

CAUSES OF ENGLISH SPELLING MISTAKES

The inconsistency of English spelling rules means that spelling mistakes by learners of the language are inevitable and even necessary. Fortunately, most are temporary, disappearing as we become more aware of the rules and more familiar with the correct spellings through reading. The few mistakes that persist long enough to become deeply ingrained and hard to overcome usually do so as a result of more than just the inconsistency of the rules.

Strategies for eliminating mistakes of this kind are well established. It is always useful to have your writing looked over by a friend, tutor or spellcheck in order to identify or confirm your weaknesses. After becoming aware of a particular spelling that you always struggle with, you will probably benefit from noting it and making a conscious effort to memorise it.

TYPES OF SPELLING MISTAKE CAUSE

Each of the following seems to explain a variety of spelling mistakes. There are several causes for misspelling in English. Some of them are due to the internal structure of the English language,- some are social and personal; some are visual and auditory; a few are pedagogic and certain other causes are grouped as Miscellaneous factors.

1. Lack of Coordination between Pronunciation and Spelling

The English language is exceptional in the complexities of its orthography. The major cause for orthographic errors in English is the dichotomy between the phoneme and the grapheme. To quote Webster(1958):

In a perfect language, every simple sound would be expressed by a distinct character; and no character would have more than one sound.....the English language in particular, is, in these respects extremely irregular. (p.19)

English does not always use a single letter to spell one sound. Moreover, it does not always use the same letters to spell the same sound. English alphabet is inadequate to represent all the existing sounds. When the alphabet has remained constant, sounds have changed considerably. In English, forty four phonemes are represented by twenty six letters only. As learners generally rely on their phonetic judgement for spelling, the words which do not conform to this arrangement cause considerable hardship to them. Citing this as a reason for orthographic difficulty, Bebout (1985) says, "Because of the complex sound-symbol relationships in English, the field of English spelling error-analysis is a rich one". In most of the English words, the spelling cannot be inferred from their sound. Every sound in English is a law unto itself. In phoneme - grapheme correspondence, the vowels in English are highly ambiguous whereas consonants are very low in ambiguity.

EG: Venezky quoted by Read (1986) writes, "S is the usual spelling for /z/, except initially and z is the least frequently used letter in modern English spelling".(p.30, 31)

No doubt, 'z' is very rarely used in contemporary English writing. Letters in English 's' and 'z' pose difficulty to the learners of English globally. There is no difference between the voiced and voiceless consonants in Tamil. Hence it poses a specific problem to the learners of English in Tamilnadu.

In Bengali too there is no z sound and this contributes to phoneme-grapheme type of spelling errors.

2. Interference of Homophones

Shaughnessy (1979) states that homophones are a source of many orthographic errors, especially to the L2 [second language] learners of English. When two or more lexemes have phonetic and orthographic identities, they are called homonyms. For example,

night / naɪt / - end of the day

knight / naɪt / - a title or rank given to a gentleman in feudal times.

Both these words have the phonetic identity and hence they are called homophones and lead to spelling errors among second language learners. The English language is rich in homophones because it has derived several words from different languages like Latin, Greek, French, German and several other languages. Many changes have taken place in English that have far outrun its orthography. The learner is confused as to which word goes with which meaning.

2. Silent Consonants

One of the many peculiarities of English spelling is its occasional use of consonant letters that are not pronounced when the word is spoken. This phenomenon is likely to be encountered by learners of English even at very elementary levels, in such words as knee, night and talk. A common reason for it is that the unexpected spellings once did represent the way their word was pronounced, but they stopped doing so because the pronunciation of the word changed as a result of the natural evolution that all languages undergo. The spellings of the words have not changed because spellings in general tend to be kept the same. Many words with a silent consonant actually do not seem to be much of a learning problem. However, a fair number can cause erroneous pronunciation of the consonants in speech, and some can cause spelling errors.

