systems. Writers seem to prefer to produce written forms they have seen before for specific words, even if there is not a good match between written characters and sounds.

### **The advent of printing and standardization of English spelling**

Before the innovation of typewriter, people used to write words as they feel. This created a serious problem in understanding the message of the writers. However, after the innovation of type writer, people began to use similar spelling for the words they are writing. For example, with the advent of typewriter, the growth of a professionalized class of printers outside the direct control of church and government led to the role of printers in setting norms of writing and spelling. Printers had a strong interest in standardization to reduce variation and hence make the printing process easier. The printing profession evolved into the profession of publishing, and publishers have been important ever since the setting of written standard (Kemmer, 2009). Norms for writing words consistently with an alphabetic character set are collectively called orthography. Thus we should not go back to commit the mistakes of early people who were writing words as they feel. Learning the correct spelling of words is crucial. Teachers of any subject using English as a medium of instruction should also give attention for teaching of the spelling of words in their respective subjects. In addition to teaching the spellings of words, teachers should motivate the students to learn spelling, that is, by giving

value for the correctly spelt words in students' written works and punishing them for wrongly spelt words.

### **Statement of the problem**

Spelling errors in the first and second languages have been the focus of many studies (Al-Jarf, 2010). A lot of spelling error corpora has been available in the literature since 1920. For instance, Birkbeck Spelling Error Corpus Mitten (1985) indicated collection of files that contains 36,133 misspellings of 6,136 words gathered from various sources, available as separate files with detailed documentation from the Oxford Text Archive (<http://ota.ahds.ac.uk>). These errors include the results of spelling tests and errors from free writing, taken mostly from school children, university or adult literacy students. However, there is no study conducted on students' spelling errors as far as the researchers' knowledge is concerned in the school under study in Ethiopia.

As English teachers, the researchers observed that students' commit spelling errors. Even students who are good at spoken English sometimes commit spelling errors when they write what they speak or what others say to them. Besides, from long years of teaching experience and observation, the researchers realized that colleagues who teach different subjects in English complained that most of the students seem to have problems of spelling in their writing. Therefore, the wrong spelling in the students' test, class works, home works, assignments and lecture notes seems to mislead teachers to understand the students' answers in a wrong way. As a result, the students fail to get the result that they deserve due to wrong spellings. The absence of adequate reference materials on how to learn English spellings for practical usage in our local context has also initiated the researchers to sort out the reasons why the students tend to make spelling errors in their writing.

### **Objectives of the study**

The objective of the study is to investigate factors that contribute to the students' spelling errors at Don Bosco high and preparatory school in Batu, Ethiopia. Therefore, the study seeks to answer this research question: What are the causes for grade nine students' spelling errors?

### **What is spelling?**

Various writers define spelling differently. For instance, spelling is defined as the act of forming words correctly from individual letter (Hornby, 2000). This means spelling has its rules to form words correctly, that is, letters must appear in correct sequence to be meaningful; otherwise it will lead to spelling errors.

What is spelling error? According to Al-Jarf (2010),

spelling errors can be either freely produced or elicited by certain tasks. Any word that does not match the target word in part or in full is marked as a misspelling. Any faulty word, faulty grapheme (single vowel, single consonant, vowel digraphs, consonants digraphs, phonogram, suffix, or prefix) within a word is counted as error (Al-Jarf, 2010). Similarly, Shaw (1970) stated that error is a mistake, especially one that causes problem or affects the result of something. Thus, spelling errors affect the interpretation of a word in the minds of the readers. Spelling errors cause problems to communication since it is a deviation from rules or norms. That means “any graphemes that are added, deleted, substituted by another or reversed are counted as misspelling” (Al-Jarf, 2010). According to Corder (1967), error can be defined as systematic consistent deviance characteristic of the learner’s linguistic system at a given stage of learning. Moreover, Dulay et al. (1982) define error as:

“... the flawed side of the learner’s speech or writing. Those parts of the conversation or composition that deviate from selected norm of mature language performance.” In this study, the researchers agree to the definition of Dulay et al. (1982) who classify “error” as a systematic deviation of spelling from a selected norm or norms. To put it in other words, errors are defective parts in writing or it is the composition that does not follow the rules of the target language. The spelling error corpus is then divided into the following groups: (i) whole word error; (ii) words containing one error; (iii) words containing two errors; (iv) word containing three errors; (v) words containing four errors and so on.

According to Lounsbury (1900), cited in Susan (2011) English spelling is consistent in consistency. That means our system of spelling is extremely complex and inconsistent (for one thing the Latin alphabet had fewer letters than English sound). Sounds can be spelt in several ways, letters can represent several sounds, and most spelling “rules” have many exceptions! ([www.susancanthonny.com](http://www.susancanthonny.com)).

