



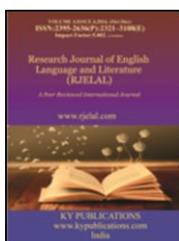
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## OVERVIEW OF COMMON SPELLING ERRORS IN STUDENT'S EXAMINATION SCRIPTS IN COMMUNICATION SKILLS: A DISTURBING PHENOMENON IN TAMALE POLYTECHNIC, GHANA

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### ABSTRACT

The English Language has become the world's most important language today with half a billion speakers – in science and technology, commerce, trade, in the arts and international diplomacy. This study, therefore, investigated common spelling errors in students communicative skills examination scripts which have unspeakable consequences on their academic performance and professional life with a view to arresting this deficiency. Kohler's theory of Learning by Insight was adopted using survey and in-depth interviews. Five HND departments were purposively selected-Building Technology, Electrical/Electronics, Agricultural Engineering, Accounting and Information and Communication Technology. Three hundred and sixty scripts were randomly selected. In-depth interviews were conducted on this sample using convenience sampling technique. Majority (61%) of the students write poor spelling and most (75%) moderately performed low in examination as a result of inadequate qualified English teachers at the basic and Senior High Schools, student's own attitude to English language learning and acquisition, improper use of method of teaching English, inadequate instructional materials coupled with lack of language laboratory for teaching English Language. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse quantitative data while explanations building through thematic analysis were used for the qualitative data. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is a communication-driven world where the individual needs communication competence to be relevant in the new world order. Communication is one of the strongest weapons of humanity with which one can control and rule one's world. This study recommends that qualified teachers of English Language should be employed at the basic and senior high schools, language laboratory should be provided to enhance effective teaching and learning, students should be encouraged to participate in literary and debating programmes/activities and all stakeholders should be involved in this spelling 'revolution'. Students/ pupils ought to widely read good books and develop their spelling skills. All these require attitudinal change on the part of the trainers and the trainees. Every learner of English language should regard every word as unique and learn it individually with effective communication the individual would be able to attain self-actualisation.

**Keywords:** English Language, Spelling Errors, Students, Examination, Communicative Skills.

**Background to the Study**

Spelling is simply the correct letter in a word (Gogovi, Gborsong, Yankah, Essel, 2014). But research has found that 300 words are most commonly misspelt by university students (Gogovi *et al*, 2014). In pointing out the deficiencies of the English alphabets, Pink and Thomas (1976) argued that modern English Language spelling is not phonetic. They argued further that English Language alphabets do not accurately and consistently represent the sounds of speech. Gogovi *et al's* argument corroborate Pink *et al's* (1990) assertion that one reason for finding English Language spelling difficult is that there is no correspondence between the pronunciation of a word and its orthography. In other words, English Language spelling is not phonetic but rather ideographic in nature.

Pink *et al* (1970) agreed that the spelling of today is so defective as a symbolic representation of the spoken language. They further observed that modern English Language came about in the fifteen century, and, so far as it represents any pronunciation at all, it represents the pronunciation of this century. Gogovi *et al* (2014) pointed out that there is no ambiguity therefore in the writing system, it should be clear that pronunciation cannot be a good guide to English Language spelling. That learners' best guide is reading because each word should be seen and its spelling learnt. Pink *et al* (1970) suggested that in spite of these anomalies, learners and users of English Language words need to consciously read and learn these words.

Odejide, Soola, Oyetade, and Mosuro (1995) argued that communicative skills are designed for the student of a higher institution of learning who has to perform a variety of academic tasks through the medium of English. The student often has to explain, or describe a concept or argue a point of view, demonstrate a process either in writing or in speech. The student has to read a variety of materials in his/her discipline and in other content areas, listen to lectures, find out information from available sources and use them appropriately in writing. In this context, this researcher argues that poor spelling or bad grammar or awkward sentence structure will have a great impact on the reader and

examiners than the real content of what students are trying to say.

Ogbodo, Otagburuagu, Ogbuehi, and Ogeniyi (2010) argued that without effective communication, individuals cannot attain self-actualisation and the strides for the acquisition of skills and empowerment through education will flounder in frustration. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is a communication – driven world where the individual needs communicative competence to be relevant in the new world order (Ogbodo *et al*, 2010).

