

An investigation of spelling proficiency: A case study of second language learners of English in Imo State

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Abstract

This research seeks to investigate spelling second language learners of English language in Imo state. The study aims to assess current spelling proficiency levels, identify existing strategies employed by teachers and schools, examine their effectiveness, and propose new approaches. The study is anchored on the assumption that targeted spelling instruction can significantly impact students' spelling skills, thereby contributing to academic achievement. The research focuses on secondary schools in four (4) selected Local Government Areas in Imo state. Data were analyzed using the mean scores of the respondents. The findings reveal that students face challenges in spelling proficiency, with notable spelling errors and a limited grasp of spelling rules. While teachers implement various strategies, variations exist in their perceived effectiveness. However, new approaches, such as spelling bees and mnemonic devices, show promise and receive strong support from respondents. Personalized instruction, interdisciplinary integration, and collaboration with external organizations also hold potential. Based on the findings, the study recommends providing professional development for teachers, implementing spelling bees, utilizing mnemonic devices, offering personalized

instruction, integrating spelling across subjects, and strengthening collaboration with external organizations.

Keywords: *Spelling proficiency, spelling errors, personalized instruction, spelling patterns, academic achievement.*

Introduction

Improving spelling proficiency among students is a crucial aspect of their overall language development and academic success (Lurvink & Pitchford, 2023; Afzal, 2019). Competence in spelling enhances students' written communication skills and contributes to their reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). However, a growing body of research suggests that secondary school students often struggle with spelling, leading to potential setbacks in their academic progress (Wiendels, 2019; Obradović et al., 2009). Spelling proficiency refers to individuals' accuracy and competency in correctly spelling words in written communication. It encompasses the ability to apply spelling rules, recognize and use common spelling patterns, and accurately spell a wide range of words (Jackson, 2018).

Strategies for improving spelling proficiency include instructional techniques, interventions, and the approaches teachers and schools employ to enhance students' spelling skills. These strategies can include explicit instruction of spelling rules, phonics-based approaches, mnemonic techniques, word study activities, spelling drills, and the integration of spelling instruction across different subject areas (Pan et al., 2021; Westwood, 2018).

Improvement in spelling proficiency refers to the progress students make in enhancing their spelling skills over a certain

period. This improvement can be measured quantitatively through an increase in accuracy and a reduction in spelling errors, as well as qualitatively through students' self-perception of their spelling abilities and confidence in applying spelling rules in their written work (Tran et al., 2021; Umar & Ahmed, 2018).

Imo state, located in eastern Nigeria, is home to numerous secondary schools where students face challenges in achieving spelling proficiency due to mother tongue interference and other sociolinguistic factors. The educational landscape in the Imo state educational system presents a unique context influenced by various factors such as limited resources, teaching methodologies, and cultural aspects that may impact spelling instruction and learning outcomes (Wiendels, 2019). Consequently, an in-depth investigation is warranted to understand the current state of spelling proficiency among students and explore effective strategies to address this issue in the selected secondary schools within the state.

There are various perspectives on the strategies employed to improve spelling proficiency among students. Some researchers argue that explicit and systematic instruction, including phonemic awareness and phonics-based approaches, is crucial for enhancing spelling skills (Henbest, 2017; Dessemontet, 2021). These approaches emphasize the importance of teaching students the fundamental rules and patterns of spelling, allowing them to develop effective spelling strategies.

On the other hand, some researchers advocate for a more holistic and meaning-based approach to spelling instruction. They argue that exposing students to various rich and authentic texts, engaging in vocabulary development activities, and promoting writing opportunities can improve spelling proficiency (Mart, 2018; Henshaw, 2016). According to this perspective, spelling

skills are developed through language exposure, practice, and meaningful context.

Through this research, valuable insights can be gained regarding the spelling proficiency levels of students in Imo state and the strategies currently utilized by teachers and schools. Additionally, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies will aid in developing targeted interventions and recommendations for improving spelling proficiency among secondary school students in Imo state.