English spelling consists of three-tier system that corresponds to its historical development (Henderson and Templeton, 1986). The system encodes pronunciation, linguistics origins, and meanings of words or parts of words derived from Greek or Latin (Babkoff (2005). The lack of correspondence between English spelling and pronunciation can be attributed to a history of influence from other languages (namely French) and changes in pronunciation without sufficient accompanying changes in spelling.

Written English began after the establishment of monasteries in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Monks wrote and copied Latin manuscripts and therefore adapted the Roman alphabet for the writing of English ([http://www.palgrave.com/](http://www.palgrave.com/language/) language/. [Freeborn/site/ pdfs/](http://www.freeborn.com/site/pdfs/)

commentary.

There are many reasons why students commit spelling errors. The first reason could be explained in terms of the origin of English Language. Spelling errors can be attributed to the origin of the words of English language. Originally, old English was written phonetically. However, during the Normans time in England (11-15th century), French influence significantly altered the English Language. Later, with developments in sciences, terms were created using Greeks and Latin (Babkoff (2005). Hence, the spelling system balances a phonetic demand ( the consistent spelling of sounds among words) with a semantic demand (the consistent spelling of morphemes among words) (Cummings, 1988). Latin Language was the language of culture in western Europe for more than 1,000 years and English took a great deal of its vocabulary from it in order to enrich the simple Germanic Language. English has borrowed those words along the Latin alphabet for its writing (Jon, 2010).

The origin of English Language comes from different languages; this makes the words to lack uniformity in their spelling rules. Regarding this, Boer (1817) argued that the study of “English Language reveals that its vocabulary is a mixture of Anglo-Saxon, Roman, and Norman-French and later Latin and Greek.”

In other words, the roots of the problem are fascinating, and lie deep in the history of English Language. To highlight this truth, English speakers throughout history have freely borrowed words from a dozen of languages. To show the origin of these words, English kept the original spellings. All words with ‘Ph’ for example, are from Greek. In addition, the Latin alphabet, which was adopted for writing English, did not fit in. It had fewer letters than the English sounds have. The existing English spelling conventions provide adequate solution for 42 of the 43 English phonemes. The 26 letters of the Roman alphabet can cater for all English spelling (Bell, 2004).

The second cause of spelling error is that spelling English words is difficult by itself. English language is not a syllabic language. That means we do not some times write words as we pronounce them. This discrepancy between the spoken and written form contributes a lot to spelling errors of students since many words having the same sound are spelt differently, many others have silent letters in their spelling, and many words are not spelt as they sound. For centuries, many words have been spelled without rime or reason. However, with this lack of sensible method, the spelling of many words has become fixed. Hence, English, unlike Ethiopian languages, (Amharic, Oromo, etc), does not have the same form, both in written and spoken form to write words. This means in Ethiopian languages, a person who knows how to write sounds can write any word said to him without a mistake. Therefore, because of the influence of mother tongue interference, our students try to write English

words as the words are pronounced and commit spelling errors in their written communications. Such kind of error is committed due to transfer. Transfer refers to the effect of L1 on the learning of L2 or foreign language. In transfer, the students borrow the patterns of L1 from the mother tongue to the target language they learn (Al-Jarf, 2010). Pronunciation has changed drastically over the centuries, while spelling has stayed the same. 400 years ago, the now silent letters in write, knife, and comb were pronounced. The 'gh' in light and a guttural sound is no longer used in English; consequently, pronunciation has changed drastically over the centuries, while spelling has stayed the same. Moreover, the sounds of English Language were changing faster than the written language, which lagged behind those for pronunciation, thus providing another source of divergence of the written form from the spoken one (Anthony, 2011; Kemmer, 2009).

Learning the spelling rules of English words is very difficult due to the discrepancy between the pronunciations of many words and its spelling system. Writing down an utterance into its graphemes is not a simple cognitive task. Getting a pronunciation out of alphabetic writing requires people to analyze the sound string down to the level of component sounds (Kemmer (2009). Hence, he further stated that the lack of consistent norms for written representations, and the changes that took place over time in the English Language sound system were all the forces that led to greater divergence of the written forms and the spoken string, apart from the dialectal variation in English speaking community. This reason makes English spelling difficult for Ethiopian students to write English words in line with its pronunciation. Besides, unlike other skills, spelling is one of the most neglected parts of English lesson in Ethiopian curriculum and in the students' textbook.