The English Language continues in most areas to be used even more intensively as a medium of instruction when the pupil goes into further education beyond school, notably at training college and the university. At the course level, the main emphasis switches to the written form of English and a student's written English often needs attention throughout this whole university period (Ogbodo *et al.*, 2010). Communicative skills have been developed as one of the innovative steps towards the enhancement of the communicative ability of students in tertiary institutions. Ogbodo *et al* (2010) argued that communication is one of the strongest weapons of humanity with which one can control and rules one's world.

Odejide *et al* (1995) in their view observed that spelling errors can be a genuine problem for many second language users of English (L<sub>2</sub>). This is because there is a no-one-to-one correspondence between the spoken and the written form in the English spelling convention. For example, knife, centre, meagre, mnemonic, pneumonia, bomb, plumber and so on and so forth. Odejide *et al* (1995) further argued that there is a lot of inconsistencies in the representation of spoken language in writing as the same sound can be represented in different ways in different words. For example, the sound /f/ is represented differently in the following words: of, off, physics, tough, rough, phantom and so on and so forth.

Some of the words, students often misspell which this researcher notice are continuous, human beings, grateful, dining hall, rainy season, maintenance, integrity, Ghanaians, storey building, accommodation, in front, in fact, welcome, convenience, receive, receipts, luggage, reference,

themselves, environment, forty, privilege, occurred, personnel, necessary, grammar, clarification, within, pronunciation, truly, knowledgeable, with regard, clarity and so on. Odejide *et al* (1995) in their writing, therefore, suggested that learners of English Language should regard every word as unique and learn it individually.

However, it is disheartening to note that the poor performance of tertiary students in the English Language with particular reference to word spelling has been explained as a major cause of the decline in the general academic performance and standard of education in Ghana. Therefore, it is against this background that this study investigates the causes of poor spelling/commonly misspelt words in students' communicative skills examination scripts with a view to providing solutions.

#### Review of Related Literature

With well over half a billion speakers, the English Language has assumed the world's most important language today. But to the numerical strength of its speakers must be added the many outstanding uses to which the language is put today – in science and technology, in the arts and in international diplomacy (Banjo, 1996). Ansah (2014) observed that some university graduates write horrible English in their job application letters, curriculum vitae, the cover letters, and the results from the tests during recruitment process indicated that there are serious problems and challenges with communication. He further argued that sometimes the English, the grammar, the tenses, subject-verb agreement and very basic writing principles are wrongly composed. He went on to say that apart from bad grammar some of the graduates use text messaging in their application letters. This is because of online chatting, information exchange on phone and media influence, especially on social media platforms. The Ministry of Education itself discussed the poor reading abilities of pupils in the Primary and Junior High Schools and how this is affecting the general performance of Students in the Basic Certificate Examinations in a report by National Education Assessment Unit of Ghana Education Service (GES). Brombacher, (2017) citing an early grade reading assessment that was conducted by National Education Assessment Unit

of Ghana Education Service (GES) between 2010-2013 observed that the assessment and the results showed that by the end of primary two, most public school pupils are unable to read in a Ghanaian Language and in English Language. The finding of this assessment revealed that 64% were unable to read a single word of a story and 33% could read some words but could not understand what they read. Only 1% was able to read fluently, Brombacher, (2017) quoting National Assessment Unit.

Citing Forde (2017) a Senior Lecturer at the University of Cape Coast a guest speaker for the Ridge Church School's 60th anniversary 'Speech and Prize-Giving' ceremony in Accra on Saturday stated that even though English is the most important language in the world, most Ghanaians "who claim to be literate cannot speak or write good English. She further stressed the inability of many Ghanaians, including teachers, to speak and write good English as a national catastrophe which needs the concerted efforts of all to resolve.

The English language is spoken by about 600 million people in the world, though only half of that number speaks it as their mother tongue (Steven, Bailey, and Gerlach cited in Banjo, 1996). For the 300 million for whom the English Language is not the mother tongue, some of them speak it as a second language and the rest as a foreign language (Banjo, 1996). The popular notion has been that one goes to school to learn how to read and write the English Language at the primary level and then to apply these skills at the secondary and tertiary levels (Banjo, 1996). This researcher argues that international intelligibility is important for the county to maintain its membership of the English – speaking world.

