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Toward Better Spelling

by

Louise Lautier Owens

Educators and laymen alike are quite aware of the "hue and cry" that has gone up in recent years to the effect that Johnny can't read—and that neither can his older sister and brother, Jane and Joe College. To compound the indictment, there is the further charge that Johnny's college siblings not only cannot read, but that they cannot communicate in speech or in writing with any degree of "competency or decency." An inspection of college themes reveals that even the cost casual critics have a case.

Among the specific lacks in the language equipment of college students is competence in spelling, and it is with this aspect of language performance by two groups of Savannah State College students that this informal study is concerned. It seeks to discover the specific spelling errors made and the patterns (if any) into which these errors fall; it presents possible interpretations of the observations and suggests implications for teaching which appear to follow from the findings. Such an informal study as this is valuable to the teacher who is not free in terms of time and facilities to conduct the more intensive and elaborate research of the controlled study and who must "take his classes as he finds them," but who, nevertheless, seeks insight into some aspect of teaching and learning.

Papers from one class each in world literature (Humanities 202) and in remedial English (English 99) were selected for study because these courses, as compared with, say, a course in speech, provided numerous opportunities for written work and papers from them were readily available. (These conditions would hold true for any number of courses in other disciplines such as history, economics, or education.) Since the thirty-three students enrolled in the remedial English course were juniors and seniors who had failed either the English section of the Sophomore Comprehensive Examination, the English Qualifying Examination, or both,¹ it was thought that perhaps this group might exhibit the problem in greater degree than other groups of students; and since the fifteen students in world literature were confronted with a somewhat specialized vocabulary, it was thought that they also might find spelling a challenge.

The papers in which students in remedial English made spelling errors included five themes of varying lengths (but at least one and one-half pages each) and three drill exercises of roughly a half page each. In the drills, students were dictated sentences in which they were responsible for all of the mechanical aspects of language such as capitalization, punctuation, and, of course, spelling. These two types

¹ Passing of the English section of the Sophomore Comprehensive Examination (or the English Qualifying Examination for students who matriculated before September 1953) is a requisite for graduation. Students who have failed in one or the other examination must enroll in a course in remedial English before they are eligible to be examined again.

of materials, themes and sentences, represent a large proportion of the kinds of writing students do in college: research papers, short themes or essays, lecture notes, assembly announcements and bulletin board notices, and brief notes of a personal nature.

The papers from students in the class in world literature included eight sets of weekly quizzes (of less than a single page to a page-and-a-half each in length) and one set of final examination papers (from two-and-one-half to three-and-one-half pages each in length), all of the essay type and again representing kinds of writing which students normally do in college.

The first step in this study was the recording of the spelling errors made by the students. Here it was noted that not all of the "misspelled" words were actually misspellings: many represented "wrong-word" choices. These "wrong-word" errors were of two types, (1) failures in making the phonetic, semantic, and syntactical distinctions basic to the "correct" use of pairs of similar words such as *their* and *there*, *flower* and *flour*, *Arthur* and *author*, and *Victory* and *Victoria*; and (2) the "chance" spelling of obscure or unusual words (as far as the particular students are concerned) such as *thane* for *then*, *dinning* for *dining*, and *hing* for *hang*. Where the context indicated that the error was obviously one of confusion in similar commonly used words, the "wrong" word was not recognized as a spelling error. It was assumed that the student knew how to spell both words but had made a "wrong-word" choice through faulty discrimination. However, in instances where the "wrong" word was an obscure one, it was assumed that the student spelled the word by "chance," and this type of error was recorded as a misspelling.¹

A statistical description of the spelling errors made by the students in the two classes studied will reveal little about the nature of the errors made, but it will indicate to some extent the scope of the problem. The making of a simple statistical analysis of the errors was the second step.

Table I shows that the total number of spelling errors made by the 48 students in 347 papers was 465. Of these 465 errors, there were 281 *different* words misspelled, with 117 *variations* of these misspellings. Described in terms of specifics, the different words misspelled ranged from simple ones such as *gem* and *love*, to more difficult forms such as *accoutrements* and *hors d' oeuvres*; the variations in misspellings are represented by 12 misspellings of *Cadillac* and 8 misspelled forms of *rumor*. Various misspellings were repeated 67 times: for example, 7 persons repeated the same error in spelling *Genesis* and 6 duplicated the same error in *received*.