The third possible reason could be learners' lack of desire to learn correct spelling of English words. Many spelling errors are committed due to inattention of the learners when they spell words. Many English learners do not give attention to whether they write a word with the correct spelling or not. They simply write the way they feel rather than the way it is supposed to be written. Harry (1970) states that people / students commit spelling errors because they are not motivated to learn correct spelling due to lack of desire to learn it. The students themselves, too, do not take time to learn the spelling rules and/ or learn how to spell words and even they do not try to use all available means to learn how English words are supposed to be spelt. Furthermore, Shaw (1970) suggests that the students should develop a desire to learn, devote sufficient time to learn the spelling of English words and become competent speller. He elaborated this case and stated, "The first and most important step in correct spelling is the desire to learn, to devote the necessary time to learn.

The third is to use all available means to learn" (Shaw, 1970). There are less books that emphasize spelling rules in the school libraries as a result of little or lack of attention given to the importance of learning spelling rules, and students also lack interest to learn spelling. Furthermore, lack of interest on the part of the teachers to teach spelling of words is another cause of spelling problems. Even many teachers, sometimes, seem to commit spelling errors themselves while writing some notes on either the blackboard or exercise books.

The fourth errors made by second or foreign language learners can be divided into interlingual and interlingual errors. Interlingual errors are those that result from language transfer, which is caused by the learner's native language (L1). \*\*\*\*Interlingual transfer errors caused by the interference of the learners' L1 (Darus and Hein 2009). Lado (1957) hypothesized those errors in second language (L2) are caused by the interference of the student's native language. \*\*\*\*\*native language (L1) before Lado 1975 as Darus and Hein (2009) stated quoting Ho (1973) the intralingual errors are the second category of errors. These errors may be occurred due to inadequate learning or difficulties inherent in the target language itself, faulty teaching, confused thinking or lack of contrast of both languages These types of errors reveal the student's inability to separate L1 from L2. Hence, a contrastive analysis of L1 and L2, he thought, will help identify the areas of difficulty in L2 or FL. Al- Jarf (2010) quoting Odlin (1989), James (1980) and Brown (1980) indicated that several processes cause students' errors in L2 or FL such as transfer, overgeneralization and communications strategies. Transfer error refers to the effect of L1 on the learning of L2 or FL. In other words, in transfer error, patterns from L1 are borrowed and used in L2 or FL. In overgeneralization, we extend the patterns of L2 by analogy. It is a common process to both L1 and L2 or FL. Thus, the students extend the use of a grammatical rule of linguistic item beyond its accepted uses, generally by making words, or structures following a more regular pattern. Moreover, Richards explains that overgeneralization covers instances where the learners create deviant structures in the target language (Richards, 1974). After having read or heard sentences such as "He reached the house at 10:00 PM" a student may produce, "he leaved the house at 6:00 am." A learner may write, "She walked fastly to catch the bus" because he already knows "he walked quickly to catch the train". Overgeneralization is caused by insufficient exposure to the target language. Thus, to avoid this, students should read more written materials in English.

Other cause that affects the spelling, according to Cheng-Yu (2009), can be different letter-sound correlations. In English, letter-sound correlation different in different words. Mapping between phonemes and graphemes are not regular. So when one word is to be spelt, several "similar words are activated at the same

**Table 1.** Students' response to attention they give for the spelling words in their writing.

Item 1	Variable	No of respondents	% of respondents
How often do you care about the spelling of words when you write?	Some times	10	19.23
	Usually	10	19.23
	Always	18	34.62
	Never	14	26.92
Total		52	100

time "XIAO Xu-yue," quoted in Cheng-Yu (2009). Thus, it is cumbersome for the learners to use correct graphemes because some of the letters and consonant are replaced by those with similar pronunciation like misspelling of "editor" as "editer" "cap" as "kap" (Cheng-Yu, 2009).

Finally and very important, causes of students spelling errors could be ascribed to dyslexia. Dyslexia is a broad term defining a learning disability that impairs a person's fluency or accuracy in being able to read, speak and spell and which can manifest itself as a difficulty with phonological awareness, phonological decoding, orthographic coding, auditory short-term memory, and/or rapid naming (Wikipedia, 2011).