Smith cited in Sebranek, Mayer, and Kemper (1996: 691) observe that:

There is little point in learning to spell if you have little intention of writing. But if you must spell, you have to write often. Look at the written word to see that it is correctly spelled.

Twain also cited in Sebranek *et al* (1996:692) said:

The difference between the right word and the nearly right word is the same as that between lightening and the lightning bug.

The top academic areas that many school professionals are concerned about are English (ELA) and advanced literacy (Williams, 2008). Literacy has taken a dive in the past decade which has caused many educators to question what can be done to help students improve their reading, writing, speaking and thinking all of the most basic skills for successful future (Wise, 2009).

Wise (2009:373) is of the view that:

Literacy is, in reality, the cornerstone of student achievement for many students in any grade.

The question that many school professionals have with regard to communication is whether or not a high school student is able to follow school curriculum in subjects like English or Language Arts (Williams, 2008).

The dominance of mother tongue is regarded as one of the causes of poor performance of English language. Just like in Ghana, Usman and B. A (2012) were of the view that Nigerian students are surrounded by a complex linguistic situation that forces them to learn their first indigenous language and they are required to have a good command of the English language. Inadequate qualified English Language teachers also cause poor spelling of performance in English in senior high schools, a linguistic trait which they exhibit in the tertiary institutions during examinations. As cited in Usman *et al* (2012) inadequate infrastructural facilities and instructional media are regarded as another cause of poor performance in spelling words. Muhammed cited in Usman *et al* (2012) was of the view that most students put a kind of negative attitude in learning and use of English language which subsequently affects them in the tertiary institutions.

Teye at a book launch titled: *The History of Education in Northern Ghana* as cited by Esson (2016) encouraged young people to cultivate the habit of reading for the appreciation of knowledge. He observed that reading afforded young people the opportunity to learn the history and culture of their countries and empower them to make a

meaningful impact on society. Teye cited in Esson (2016:44) observed that:

Books live long after their authors had died, and that it is important for the younger generation to tap the knowledge of writers while they live.

Kitcher cited in (Asigbe, 2016) at a Fun Club Competition Spelling argued that spelling competition at the basic and senior high school is to assist them to consider their reading skills through the correct spelling of words. She observed that children who read widely and developed their spelling skills become good writers and are able to perform well in all aspects of their education.

Banjo (1996) observed that about 600 Million people speak English and that 300 Million people whose mother tongue is not English speak English. Professionals and grammarians are concerned about English and Advance Literacy (Williams, 2008). The view of this researcher is that regardless of whether one is a native speaker (L1) or non-native speaker (L2), international intelligibility is important for any country to maintain its membership of the English -speaking world. Hence young people in Ghana need to cultivate the habit of reading good books in order that they might be able to broaden their linguistics horizon, write correct spelling, be able to perform well in competitive examinations and remain successful in their professional and career development.

#### Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are to:

- i. Find out why students in the tertiary institutions (in Tamale Polytechnic), Ghana misspell English words in their communicative skills examination scripts.
- ii. Determine whether there is any significant difference between department of study and level of students performance in communicative skills examination
- iii. To investigate whether there is significant difference between gender and student performance in communicative skills examination with regard to spelling English Language words

**Research Questions**

This study attempted to provide answers to the following research questions:

- i. What are the factors responsible for misspelling of English words in student's examination scripts in Tamale Polytechnics?
- ii. Is there any significant difference between the department of study and student performance in communicative skills examination?
- iii. Is there any significant difference between gender and student performance in communicative skills examination?

**Theoretical Framework**

Kohler's theory of Learning by Insight or Insightful Learning cited in Unoh (1987) was adopted in this study. This theory discusses language acquisition which is a very important aspect of psycholinguistics, it does not think of acquisition of words and ideas in a vacuum, but in a wider context of communicative competence, of ability to express and use language as a means of modifying behaviour or of the use of language as a means of discovery.

**Research Design/Methodology**

Descriptive survey design was used in this study. It was used because it permitted the researcher to study small sample and later generalise the findings to the whole population. Osuala cited in (Suleiman, 2015) argued that if the phenomenon under study is homogenous a small sample size is sufficient. Suleiman (2015) cited in Osuala, observed that three factors determine the size of an adequate sample: nature of population; type of sampling design and degree of precision desired.