It is important to distinguish silent consonants from a variety of other consonant letters that are not pronounced in their typical way. Of these latter, an important group is consonant letters that combine with a neighbouring letter either to make a sound that neither would make by itself or to remove ambiguity about how the other letter should be pronounced. If this other letter is a vowel, the indicated sound will also be a vowel; otherwise it will be a consonant. Typical consonant letters that combine with a vowel for these purposes, so that they cannot be considered silent, are "h", "w" and "y", as in oh, cow and toy. The letter "r" is

also one in Australian and Southern British English, for example in cart and term (it only ever has the /r/ sound at the start of a syllable), but is clearly pronounced in the USA, Ireland and Scotland. Two consonant letters that commonly combine with particular other consonant letters in one way or another are “h” in words like choice, phrase, show and think, and “k” after “c” (back, check, ticket etc.). Another type of consonant letter that is not silent despite being pronounced in an unexpected way is, in certain positions, the letters for the so-called “plosive” consonants (/p, t, k, b, d, g/). These letters are often only partially pronounced before other plosive sounds (as in stop doing and log cabin) and at the end of sentences. It is easy to think they are completely silent in such situations when in fact they are not.

3. Spelling of another Word

There are various ways in which a spelling mistake can be caused by the spelling of another word. Unexpected Vowels in Derived Words, which deals with words that are not spelt as one would expect when one is familiar with words of very similar meaning and spelling.

An example of a word that is spelt as the spelling of a related word would suggest is the noun improvement; it merely adds to the base spelling of the verb improve without altering it. By contrast, the noun made from maintain is not *maintainance but maintenance, and is easily misspelt as a result. There is nothing predictable about this base spelling change. Other commonly misspelled words that probably have this cause include procedure, pronunciation and height.

A slightly different problem within the same category is with the -ing form of WRITE, writing. It is not irregular or illogical in any way, but is very commonly misspelt with a double “t” *writting. The single “t” is regular in that it follows the general rule for adding -ing or -ed to a verb, namely no consonant doubling if the vowel before has a “long” pronunciation. This vowel in writing has the long /aɪ/ pronunciation (other examples of long vowels are /eɪ/ in hate and aim, /əʊ/ in hope and load, /u:/ in prove and use, and /ɔ:/ in pour and form). Consonant doubling is necessary only when the vowel before -ing is “short”, such as /ɪ/ in sitting.

Other common errors that may be caused by similar-looking words include dropped “h” from whether, reversal of the final -se in categorise and “e” instead of the first “a” in separate. Although the incorrect spelling *wether could just be a result of the earlier-mentioned “silent” nature of the “h”, it could also be influenced by the spelling of weather. The problem with categorise could be the fact that the -ies ending exists in the plural form of the noun category. The incorrect spelling *seperate could be influenced by the spelling of desperate. These two spellings differ because they are derived from different Latin verbs: se-parate and de-sperate.

4. Variable Spellings of the Same Word Ending

Three word endings that vary in their spelling are -sion/-tion, -able/-ible and -ent/-ant. Choosing the right spelling need not be difficult with the first of these because there are some fairly clear rules, often discoverable from the Internet (e.g. verbs with a final -d, such as

suspend, become nouns with -sion like suspension). However, the other two endings are less predictable (one often has to know Latin to guess right).

5. Words that Break Spelling Rules

English spelling, despite the many problems that it gives, does actually follow some rules. One of the best-known is “i” before “e” except after “c”. However, this has the problem that there are many exceptions. The exceptions seem to be where mistakes in the positioning of “i” and “e” are most likely. Problem words include foreign, height, weight and seize. Also notable are achieve, believe and niece, which all follow the rule but are often misspelt. Perhaps in the first one the “ch” is wrongly considered to be “c”.

A different spelling rule may explain the common mistake of writing a single “r” in occurred. The rule is the above-mentioned one about not doubling a consonant after a long vowel when adding -ing or -ed. It indicates that there should be a single “r” in occurred because the “u” has the long sound /3/. However, the rule is not kept with this particular word. The same happens with recurred, referred, preferred and transferred.