"Children or students who are dyslexic have phonological difficulties, that is, they find it difficult to sort out the sounds within words. This means that they have problem with reading, writing and spelling." ([http:// www.dyslexia-parent.com/correction.html](http://www.dyslexia-parent.com/correction.html)). Moreover, common characteristics among people with dyslexia are difficulty with spelling, phonological processing (the manipulation of sounds,) and /or rapid visual – verbal responding (Wikipedia, 2011). Dyslexia is estimated to occur in about 4 to 8% of the population ([http:// www.dyslexia-parent.com/](http://www.dyslexia-parent.com/)). Dyslexic students have difficulty with associating sounds with the letters that represent them (sound-symbol correspondence that is very poor in spelling (orthographic coding). Thus, they face difficulty in learning the alphabet or letters order. English has a comparatively deep orthography within the Latin alphabet system, with a complex orthographic structures that employ spelling patterns at several levels, principally, letter- sound correspondences, syllables, and morphemes (Wikipedia, 2011).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Fifty-two grade nine students participated in the research along with ten teachers who taught grade nine students at Don Bosco High and Preparatory School, using English as a medium of instruction.

### Sample and sampling procedures

Out of one hundred and four students attending grade nine at Don Bosco High and Preparatory School, fifty-two that is 50% of the total population were selected for the study using simple random sampling techniques, especially lottery method. Besides this, ten

teachers (that is, 100%) who were teaching English and teaching other subjects using English as the medium of instruction were also included in the study using availability sampling technique, as their numbers were manageable.

### Instruments of data collection

Three methods of data collection instruments were used to gather information namely students and teachers' questionnaire, focused group discussion, and oral test on spelling of selected English words.

The primary instrument of data collection was questionnaire for the students and teachers. The questionnaire for the students contained fourteen items that consist of multiple choices, open-ended essay and restricted essay questions in which the students respond in writing. Teachers' questionnaire contained sixteen items, which consist of multiple choice and open-ended essay. The teachers' questionnaire had similar content with the students' questionnaire for the purpose of cross checking the responses from the students with that of the teachers' responses. All copies of the questionnaire distributed to both the students and teachers were returned.

The second instrument used to collect data for this study was focused group discussion with the teachers at the school. Twelve structured interview questions were used to discuss with the ten teachers who teach English and use English as a medium of instruction to teach other subjects about their problems related to students' spelling errors in writing in English.

The third instrument used to collect data from the students was test on spelling words namely paragraph writing from dictation, and writing, "word demons" in which students usually commit spelling errors while writing and dictated to the students to spell them correctly.

The tests were given to fifty-two grade nine students who have filled the questionnaire. Most of the student wrote what they heard from the researchers. All the papers were collected back after the test was given to them. The researchers collected the students' written works (that is, test papers) and analyzed the spelling of the students in their writing to identify what kinds of errors they have committed in their writing. The in depth analysis of the students' written work was crosschecked with their answers in questionnaires that they had filled. As the actual spelling errors of the students were seen from their writing, the written test was given to identify their spelling errors.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Analysis of the students' questionnaire

As can be seen from Table 1, 10(19.23%) of the respondents stated that they sometimes care about the

**Table 2.** Students' responses to frequency of errors they commit in their writing.

Item 2	Variable	No. of respondents	% of respondents
How often do you commit spelling errors?	Sometimes	24	46.15
	Rarely	10	19.23
	Most often	8	15.38
	Never	10	19.23
Total		52	100

**Table 3.** Students' responses to their attitude to learning of English spelling.

Item	How much important is it to know the correct spelling of words?	Number of respondents	% of respondents
Variables	Not important	2	3.8
	To some extent important	8	15.4
	Very important	42	80.8
Total		52	100

**Table 4.** Students' responses to their feeling about learning correct spelling of English words.

Item	How do you feel about learning the spelling of words?	Number of respondents	% of respondents
Variables	It is not important	6	11.54
	It is important	14	26.92
	It is very important	32	61.54
Total		52	100

spelling when they write. The other 10(19.23%) of the respondents said that they usually care about the spelling of English words when they write. The highest number of respondents 18(34.62%) reported that they always care about the spelling of words when they write, whereas 14(26.82%) of the respondents claimed that they never give attention or care about the spelling of words when they write.

As indicated in Table 2, of the highest number of respondents that is, 24(46.15%) said that they sometimes commit spelling errors while 10(19.23%) and 8(15.38%) of the students respectively said that they rarely and most often commit spelling errors. The rest 10(19.23%) of the respondents reported that they never write wrong spelling.

As can be seen from Table 3, only 2 (3.8%) of the respondents reported that it is not important to know the correct spelling of words whereas 8 (15.4%) of the respondents replied that it is to some extent important to know the correct spelling of English words. The remaining 42 (80.8%) of the respondents claimed that they believe it is very important to know the correct spelling of English words.