¹A complete record of "wrong-word" choices was not kept, but of 47 "wrong-word" choices, only 9 were categorized as "chance" spellings. Thus, it seems that faulty discrimination was far more prevalent than "chance" spelling of unusual words.

TABLE I: Number of Words Misspelled by Subjects

	33 Remedial Students	15 Literature Students	Combined Groups
No. assignments	8	9	xx
No. different papers	220	127	347
No. different words misspelled	143	138	281
No. variations of these misspellings	75	42	117
No duplications of these misspellings	40	27	67
Total number misspelled words	258	207	465

Table II shows that the average number of errors per student is 9.7 for the combined groups; thus, per paper the number of errors averages 1.3. This latter figure taken in isolation tends to distort the picture and make it seem that spelling errors are not a serious problem in the writing of these students. The total range restores perspective for it reveals that misspellings range from 1 error in 8 papers of one student in the remedial group to 26 errors in 8 papers of another student in this group. In the literature group the most typical number of errors is 21 and the standard deviation is 7.1. Fifty percent of the students in the remedial group made 7 or more errors each while fifty per cent of the literature students made 13 or more errors each. These statistics indicate that while spelling is not a problem for some students, it is a considerable one for others, particularly when it is remembered that these figures come from only a portion of the writing done by each student in only one course (and that regular students are enrolled in at least two additional courses which may require more or less writing.)

TABLE II: Measures of Central Tendency and of Dispersion

	33 Remedial Students	15 Literature Students	Combined Groups
No. misspelled words	258	207	465
Mean	7.8	13.8	9.7
Median	7.0	13.0	8.0
Mode	4.0, 9.0	21.0	8.0
Total range	1-26	3-24	1-26
Q1	9.7	21.5	13.0
Q3	4.6	6.9	4.8
Interquartile range	5.1	14.6	8.2
Standard deviation	5.3	7.1	5.6

Although the major purpose of this study is to look at the spelling errors of all the students as a single group, a comparison of the data for separate classes is revealing and leads to some fruitful insights.

A comparison shows two arresting and closely related facts: the literature class, although less than half the size of the remedial English class, misspelled nearly as many *different* words as the larger group (Table I); and the mean number of misspelled words per literature student is nearly twice that per remedial student (Table II). Since the difference between the means of these two groups is not statistically significant and may have arisen by chance, we cannot say that one group, as a group, is better or poorer in spelling than the other. However, we do ask the practical question, "Why this difference in performance?"

The subject-matter generally covered in such courses suggests what might seem to be an obvious reason: that spelling was stressed more in the remedial class. Because this study of spelling errors had been projected in the teacher's mind, students in the literature class were cautioned to spell acceptably each time they wrote papers or took notes, and they were penalized for errors in spelling, just as were the remedial students. In the literature class "difficult" spellings in the daily assignments were anticipated and students helped to see the relationships of these words to words already known, or to note other distinguishing characteristics. Frequently, time was devoted to analysis of and drill on words troublesome to the class, as was done in the remedial group. However, since the time devoted to spelling was not experimentally controlled in terms of amount or emphasis, it is possible that the remedial class received more help or was made more conscious of skill in spelling as a tool for effective written communication.

Another tentative answer to the "why" of this difference in performance of the two groups is that the specialized vocabulary of literature posed greater difficulties for this class than did the general vocabulary used in the remedial class papers. But did it?

Inspection of the words misspelled by the literature group reveals that these students misspelled only 42 words which might be considered peculiar to the course, and some of these 42 words (such as *ballad*, *tragedy*, and *prose*) are so generally used that they cannot be said to be truly specialized. Of the 42 so-called "specialized" words, 17 are proper names (such as *Descartes* and *Theodore*) which might easily occur in writing not based on literature. Thus, while a somewhat "specialized" vocabulary does account for 30.4% of the 138 different words misspelled by the literature group, it does not account for the other 69.6% misspelled by this group.