6. Double Consonants in Long Words

It seems fairly easy to notice when a word contains a double consonant. Moreover, if the word is short, like putting, normally there is also no difficulty in deciding where that double consonant should be placed. In longer words, however, multiple possible locations for a double consonant become likely, and remembering which of these is the right one can be difficult. The following words are all able to cause uncertainty about where their double consonant occurs. A consonant in each that is sometimes wrongly doubled is capitalised: beGinning, diSappear, neCessary, occaSion, proFessor, reCommend and reFerred. In a few other words, there are two double consonants, and the error is making one of them single. The cause could be the rareness of such combinations. Common examples are accommodation, embarrass, occurred, possession, Connaissance and successful.

7. Immediately-Repeated Syllable Spellings

When all or some of the same spelling is repeated in successive syllables in a word, we sometimes seem to miss the repetition and think there is only a single occurrence. A commonly misspelt word with this characteristic is beginning. The repeated letters are underlined. The typical misspelling is *beging. Other examples are: labo(u)rers, commonly misspelt as *labo(u)rs. maintaining and containing, commonly misspelt as *maintaing and *containg. possesses, commonly misspelt as *posses. In the first of these, although -or and -er are not identical spellings, they have identical pronunciation.

8. Unusual Letter Sequences

This phenomenon is probably a factor in the frequent misspelling of foreign as *foreing. The last three letters -ign are of course in most other words ordered to make -ing. A further element in this mistake may be the “silent” nature of the “g”.

The last two letters of centre, manoeuvre, sceptre and metre are in a similarly unusual (actually French) order. However, reversing their spelling is not a spelling mistake but merely a switch from British to American English!

9. Spellings in another Language

Many English words have been inducted into English language and the spellings are heavily dependent on their original form. So though phonetically “omelette” of French origin sounds “omlet” the spelling dependent on the French origin of the word, carries “-ette” in the end.

10. Words with a Difficult Pronunciation

Struggling to pronounce a word correctly often causes no spelling problem, but there are exceptions. For example, many speakers of East African languages find it difficult to pronounce the /r/ sound in the middle of longish words like discipline, hesitate, municipal, president and studying, with the result that sometimes the corresponding letter is dropped from the spelling.

11. Miscellaneous Causes of Misspelling

Lack of interest, intelligence and concentration is said to be a cause of orthographic difficulty. Enunciating the causes of orthographic errors in English, Frisby says,

Defects in hearing and speech may be reflected in bad spelling. Faulty and careless pronunciation will have an adverse effect as will an attitude of general carelessness which we sometimes find in certain pupilsFrequent absence from school and bad teaching methods will also have their effect

Carelessness, inattention, lack of memory and general backwardness in studies are also some of the causes for the orthographic errors committed by learners of English.

Wang says, "In learning an English word, the learners have to rote memorize the spelling: its letters and their arrangements".

As memorising is generally denounced today, it is also one of the reasons for the orthographic errors. According to Shanghnessy (1979) poor or illegible handwriting is another factor that contributes to orthographic errors. Some uncertain spellers often deliberately camouflage their uncertainty by writing illegibly so that it becomes difficult to differentiate genuine misspellings from illegibilities.

12. Obstacles Posed by Electronic Gadgets

Present day learners spend considerable time and energy in viewing the television and listening to the radio programmes and they do not allocate sufficient time for reading books where they visually encounter the actual spelling of words. According to Dorr "Adolescents' total television viewing time averages about twenty one hours a week and their peak viewing times are mid to late evening". He adds that those lower in status tend to watch more

television than do those in higher status; the less intelligent definitely watch more. So they get lesser exposure to written or printed words and hence do not learn proper spellings.

13. Advertisements with Deviant Spelling

Certain advertisements of consumer products which appear in the mass media contain distorting and deviant spelling of familiar words. Especially when such advertisements with misleading English spelling happen to be phonetic, they confuse the learners and lead to spelling errors.