As indicated in Table 4, there are different feelings about the learning of spelling of English words among the learners. For instance, only 6(11.54%) of the respondents

alone reported it is not important to learn the spelling of English words to effectively communicate in writing. However, 14 (26.92%) of the respondents claimed that it is important to learn the spelling of English words to communicate well in writing. The majority of the respondents that is, is 32 (61.54%) them reported that it is very important to learn the spelling of English words.

As shown in Table 5, 10 (19.23%) of the respondents stated that the main problem in learning spelling is lack of materials. The other 14 (26.92%) of the respondents claimed that lack of interest to learn is their main problem in learning spelling. These students seem that they need their teachers' assistance in raising their interest and helping them learn the spelling rules of English words. 10 (19.23%) of the respondents claimed that lack of good teachers is their main problem in learning spelling rules of English words. The remaining 18 (34.62%) of the respondents claimed that all variables such as lack of materials for learning spelling rules, lack of interests to learn among students due to lack of good teachers who teach them are their main problems in learning spelling rules of English words.

As depicted in Table 6, 18 (34.62%) of the respondents said that they write it as they feel it is while 8 (15.38%) and 12(23.85%) of the respondents replied that they ask their friends and their teachers if they do not know how

**Table 5.** Students' responses to problems in learning English spelling.

Item	What is your main problem in learning spelling	No. of respondents	Percentage
Variables	Lack of materials	10	19.23
	Lack of interest to learn	14	26.92
	Lack of good teachers	10	19.23
	All	18	34.62
Total		52	100

**Table 6.** Students' response how they spell a word when they face difficulty.

Item	What do you do if you do not know how to spell a word?	No. of respondents	Percentage
Variables	Write it as I feel it is	18	34.62
	Ask my friends	8	15.38
	Ask my teachers	12	23.85
	Check it up in the dictionary	14	26.15
Total		52	100

**Table 7.** Students' responses to causes of their spelling errors.

Item	What are the causes for your spelling errors?	No. of respondents	Percentage
Variables	The difference between written and spoken English	16	30.77
	The origin of English words	2	3.85
	Carelessness	4	7.69
	All	30	57.69
Total		52	100

**Table 8.** The teachers' responses to their students' interest to learn spelling.

Item	Variable	No. of respondents	Percentage
How much are your students interested in learning spelling?	Not interested	5	50
	Interested	3	30
	Very much interested	2	20
Total		10	100

to spell English words respectively. The remaining considerable number of respondents that is, 14 (26.15%) of them indicated that they check it up in the dictionary whenever they face difficulty on how to spell English words. This shows that some students do not worry about the way they spell words and do not attempt to learn the spelling of the new English word.

As shown in Table 7, a significant number of respondents that is, 16 (30.77%) of them indicated that the errors are caused due to the difference between written and spoken English. The least number of respondents that is, 2 (3.85%) of them replied that the origin of English words is the cause for their spelling errors. The other 4 (7.69%) reported that carelessness is the cause of spelling errors while writing English words.

The majority of the respondents that is, 30 (57.69%) of them indicated that all of the variables such as the difference between written and spoken English, the origin of English words and carelessness have contributed a lot to the spelling errors of the students.

#### Analysis of teachers' questionnaire

As can be seen in Table 8, half of the respondents (that is, 50%) of the teachers claimed that their students are not interested towards learning the correct spelling of words. The other three teachers (that is, 30%) of the responding teachers pointed out that their students are interested in learning spelling rules of words. The rest two

**Table 9.** Teachers' responses to the weakness of their students in spelling correctly.

Item	Variable	No. of respondents	Percentage
How weak are your students in their use of correct spelling?	Very weak	7	70
	To some extent weak	3	30
Total		10	100

**Table 10.** Teachers' responses to frequency of their students' spelling errors.

Item	Variable	No. of respondents	Percentage
How often do your students commit spelling errors?	Sometimes	5	50
	Usually	3	30
	Always	2	20
Total		10	100

**Table 11.** Teachers' responses to kind of errors they point out when they correct the students' written work.

Item	Variable	No. of respondents	Percentage
What kinds of errors do you point out?	All, I consider, major but not minor ones	2	20
	Only few major errors, not many of them	2	20
	Only errors that interfere and hampers communication	6	60
	Other	0	0
Total		10	100

teachers (that is, 20%) of them said that their students are very much interested in learning spelling rules of English words. This result seems to suggest that students' interest varies from teacher to teacher as it might be the result of teachers' attention towards the correct use of spelling by their students, which differs.