Therefore, this study aims to bridge the existing knowledge gap by investigating the spelling proficiency levels, evaluating the current strategies, and proposing new or alternative approaches to enhance spelling skills among students in selected secondary schools in Imo state. The findings will contribute to the body of literature on spelling instruction and have practical implications for educators, curriculum developers, policymakers in Nigeria.

Spelling proficiency among secondary school students in Imo state is a pressing concern that demands attention. While spelling plays a pivotal role in written communication and overall academic achievement, research suggests that many students in this context struggle with spelling skills (Rossetti, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). Despite the significance of spelling proficiency, there is a lack of comprehensive studies focusing specifically on the strategies employed to enhance spelling skills in secondary schools within Imo state. This knowledge gap hinders the development of effective interventions tailored to the specific needs of students in this context.

From the foregoing, the objectives of this study are to examine:

1. Investigate the current spelling proficiency levels among students in selected secondary schools in Imo state.

2. Identify the existing strategies employed by teachers and schools to enhance spelling proficiency among students in selected secondary schools in Imo state.
3. Examine the effectiveness of the current strategies in improving spelling proficiency among students in selected secondary schools in Imo state.
4. Propose and evaluate new or alternative strategies to enhance spelling proficiency among students in selected secondary schools in Imo state.

The lack of comprehensive studies on the strategies for improving spelling proficiency among secondary school students in Imo state has resulted in significant knowledge gaps. These gaps pertain to the current state of spelling proficiency, the strategies employed by teachers and schools, and the effectiveness of these strategies. therefore, there is the need to develop evidence-based interventions that can effectively enhance spelling skills among secondary school students in Imo state, contributing to their overall academic success. While there is a wealth of literature on spelling instruction strategies in general, these strategies may not be directly applicable to the educational landscape of Imo State due to various contextual factors (Ikokoh et al., 2021, Butler, 2015). Therefore, it is crucial to identify the existing strategies utilized by teachers and schools in selected secondary schools within Imo state to gain insights into the current practices and determine their effectiveness. Therefore, there is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of the current strategies in improving spelling proficiency among secondary school students in Imo state. While some studies have examined the impact of specific strategies on spelling skills, the efficacy of these strategies may vary depending on the

educational context and student population (Matte-Landry et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023).

Theoretical framework

The orthographic theory, initially proposed by Frank Smith in his seminal work "Understanding Reading" (1978), represents a foundational theoretical framework in spelling and language acquisition. This theory contends that the English spelling system transcends pure phonetic correspondence, featuring a plethora of irregular spellings necessitating memorization. A core premise of this theory is that effective spelling acquisition hinges on grasping entire word patterns rather than relying exclusively on phonological or lexical pathways.

Championed by notable scholars such as Frank Smith, Gough and Hillinger, and Treiman, the orthographic theory has garnered support and recognition for its comprehensive insights into the complexities of spelling proficiency. The theory's bedrock principles underscore its relevance in unraveling strategies to enhance the spelling prowess of second-language learners of English in Nigeria.

Frank Smith's pioneering work, alongside the contributions of scholars like Gough and Hillinger and Treiman, firmly establishes the orthographic theory as a guiding light in spelling acquisition. Their collective research underscores the multifaceted nature of spelling, emphasizing the role of holistic word patterns over mere phonological adherence.

Basic tenets of the orthographic theory

1. **Phonetic variation:** The orthographic theory posits that the English spelling system transcends phonetic

- predictability, showcasing numerous non-phonetic spellings.
2. Irregular memorization: Acknowledging the existence of irregular spellings, the theory underscores the need for learners to memorize these exceptions, going beyond strict phonemic patterns.
 3. Holistic pattern learning: The theory promotes the significance of apprehending entire spelling patterns to foster accurate spelling, pivoting away from over-reliance on phonological or lexical tactics.
 4. complex cognitive processes: Spelling proficiency is characterized by intricate cognitive processes, including phonological decoding, orthographic mapping, and morphological analysis.