TABLE III: Comparison of Spelling Errors in the Study With Words Found on Lists of Frequently Misspelled Words

Lists and No. of Words Compared	Remedial Group No. and % of Errors Found on Lists	Literature Group No. and % of Errors Found on Lists	Combined Groups No. and % of Errors Found on Lists
¹ The Harper Handbook—600 words	25 words 17.5%	27 words 19.6%	52 words 37.1%
² The University Spelling Book 500 words	29 words 20.3%	29 words 21.1%	58 words 41.4%
³ A Handbook of English 481 words	21 words 14.6%	31 words 22.5%	52 words 37.1%
⁴ Scribner Handbook of English 264 words	9 words 6.2%	23 words 16.7%	32 words 22.9%
Words common to lists above 105 words	8 words 5.6%	11 words 8.0%	19 words 13.6%

A related factor which presumably might explain the difference in performance of the two groups is the presence of spelling “demons” among the misspelled words of the literature class. But the fact is that relatively few of the words misspelled by either class or by the total group appear on the lists of frequently misspelled words in the books indicated in Table III. It is evident from the data presented in this table that mastery of “spelling demons” would at best have reduced only by 31 (or 22.5%) the number of different words misspelled by the literature group. These 31 words and the 42 words of the “specialized” vocabulary of literature account for 52.9% of the words misspelled by the literature group. What then of the remaining 47.1 per cent?

Were the students in the remedial group “smarter” than those in the literature group? Our experience with the English Qualifying Examination here at Savannah State has shown that occasionally some of our “better” students fail the Examination and are required to enroll

¹ George S. Wykoff and Harry Shaw, Second Edition. New York: Harper and Brothers. 1957.

² Thomas Clark Pollock and William D. Baker. New York: Prentice-Hall. 1955.

³ Charles W. Roberts, Jesse W. Harris, and Walter G. Johnson. New York: Oxford University Press. 1944.

⁴ Albert H. Marckwardt and Frederic G. Cassidy. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1960.

in remedial English, so that presence in the remedial class does not in itself indicate a lack of "success" in college.

In this particular remedial class, there was one student whose record showed a 2.375 cumulative average (3.0 being the highest attainable). An average of 1.0 (or a C average) is required for graduation, and six remedial students had cumulative averages between 1.65 and 1.88 as compared with two students in the literature class whose averages were 1.60 and 1.68 respectively. Thus, on the surface, it would seem that the remedial group was the more successful—that is, as far as grades and point averages are valid indices of achievement. However, when the mean cumulative average of each group was calculated and the difference between the means tested for significance, it was found that one group was not significantly superior to the other in achievement in college.

Was the literature group less strongly motivated than the remedial group? While this study made no provision for the measurement of the motivation of the two groups, it is quite likely that the remedial group was more strongly impelled as the result of (1) previous unsuccessful performance in written communication resulting in their having to enroll in remedial English; (2) desire to pass the English Qualifying Examination upon sitting for it the next time; (3) desire not to have to repeat the remedial English course; (4) in some instances, the relationship of success in remedial English and passing the English Qualifying Examination to impending graduation from college; and (5) a genuine desire on the part of some students to improve their skill in spelling, particularly since their inadequacies had been demonstrated to them in a concrete and meaningful situation where failure to write well meant the postponement of some other highly desired goal (college graduation). These reasons undoubtedly supplied tremendous drive for the remedial students to improve in the mechanics of writing, including spelling. It is unlikely that any literature student believed that spelling would influence his final grade to such an extent that he would fail the course because of weaknesses in this aspect of writing.

This comparison of groups suggests (1) that spelling may have been given less attention in the literature class; (2) that the "specialized" vocabulary of the literature class was not so very specialized, and hence does not account for the greatest per cent of words misspelled by this group; nor were the misspellings of this group primarily the "spelling demons;" (3) that the achievement of the literature students—as indicated by cumulative averages—was not significantly lower than that of the remedial group; and (4) that the literature group was quite possibly less highly motivated than the remedial group. We note, then, that direct attention to spelling and motivation are two factors which seem to account for the difference in the performance of the two groups. In spite of the fact that motivation and direct instruction in spelling are the two factors which the study does not measure in any objective way, what we know about learning leads us to consider the conclusions with regard to these factors as being highly tenable.

The most important dimension of this study, with respect to its meaning for teaching and learning, lies in the nature of the spelling errors made. The third step in this study was to categorize the 281 different misspellings and their 117 variations—398 words, if we do not count the 67 duplications. (See Table I, totals of the combined groups.)

Analysis of the misspelled words reveals that the errors fall into three broad categories: (1) errors resulting from faulty hearing and/or pronunciation, (2) errors involving the vagaries of English spelling, and (3) errors not subject to ready classification.