As indicated in Table 9, the majority of the teachers (that is, 7 (70%) responded that their students are very weak in writing correct English spelling while the rest 3(30%) of them said that their students are to some extent weak. This by itself shows that, though the degree varies, the students have weaknesses in correcting spelling words when they write. As can be seen from Table 10, 5 (50%) of the teachers said that students sometimes make spelling errors in their writing whereas 3(30%) of the teachers reported that the students usually commit spelling errors in their writing. However only 2(20%) of the respondents indicated that students always commit spelling errors in their written work. Thus, as can be concluded from the data the students commit spelling errors most of the time in their writing.

As indicated in Table 11, 2 (20%) of the teachers said

that they correct all major spelling mistakes except minor ones while the remaining 2 (20%) of the teachers said that they check only few major spelling errors. Moreover, the majority of the teachers 6 (60%) said that they correct only errors which interfere with communication.

As indicated in Table 12, above 8 (80%) of the teachers reported that the students do not care about their spelling errors and the remaining 2 (20%) of them said that they care about their spelling to some extent when they write. However, it seems that teachers themselves have not worked a lot on the students to help them take care of spelling errors in their writing so that students seem to be careless over spelling errors. Had the teachers given much motivation to students to give attention for their spelling in writing, the students would have shown much care for the spelling errors they make when they write.

### Focused Group Discussion

The researchers had conducted a focused group discussion



**Table 12.** Teachers' responses to value the students give to the correctness of the spelling in their writing.

Item	Variable	No. of respondents	Percentage
How much do you think your students care about their spelling?	They do not care	8	80
	To some extent	2	20
	Very much	0	0
Total		10	100

with the ten teachers teaching at the school using structured interview. The teachers had admitted that their students have problems in spelling English words correctly. They further stated the causes for students spelling errors. These include lack of adequate spelling lessons at different class level, mother tongue interference namely as Afaan Oromo and English Language use Latin alphabet, thus Oromo students' confuse the rules of Oromo language with that of English. The English Language curriculum of Ethiopian education does not give much attention to different tasks on spelling rules and activities to encourage students and teachers to learn and teach how to spell English words. Teachers' negligence to spelling errors when they mark their students' written examinations also play a part. The students' are a little bit exposed to English Language writing system. This is because they learn all other subjects in their mother tongue until grade eight. Besides, some students could be dyslexic.

As a result, they have difficulty in understanding what the students communicate due to spelling errors of the students. For example, they write words like "know" as 'now', "want" as 'went' and "write" as 'right'. They have also stated that the spelling errors occur in their examination papers too and only English teachers at the school stated that they correct their spelling errors by indicating where they made the spelling errors. For example, they expressed that they encircle miss spelt words or write 'sp' where they want their students to spell the words correctly. All these spelling errors were committed because the teachers said that the students lack interest in learning or knowing the correct spellings of English words, as they perceive that learning spelling is only for lower grade students. Thus, they forwarded a solution to raise their students' interest to learn spelling rules; they claimed that the students should learn synonyms and antonyms of the vocabularies of English words. Moreover, they help the students to overcome their spelling errors through encouraging the students to learn the spellings of new words whenever they come across any and ask their students to know how to change a verb to noun using appropriate forms. In addition, they have recommended that it is very important to dictate to the students and follow them up to learn how to spell the new words whenever they teach new words, which are difficult to spell it. They also stated that it is crucial to

discourage the students from committing spelling errors through reducing marks from their students when they misspell words in their examinations. So as to help them give due attention to spell words correctly for the sake of their marks.

Concerning materials available at their school to enhance their students' interest, the teachers expressed that except few activities and exercises given at lower grades, and in the students' textbook for the same grade, there is hardly any materials that help the students learn spellings. Thus, few of the English teachers have bought foreign books that teach a series of capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and even grammar and composition as well.

In general, all of the teachers identified the major causes of their students spelling errors could be ascribed to their students' lack of interest to learn spellings of new words, their lack of appreciation for dictation, both from the teachers and students, the teachers' attitude towards the students' errors and the way teachers give feedback to their written work. Besides, they lack books and materials that help teachers and students to teach and learn the spelling rules of new and difficult English words to spell. Again, the teachers did not include more writing examinations to help them learn spellings through their written feedback about their errors. Similarly, they have stated that there is interference from Afaan Oromo in spelling English words as both language use the same Latin scripts in writing. Besides this, there is lack of materials that help the learners develop spelling skills. Thus, the teachers recommended that to overcome these problems teachers should give many activities, which enable the learners, develop their spelling skills and encourage them to develop interest to learn the spelling rules.