**Population of the Study**

Five hundred and eighty-three first years students from HND Building Technology, HND Electrical/Electronic Engineering, HND Agric Engineering, HND Accounting (2014 & 2015) and HND Information, Communication and Technology students were sampled for this study respectively.

**Sampling Technique**

All first year students of HND Building Technology, HND Electrical/Electronic Engineering,

HND Agric Engineering, HND Accounting (2014 & 2015) and HND Information, Communication and Technology were purposively selected because these are students who write communicative skills examination. Purposive sampling of these subjects (students) was made in accordance with Nwanko's suggestion cited in (Suleiman, 2015: 115) that:

Deliberate selection of sample cases from a population becomes sensible or justifiable when within a population there are some elements or cases that have certain characteristics crucial to the study, and the alternative open to the investigator is to include these crucial elements.

**Sample for the Study**

Simple random sampling technique was employed to select 360 scripts from the five hundred and eighty-three scripts. 72 scripts were picked from each class for a content analysis. This sample permitted the researcher to have equal representation from these students

**Data Analysis Procedure**

The data collected were analysed using frequency count, percentage, chi-square and ANOVA analysis.

Table 1 Department of Programmes Subjects

Department	Frequency	Percentage
Building Technology	72	20%
Electrical and Electronics	72	20%
Agricultural Engineering	72	20%
Accounting (2014)/(2015)	72	20%
Information Communication Technology	72	20%
Total	360	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2016

Table 1 indicates information on the sampled population in the selected departments. This finding revealed that the students from Building Technology, Electrical/Electronic Engineering, Agric Engineering, Accounting 2014 and Accounting 2015, and Information and Communication Technology were (20%) respectively, which implies that all the students surveyed were equal.

Table 2 Level of Student's Performance in Communicative Skills Examination.

Level of Performance	Frequency	Percentage
Low	220	61.1
Moderate	75	20.8
High	65	18.1
Total	360	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2016

Table 2 shows frequency distribution according to the level of student's performance in communicative skills examination with 220 representing 61.1% (indicates low performance), 75 representing 20.8% (indicates low moderate performance) and 65 representing 18.1 (indicates high performance). This implies that majority (61.1%) of the students performed low whilst most (75%) moderately performed low with regard to spelling English words during their examinations.

**Research Question 1:** What are the factors responsible for mis-spelling of English words in students' communicative skills examination?

Findings from IDI:

Sir, inadequate qualified English language teachers in our Senior High School is a serious factor. This is because those who teach us are not good at the basic and are not English experts and/or grammarians (a student interviewee)

This corroborates Adedokun's view (2011) that poorly trained English and untrained teachers were employed to teach. This situation immensely affects spelling of English words which affect their later life in tertiary institutions.

The problem in some of the Senior High Schools is that some do not have English teachers until it is third term or even two months to writing their WASCE English Language examination (IDI)

Table 3 Cross-tabulation and chi-square of department and level of student's performance in communicative skills examination

Departments	Level of performance				X <sup>2</sup> Cal	X <sup>2</sup> Crit	Df	P
	Low	Moderate	High	Total				
Building Technology	26 (7.2)	15 (4.2)	19 (5.3)	72 (20%)				
Electrical/Electronic	51 (14.2)	6 (1.7)	3 (0.8)	72 (20%)				
Agric Engineering	60 (16.7)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	72 (20%)	186.108	7.81	10	0.000
Accounting 2014/2015	32 (8.9)	25 (6.9)	3 (0.8)	72 (20%)				

This supports Usman *et al's* view (2012) that inadequate and obsolete teaching material leads to poor performance in English examinations.

Some of us do not know how to study English grammar and composition books on our own. Reading English books are boring, hence our attitude to the English language in our Senior High School is problematic, we also think it is difficult because it is not our mother tongue IDI.

This also supports Usman *et al's* (2012) that the dominance of mother tongue is regarded as one of the causes of poor performance in the English Language.

Sir, television as a medium of communication is not helping in this regard. A lot of us are ignorant when we see any spelling on television, we think that that spelling is correct. Today, using text messaging language (corrupted spellings) is common (IDI).

This assertion corroborates Ansha's argument that apart from bad grammar, some of the graduates use text messaging in their application letters.

Inappropriate methods of teaching the English language in the basic schools through to the second cycle schools are worrying (IDI).