TABLE IV: Classification of Errors and Number of Errors Made in Each Category

	No. made by Remedial Students	No. made by Literature Students	Totals
Group I. ERRORS INVOLVING FAULTY HEARING AND/OR PRONUNCIATION			
Omission of sound(s)	35	29	64
"Incorrect" sound(s)	34	21	55
Addition of sound(s)	19	16	35
Echo of other word(s)	11	5	16
Sub-totals	99	71	170
Group II. ERRORS INVOLVING THE VAGARIES OF ENGLISH SPELLING (Phonetics)			
Use of "incorrect" vowel	27	25	52
Use of "incorrect" consonant(s)	3	7	10
Doubling consonants unnecessarily	10	2	12
Failure to double consonants	8	2	10
Omission of silent letter(s)	3	8	11
Addition of silent letter(s)	5	5	10
Confusion with other methods of forming inflections	4	4	8
Confusion in <i>ie, ei</i> words	3	2	5
Sub totals	63	55	118
Group III. MISCELLANEOUS ERRORS			
Words having multiple errors	32	36	68
Transposition of letters	8	11	19
Poor letter formation	6	3	9
Unclassified errors	10	4	14
Sub-totals	56	54	110
Grand totals	218	180	398

The first category of errors includes such typical misspellings as:

Omission of sound(s) :	*convience	convenience
	disppointed	disappointed
	commuity	community
	mulplicity	multiplicity
	meanful	meaningful
“Incorrect” sound(s) :	aposthophe	apostrophe
	efford	effort
	furnisher	furniture
	shovel	shovel
	philosopical	philosophical
Addition of sound(s) :	meterical	metrical
	porker	poker
	Therodore	Theodore
	rememberance	remembrance
	fifhtteenth	fifteenth
Echo of other word(s) :	antodote	(echo of <i>antidote</i>) anecdote
	Dirserie	(echo of <i>Desiree</i>) Dreiser
	mellowdrama	(echo of <i>mellow</i>) melodrama
	comparitance	(echo of <i>-tance as comparison in acceptance</i>)

The errors in Group I suggest (1) that students do not live in an environment where distinct speech is the rule; (2) that students do not “hear” sounds clearly; (3) that students themselves mumble and mutter when they speak; and (4) that students are not equipped with methods of attacking new words in order to arrive independently at acceptable pronunciations.

Prevention, therapy, and development of consciousness of Group I errors, it seems, would call first for more careful enunciation on the part of teachers, followed by specific attention to helping students to “hear” sounds, to discriminate between sounds heard, to reproduce those sounds accurately in speech, and to relate them to written symbols. In this connection, the old five-step plan of having students see the word, say the word, spell the word, learn the meaning of the word, and use the word in original sentences (oral and written) is still a good method for developing in students not only audio and visual discrimination and the ability to spell acceptably, but also for broadening vocabularies and increasing language facility. Students need help too in syllabication, in noting similarities and differences in words, and in seeing already known patterns within new words.

The second broad category with its sub-types involves errors which stem from the unphonetic nature of the English alphabet: one letter may represent more than one sound (as *s* in *case* and *sugar*); one sound may be represented by more than one letter (as *k* sound in *kite* and *call*); an unstressed vowel sound may be represented by any

* The first word in each pair is the one used by the student; the second word is the one called for by the context.

one of several different vowels (as the unstressed vowel in *aggravate* and *commit*); and some letters are "silent" (as is *thought* and *some*). Examples of these errors made by the subjects are:

Use of "incorrect" vowel:	existence narritive presant examanation marshmellows	existence narrative present examination marshmallows
Use of "incorrect" consonants:	caracterization exactly skem unconscious farse	characterization exactly scheme unconscious farce
Doubling consonants unnecessarily:	writting ellegy occassion annother holliest	writing elegy occasion another holiest
Failure to double consonants:	begining clubing geting planed shoping	beginning clubbing getting planned shopping
Omission of silent letters:	Decartes Descarte lisening Lincon lov	Descartes Descartes listening Lincoln love
Addition of silent letters:	frome groupe suggestes grande salade	from group suggests grand salad
Confusion with other methods of forming inflections:	essaies studied tryied praied useing	(as in <i>babies</i>) essays (as in <i>studying</i>) studied (as in <i>trying</i>) tried (as in <i>candied</i>) prayed (as in <i>dyeing</i>) using
Confusion in <i>ie, ei</i> words:	decieved peice recieved Drieser	deceived piece received Dreiser