Teachers should include the three domains of evaluation such as cognitive, affective and psychomotor domain and give emphasis to comment on their spelling errors to discourage them from committing the spelling errors when they write. The school management has to do its level best by getting the materials that help the students learn the spellings of English words and teachers to enable them teach their students how to spell English words correctly. Furthermore, the teachers should develop a sense of competition among students to help them develop their spelling skills.

### Analysis of the writing test from the dictation sample sentences written by the students

As we have tried to understand from the students listening test, they have problems of writing words as they are pronounced, and writing the same word with different spelling pattern in different sentences. Their carelessness is also manifested in their work where they fail to write sounds (be it right or wrong spelling) that are found in the words. The following piece of writing is taken from students' answer sheet of the test given to them to evaluate their spelling errors.

"many people in the world do'nt no to comminicate with there frieds. However, communication can be made srow speaking or writting. Speaking is a means of comminication which helps people to Discous Ideas faes to faes whyl writing is a means of comminication using wreatin smbols. Speaking is more wydle used than writing in our day to day comminication".

When one sees the written sentences above, one can realize many problems. The first letter of the first sentence "m" begins in a small letter. There is also punctuation problem in writing a word "do'nt"; the apostrophe should have been written in between 'n' and 't'. Besides this, the writer wrote 'no' to mean 'know' where a student wrote a word with its sound but not correct spelling. In this case, we have a word 'no' in English having another meaning; this creates confusion for the reader to interpret it in a wrong way. In the same sentence, the student wrote the word communicate as "comminicate" where the spelling error is clearly seen. At the end of the sentence, the student wrote a word friends as "frieds" which seems to depict the carelessness of the student as the sound 'n' is omitted from the word.

In the second sentence, the student wrote the word 'through' as "srow". Here, the student does not know the right spelling of the word; therefore, seems to write the word as he feels it to be written. Moreover, the last word of the sentence, that is, writing is written as "writting". This again shows the weakness of the student in spelling the word correctly.

In the third sentence, the student wrote 'communication' as "comminication" as what he did in the first sentence. On the same sentence the word "discuss," which was written in the middle of the sentence was written beginning with a capital letter and with wrong spelling like this "Discous". The word ideas, is written beginning with a capital letter 'I' where it was supposed to be a small letter. In addition, the final word of the sentence 'face' was written as 'faes' which seems to show the student writes as the word sounds.

In the fourth sentence, the student began with a wrong spelling "whyl" to say 'while' as the word sounds, but not as it is actually to be written. The word communication is also written with a wrong spelling as it is written in the

above sentences, "comminication". This seems to show that the student does not actually know how the word is spelt and it is not a result of carelessness. In the same sentence the word 'written' is written as "wreat in" which shows wrong spelling of the word. In the same sentence the word "symbol" is wrongly spelt as 'smbol'.

In the fifth sentence, the writer committed mistake in writing the word 'widely' as "wydle" which shows the inability of the student in writing the word. The word communication, too, like in the above sentences is written with wrong spelling as "comminication".

In general, this written test from dictation seems to show that the students' spelling errors are results of lack of knowledge of the correct spelling of words, discrepancy of written form and spoken language and carelessness. In addition the students have problems in using punctuation marks and when and where to use capital letters.

According to Al-Jarf (2010), the spelling error corpus is divided into the following groups: (i) whole word error; (ii) Words containing one error; (iii) words containing two errors; (iv) word containing three errors; (v) words containing four errors and so on.

As it is indicated in Table 13, the majority of the students who have taken the oral test wrote most of the words with wrong spelling. Therefore, it seems that the students have more spelling errors when they write at word level than sentence level. This is because they can understand what words they have heard from the speaker by the context from the other words in the sentence. Therefore, they commit one faulty grapheme, two, three, four and five grapheme spelling errors in their writing. This weakness of the students is revealed in which the misspelled words do not sound like the target word because the whole word, a consonant, a vowel, a syllable, a prefix, suffix, a grapheme cluster is not heard at all, is misheard, is added or reversed or missed with another in the written dictation tests. That means the written symbol does not correspond with the spoken sound, syllable or word.

As can be seen from Table 14, the majority of the students (65%) claimed that they commit spelling errors due to lack of knowledge of how to spell English words. However, the remaining (35%) of them indicated that they commit spelling errors due to carelessness, pronunciation written discrepancy and less attention given to English spelling when they write.

### Conclusions

Based on the general objectives of the study, the research explored the causes of students' failure to spell English words correctly in their writing and suggest ways the students can learn how to spell words correctly.