The orthographic theory provides a robust framework for enhancing spelling proficiency among second language learners of English in Nigeria due to its alignment with the complexities inherent in language acquisition within this context. The suitability of this theory for this study is anchored on the following:

1. Moving beyond phonological decoding: Recognizing that the English language exhibits phonetic variations, the theory underscores the importance of not solely relying on phonological decoding. This insight resonates deeply in Nigeria, where linguistic diversity gives rise to divergent phonetic nuances that challenge direct phoneme-to-grapheme correspondence.
2. Emphasis on holistic learning: The orthographic theory's emphasis on learning spelling patterns as a whole resonates with the intricate structure of English words,

enabling learners to navigate irregularities and predict spelling with greater accuracy. This approach accommodates the idiosyncratic nature of English orthography.

3. Morphological awareness: In Nigeria, where English often coexists with local languages, understanding the morphological structure of words is pivotal. The orthographic theory's acknowledgment of morphological analysis aligns with the linguistic landscape, enabling learners to dissect and comprehend the building blocks of English words.

From the foregoing, the orthographic theory provides a valuable theoretical framework for the study of spelling proficiency among second language learners of English in Imo State. It addresses the challenges posed by phonetic variations, irregular spellings, and the need for holistic learning, making it a guiding principle for educators and researchers in this context. The study can leverage the insights from this theory to develop effective teaching strategies and interventions to enhance spelling proficiency among second language learners in Imo State.

Methodology

This study investigates strategies for improving spelling proficiency among students in selected secondary schools in Imo state. A mixed-methods research design is employed to achieve this objective, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. The methodology consists of the following components: sampling and participant selection, data collection instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select secondary schools in Imo state. The selection was based on factors such as geographic location, school size, and student population diversity. Within the selected schools, students from different grade levels were included to ensure a representative sample. Also, informed consents were obtained from the students' parents or guardians.

To address the research objectives, multiple data collection instruments will be utilized. These instruments include:

- Spelling proficiency test: A standard spelling test was administered to assess the spelling proficiency level of the students. The test comprises words from various difficulty levels, including common spelling patterns and challenging words.
- Questionnaire: A 4 Likert scale-based questionnaire based on Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Strongly Disagree (SD), and Disagree (D) were developed to gather quantitative data on students' perceptions of their spelling skills, the effectiveness of current strategies, and their attitudes towards spelling.
- Descriptive statistics such as mean score (\bar{X}) was calculated to summarize the data for the quantitative data obtained from the spelling proficiency test and questionnaire.

Data presentation and analysis

Objective 1: Investigate the current spelling proficiency levels among students in selected secondary schools in Imo state.

S/N	Item	X	Decision
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1	Students in selected secondary schools in Imo state have a firm grasp of spelling rules and consistently demonstrate accurate spelling in their written work.	2.3	Disagree
2	Students in selected secondary schools in Imo state make frequent spelling errors in their written assignments.	2.7	Agree
3	Students in selected secondary schools in Imo state actively seek help or resources to improve their spelling skills.	2.4	Disagree
4	Students in selected secondary schools in Imo state consider spelling essential to their academic performance.	2.8	Agree
5	Students in selected secondary schools in Imo state believe they have room to improve their spelling abilities.	2.6	Agree

The findings of research objective 1 indicate that students in selected secondary schools in Imo state struggle with spelling proficiency, as they make frequent spelling errors in their written work and do not have a firm grasp of spelling rules. Despite recognizing the importance of spelling for academic performance, students show limited initiative in seeking helps or resources to improve their spelling skills. These findings underscore the urgency for targeted interventions to enhance spelling proficiency and create a supportive learning environment that fosters students'

motivation to improve their spelling abilities, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes.