The errors suggest that too often have teachers erroneously told pupils that "the word is spelled just as it sounds." Students have not been made aware of the lack of a one-to-one relationship between the

sounds of English and the letters of our alphabet. Or, if made aware of this discrepancy, they have not been helped sufficiently to see, understand, and make the patterns of English orthography, generally referred to as "spelling rules," operative in their writing. They do not know that the conventional spelling of many words, including the exceptions to the rules, must be seared into their minds on an individual-word-by-word basis—not determined on the spur of the moment according to "how they sound."

Students need help in understanding these matters, and definite provisions for necessary study and drill should be included in teaching plans. Students' need for this kind of instruction does not seem to be peculiar to classes in composition per se, for the errors made by students in this study reveal that both composition (remedial English) and literature students had difficulty especially in determining which letters represent which unstressed vowel sounds. Perception of spelling patterns and the understanding of sound-symbol relationships must not be left to chance, or the chance is that students' verbal intelligence will be severely limited and their writing marked by illiterate spellings.

The third group of misspellings, called miscellaneous errors, is made up of (1) words incorporating two or more errors each or words in which single errors lend themselves to more than one classification, (2) errors which may be the result of faulty letter formation rather than ignorance of conventional spelling, (3) words in which there are transposed letters, and (4) errors which are unclassified.

Typical examples are:

Words having multiple errors:	Hippotyus	Hippolytus	(ommission of a letter and transposed letters)
	reciet	recite	(transposition of a letter? or an error caused by mispronunciation?)
	audance	audience	(ommission of a sound and "incorrect" vowel)
	plonds	plans	(handwriting? or inaccurate vowel? also addition of a sound)
	meterecal	metrical	(failure to drop <i>e</i> from <i>meter</i> and inaccurate letter for unstressed vowel)

Possibly poor letter formation:	unaninuous	unanimous
	quartee	quarter
	combination	combination
	Oceon	Ocean
	loveng	loving

Transposed letters:	antienc	ancient
	Britian	Britain
	peom	poem
	salior	sailor
	Linclon	Lincoln

Unclassified errors:	Spearsian	Spenserian
	durning	doing
	remo	rumor
	parten	partner
	stine	straight

The errors resulting from poor handwriting must be attacked obviously through improvement of handwriting itself, while the therapy for the other types of errors listed above, it seems, lies in analysis of these errors through discussion with students to determine whether a misspelling, say *reciet*, is the result of faulty pronunciation or of some thought process which produces reversals. The clue for remediation then is likely to be inherent in the errors themselves. Upon analysis, such errors will likely fall into one or another of the classifications in Group I and Group II, and the instructional methods already broadly indicated for dealing with those errors, might be employed.

It must be emphasized here that this study was an informal one; no attempt was made to control any aspect of it experimentally. The errors discussed here are the spelling errors made by these students in these classes. Other students in these or other courses may make the same or other errors, depending upon the extent to which the students whose misspellings have been just studied are typical of the population of Savannah State College.

This study has revealed no truly new or startling facts. It simply points up in bold relief what has been known for some time: that the problem is a very real one in greater or less degree for most of our students, and that its solution lies beyond our reliance upon students having passed through twelve years of schooling during which they may or may not have learned to spell.

The solution to the problem lies beyond the reminder to students that they must spell "correctly" or that they must study one or another of the lists of "frequently misspelled words." The solution lies in the development of positive attitudes toward accuracy in general and in spelling particularly, along with the development of the mental abilities called for in spelling. Our students need direct instruction in matters related to spelling, and this instruction must be provided them, even in college classes. Simple analysis of misspellings followed by direct instruction in the areas of weakness is suggested as a technique for making poor spellers good and good spellers better.

And the wonderful prospect is that the prevention, the treatment, and the cure of disabilities in spelling are not restricted to classes in English composition. The students who made the errors in this study were enrolled in other courses and it is unlikely that the bell for changing classes magically changed these students into good spellers. The words used in common by us all must be spelled by persons writing

in the specialized fields. Analysis of errors followed by direct attention to these words and to "specialized" terms is in order just as much in the various "content" courses as it is in the English class. "A rose is a rose is a rose" wherever we find it—in the chemistry report or in the English theme.