After the indepth discussion of the results obtained from the students and teachers' questionnaire, focused group discussion with teachers at the school and the test

**Table 13.** Example of words with one, two, three, four, five and no spelling errors.

S/N	Number of errors per word	Target word	Error
1	One faulty grapheme per word	Absence	Absense
		Achieve	Achiev
		Battery	Battry
		Neighbour	Nighbour
		Pronunciation	Pronounciation
		Calendar	Calender
		Committee	Commitee
		Environment	Enviroment
		Foreign	Foriegn
		Grammar	Grammer
		Restaurant	Resturant
2	Two faulty grapheme per word	Succeed	Succed 1
		Analyze	anilize
		Believe	Beliv
		Condemn	Condmon
		Continuous	Continus
		Ceiling	Cyling
		Necessary	Necesnry
		Suspicious	Suspcius
		Tomorrow	Tommorrow
3	Three faulty grapheme per word	Unnecessary	Unnecesry
		Bureau	Beruo
		Conceive	Consieve
		Deceive	Disive
		Guarantee	Garanti
		Excellent	Ekselent
4	Four faulty grapheme per word	Except	Eksept
		Millionaire	Millianor
5	Five faulty grapheme per word	Scissors	Secciors
		Anxiety	Ansayte 5
6	With no faulty grapheme per word	Accident	Accident
		Accept	Accept
		Benefit	Benefit
		Psychology	Psychology
		Repetition	Repetition
		Busy	Busy
		Column	Column
		Eight	Eight
Street	Street		
		Generous	Generous

on writing sentences and words from dictation, we can draw the following conclusions.

Spelling is an area of English that is difficult to master because it presents meaning more than pronunciation. This is due to the layers of sound, pattern and meaning that have resulted from the influence of dozens of

languages that the English Language borrowed words from such as Anglo-Saxon, French, Greek, and Latin along with their spelling rules. The origin of English Language, which comes from Latin, French, Greek, etc., has made it lack uniform rule to spell words. This has become one of the main causes for the spelling errors of

**Table 14.** Summary table about the students' problems in spelling of words in their piece of writing.

Item	Average error pretest (%)
Lack of knowledge of the spelling of the words/ inability to spell the words' correctly	65
Carelessness/ less attention given while writing	35

the students.

Spelling English words by itself is difficult, as we did not spell many words the way they sound and others have silent letters. This inconsistency in English spellings misleads students to write words with wrong spelling. Moreover, the students lack interest to learn spelling. The analysis of the test and the questionnaire shows that students lack interest to learn spelling. They write words as they feel rather than in the way they should be spelled. Furthermore, there are shortage of books and reference materials to guide or help them with spelling skills.

Teachers do not give much attention to teaching spelling. The analysis of the data from the questionnaire and focused group discussion reveals that teachers do not give attention to teaching spelling. They also neglect the spelling errors of students in their written work. In addition, in language teaching, we teach various skills of English Language such as listening, reading, speaking and writing. However, the spelling skills were usually ignored in the teaching process. It is vital to develop and integrate spelling lessons into the language teaching in reading, listening, speaking, writing, grammar, vocabulary and dictionary skills to help our students develop their spelling skills.

The curriculum of the education system in the country does not encourage teaching spelling of English words in detail. Therefore, the English textbooks up to grade 9 give more attention for other skills and neglect spelling practical exercises. Moreover, English spelling is a complex cognitive activity in which many interrelated skills are involved. Because English spelling is more complex and inconsistent, teachers should expose the students into several spelling exercises to help them learn.

In summary, the teachers and students have shortage of reference materials such as the textbooks for the students to refer to when learning spelling rules.

## RECOMMENDATION

The objective of this study is to find out students' problems in writing words with the correct spelling. In addition to this, it has also tried to suggest some solutions that can help to solve the problems. The researchers, therefore, recommend the following based on their findings.

Teachers have to use assessment of their students' tests, or sample of students' writing to diagnose students need and apply different methods of teaching them\*\*.

According to Invernizz and Hayes (2004), identifying the students' error types can allow teachers to design learning tasks to focus on the learners' specific needs.

Teachers should implement different strategies to teach them based on the types of errors they commit. Teachers should take the responsibility to teach and motivate students to learn spelling. They should encourage students to use the correct spelling in writing through reducing certain number of marks for every wrong spelling in their test, class work, assignment etc. Students, on their part, should give attention to learn the spelling of words and they have to write every word with correct spelling to avoid misunderstanding. In the curriculum of the education system such as students' textbooks, lessons on spelling rules and practical exercises should be included adequately in the teaching materials to enable the learners develop their spelling skills. Textbook authors and other reference books should also give enough attention to include spelling rules and exercises that can help the students develop their skills in spelling.

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