Objective 2: Identify the strategies teachers and schools employ to enhance spelling proficiency among students in selected secondary schools in Imo state.

S/N	Item	X (Mean)	Decision
6	Teachers in selected secondary schools in Imo state regularly incorporate spelling exercises and activities into their lesson plans.	2.6	Agree
7	Teachers in selected secondary schools in Imo state provide students with spelling lists and practice materials to improve their spelling skills.	2.3	Disagree
8	Teachers in selected secondary schools in Imo state offer individualized feedback and guidance on spelling errors to help students improve.	2.5	Agree
9	Teachers in selected secondary schools in Imo state use technology-based tools or resources to support spelling instruction.	2.2	Disagree
10	Teachers in selected secondary schools in Imo state collaborate	2.4	Disagree

with colleagues to share effective strategies for enhancing spelling proficiency among students.

The findings of research objective 2 reveal that teachers in selected secondary schools in Imo state actively incorporate spelling exercises and provide individualized feedback to enhance students' spelling proficiency. However, discrepancies in the provision of spelling lists, use of technology-based tools, and collaboration among teachers suggest potential areas for improvement. Addressing these variations could lead to more effective and consistent spelling instruction, ultimately fostering improved spelling skills among students in Imo state's secondary schools.

Objective 3: Examine the effectiveness of the current strategies in improving spelling proficiency among students in selected secondary schools in Imo state.

S/N	Item	X (Mean)	Decision
11	The current strategies employed by teachers and schools effectively improve students' spelling proficiency in selected secondary schools in Imo state.	2.4	Disagree
12	The current strategies employed by teachers and schools have a positive impact on students' confidence in their spelling abilities.	2.3	Disagree

13	The current strategies employed by teachers and schools adequately address the diverse spelling needs and abilities of students in selected secondary schools in Imo state.	2.5	Agree
14	The current strategies employed by teachers and schools are perceived by students as engaging and enjoyable, enhancing their motivation to improve spelling skills.	2.8	Agree
15	The current strategies employed by teachers and schools receive positive feedback from parents or guardians regarding their impact on students' spelling proficiency.	2.9	Agree

The findings of research objective 3 reveal mixed perceptions regarding the effectiveness of current strategies in improving spelling proficiency among students in selected secondary schools in Imo state. While the strategies were perceived as engaging and motivating, respondents disagree on their overall impact on spelling proficiency and students' confidence. The positive feedback from parents or guardians indicates the potential for involving stakeholders in refining spelling instructional approaches to better address students' needs and enhance outcomes. Further examination and evaluation of these strategies are crucial to identify areas for improvement and foster a collaborative and supportive learning environment.

Objective 4: Propose and evaluate new or alternative strategies to enhance spelling proficiency among students in selected secondary schools in Imo state.

S/N	Item	X (Mean)	Decision
16	Implementing regular spelling bees or competitions in selected secondary schools in Imo state will motivate students to improve their spelling skills.	3.3	Strongly Agree
17	Incorporating mnemonic devices or memory aids into spelling instruction in selected secondary schools in Imo state will enhance students' retention and recall of spelling patterns and rules.	3.0	Strongly Agree
18	Providing students with personalized spelling instruction tailored to their specific areas of weakness will improve spelling proficiency in selected secondary schools in Imo state.	2.8	Agree
19	Integrating spelling instruction across various subject areas in selected secondary schools in Imo state will reinforce spelling skills and their application in different contexts.	2.7	Agree
20	Collaborating with local libraries or educational organizations to	2.6	Agree

provide additional spelling resources and support to students in selected secondary schools in Imo state will enhance their spelling proficiency.