This corroborates Ya'u and Sa'ad assertion cited in Usman *et al* (2012) that the time and background of the learners in choosing the method to be used in teaching affects learners' performance in the acquisition of seeking appropriate linguistics codes.

**Research Question 2:** Is there any significant difference between the department of study and level of student's performance in communicative skills examination?

Information Communication Technology	47 (13.1)	10 (2.8)	3 (0.8)	72 (20%)				
Total	20 (61.1)	75 (20.8)	65 (19.1)	360 (100.0)				

$\chi^2 = 186.108$ ,  $df = 10$ ,  $p < 0.05$

Table 3 shows that there was a significant difference between the department of study and level of student performance in communicative skills examination ( $\chi^2$  Crit. = 7.81,  $\chi^2$  Cal. = 186.108,  $df = 10$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The  $\chi^2$  crit. Is less than 1  $\chi^2$  cal.

Hence, there was a significant difference between the department of study and level of student performance in communicative skills examination.

**Research Question 3:** Is there any significant difference between gender and student’s performance in communicative skills examination?

Table 4: T-test difference in gender and student age group and level of student’s performance in communicative skills examination

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	S.D	Df	t-cal	t-crit	P
Performance in Communicative skill examination	Male	238	37.02	0.854	358	0.102	1.960	Not significant
	Female	122	36.27	1.236				
	Total	360						

( $P > 0.05$ )

Table 4 shows that there was no significant difference between gender and student performance in communicative skills examination. It was observed that the t-calculated value was less than t-critical values ( $t\text{-cal} = 0.102 > t\text{-crit} = 1.960$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ). Therefore, it was concluded that there was no significant difference between gender and student’s performance in communicative skills examination with regard to English word spelling.

Ghanaians “who claim to be literate cannot speak or write good English. She further stressed the inability of many Ghanaians, including teachers, to speak and write good English as a national catastrophe which needs the concerted efforts of all to resolve. Kitcher cited in Asigbe, (2016) further observed that children who read widely and develop their spelling skills become good writers and are able to perform well in all aspect of their education. In reality, literacy is the cornerstone of student’s achievements.

**Summary of Findings**

**Conclusion**

The English Language is spoken by about 600 million people in the world, though only half of this number speaks it as their mother tongue Steven *et al*, cited in Banjo, (1996). From this study majority (61%) of the students abysmally write poor spelling in English while most (75%) moderately perform low and this corroborates the National Education Assessment Unit figure that (64%) of the pupils in most public schools are unable to read in a Ghanaian language and in English Language, (33%) could read some words but could not understand while only 1% was able to read fluently (Brombacher, 2017).

Reading is one of the basic communication skills (i.e. speech, listening and writing) that set man above lower animals. Reading is a receptive and literacy skill. Majority (61.1%) of the students at the tertiary educational institutions – universities, colleges of education and polytechnics irrespective of age and gender engage in poor spelling which affects their academic performance and most of the students (75%) moderately perform low and this undoubtedly has unspeakable consequences on their private, public, professional life and career development. All these figures support Brombacher, (2017) assertion that (64%) of the pupils could not read well and (33%) could read but could not understand. Hence, the good spelling of English words is apropos and should be acquired through conscious and deliberate efforts. All stakeholders should identify their efforts at reducing the trend of the poor spelling of English

In a related development, this study’s statistical figures also corroborate Willaiams’s, (2008) assertion that top academic areas that many schools professional are concerned about are English (ELA) and Advanced literacy while Forde (2017) also stated that even though English is the most important language in the world, most

words which may have a great impact on the intelligibility of the individuals.

Even though Ghana like most sub-Sahara Africa countries is multilingual and multicultural, and also a member of Commonwealth English speaking countries, we cannot dismember ourselves from this primordial linguistic affinity. Most students put a kind of negative attitude to learning and use of English language which has a spiral and snowball effects on their performance in the tertiary institution.

#### Recommendation

This study recommends that qualified teachers of English Language should be employed at the basic and senior high schools, language laboratory should be provided, students should be encouraged to participate in literary and debating programmes / activities and all stakeholders should be involved in this spelling 'revolution'. Children/students need to widely read good books and develop their spelling skills. Every learner of English language should regard every word as unique and learn it individually with effective communication the individual would be able to attain self-actualisation. All these require attitudinal change on the part of the trainers, the trainees, and the government to provide adequate facilities in this endeavor.

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