The findings of research objective 4 indicate strong agreement regarding the effectiveness of the proposed new or alternative strategies to enhance spelling proficiency among students in selected secondary schools in Imo state. Implementing regular spelling bees or competitions and incorporating mnemonic devices are perceived as motivating and improving the retention of spelling patterns. Providing personalized instruction and integrating spelling across subject areas are valuable approaches to addressing specific weaknesses and reinforcing spelling skills. Collaboration with external organizations to support spelling resources also holds promise in enhancing students' spelling proficiency. Implementing these strategies can improve spelling skills and foster a comprehensive approach to spelling instruction in Imo State's secondary schools. The orthographic theory justifies the proposed strategies for enhancing spelling proficiency among students in Imo State by emphasizing the need to grasp entire word patterns, use mnemonic aids, and recognize irregularities in English spelling. In summary, the orthographic theory supports the strategies and can positively influence research outcomes in the context of spelling proficiency in Imo State.

Conclusion

The findings from this study conducted in selected secondary schools in Imo State shed light on the current state of spelling

proficiency among students, the strategies employed by teachers and schools, the effectiveness of these strategies, and proposed alternative approaches. The results suggest that students in these schools generally struggle with spelling proficiency, making frequent errors and demonstrating limited initiative in seeking help or resources for improvement. While students recognize the importance of spelling for academic success, the discrepancy between their perceived room for improvement and their proactive efforts indicates a need for targeted interventions and increased motivation. Regarding the strategies employed by teachers and schools, there are variations in their implementation. While some educators actively incorporate spelling exercises and provide personalized feedback, disparities in the provision of materials, technology-based tools, and collaborative efforts point to areas for improvement in the consistency of spelling instruction. The effectiveness of current strategies is viewed with mixed perceptions. While students find the strategies engaging and motivating, there are doubts about their overall impact on spelling proficiency and students' confidence. However, the positive feedback from parents or guardians highlights the potential for involving stakeholders in refining spelling instructional approaches. The proposed alternative strategies, strongly supported by respondents, offer promising avenues for enhancing spelling proficiency, such as spelling bees, mnemonic devices, personalized instruction, interdisciplinary integration, and collaboration with external organizations. These strategies align with the orthographic theory, emphasizing holistic learning, cognitive processes, and recognizing irregularities in English spelling, and have the potential to significantly improve spelling skills among students in Imo State's secondary schools. Overall, these findings underscore the need for a comprehensive approach

to spelling instruction, a focus on individualized support, and the active involvement of various stakeholders to improve spelling proficiency and enhance the overall academic performance of students in Imo State.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations were drawn:

1. There is a need to provide teachers with ongoing professional development workshops focused on effective spelling instruction strategies. This will equip them with the necessary tools and knowledge to better address students' spelling needs and employ evidence-based approaches.
2. Organize regular spelling bees or competitions in secondary schools to motivate and engage students in spelling practice. These events can foster healthy competition and instill a sense of achievement, encouraging students to improve their spelling skills.
3. Encourage teachers to incorporate mnemonic devices and memory aids into spelling instruction. Such techniques can help students retain and recall spelling patterns and rules more effectively, leading to improved spelling accuracy.
4. Develop individualized spelling instruction plans for students based on their specific areas of weakness. Tailoring instruction to address individual needs can accelerate students' progress and build their confidence in spelling.
5. Teachers can help learners to identify and learn the spelling patterns of words. This can be done by providing

- explicit instruction on spelling patterns, using games and activities to practice spelling patterns, and providing learners with opportunities to apply their knowledge of spelling patterns to real words.
6. There is also the need to help learners to understand the morphological structure of words. Many words are made up of smaller units, such as prefixes, suffixes, and roots. By understanding the morphological structure of words, learners can better remember their correct spellings. This can be done by providing explicit instruction on morphology, using games and activities to practice morphology, and providing learners with opportunities to apply their knowledge of morphology to real words.
 7. Provide ample opportunities for practice: Learners need to have ample opportunities to practice spelling in order to improve their skills. This can be done by providing learners with spelling exercises, having them write regularly, and providing them with feedback on their spelling.

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