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# Spelling Errors among Junior High School Students in the Cape Coast Metropolis

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## Abstract

In recent years, the standard of English has been criticised as being low. The Chief Examiner's Report on the 2001 - 2010 Basic Education Certificate Examination (B.E.C.E.) singled out poor spelling as a major cause of the poor performance by candidates during examination. This paper therefore investigates spelling errors among Junior High School (JHS) students in some selected schools in the Cape Coast Metropolis in the Central Region of Ghana. It also finds out if the type of school (social classification) has any influence on the performance of students and, to establish the correlation between gender and performance in English Language (L<sub>2</sub>). The study employed both qualitative and quantitative approach. The data for the study were obtained using some test tools, questionnaire, and interviews. In all, 60 participants made up of 30 males and 30 females were used for the study. The result identified six error types – omission, addition, substitution, inversion, pronunciation and miscellaneous out of which omission errors were committed most. It also revealed that, even though students in both private and public schools have difficulties in learning the L<sub>2</sub>, students in the private school show some level of mastery in spelling ability than their counterparts in the public schools. The result also indicates that boys perform better than their female counterparts when it comes to spellings. These findings have some pedagogical implications for people who are interested in language studies.

## Keywords

Spelling Errors, Junior High School, Gender, English Language

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## 1. Introduction

In a multilingual country like Ghana, English language is considered as an essential tool in achieving effective communication. The use of English language for formal teaching and learning in the Gold Coast started when Britain became their colonial master (Sackey, 1997:126). He further explains that the teaching of English language started in Castle schools where the language was learnt through "repeated readings of primers and spelling books".

As part of the British colonial policy during the colonial era, the indigenes of colonies of which Ghana was not an exception were compelled to learn the language of the

colonial master (that is; English language). As a result of this policy, English had so much power and as Sackey (1997:132) puts it, 'without it, there could be no participation in the economic and political life. Also, Roberts (1996) explains that English Language has become a powerful language due to the fact that it has broken linguistic barriers to become a widely spoken international language particularly, as a second or foreign language. For this reason, even after colonial rule, Ghana had to adopt English Language as an official language for formal education, the media, and for government and business purposes in the country.

For instance, the present education language policy states that with the exception of lower primary (classes one to three); English should be a medium of instruction at all levels.

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It is used in teaching subjects like mathematics, agricultural science, and science, amongst others.

English Language is considered as one of the core subjects in Ghanaian schools and also a prerequisite for entry into Senior High Schools and tertiary institutions. Thus, success in any form of formal education and training in highly skilled labour generally depends upon one's ability to understand and use English Language effectively. However, a lot of individuals, particularly students, tend to commit avoidable errors in the use of the language; more worrying is when such errors are committed by students in their final examinations.

In Owusu-Ansah (2005)'s analysis of the Chief Examiner of WAEC's report, concerning the Junior High School Certificate Examination between 1993 and 2003, he highlighted spelling errors as a major problem in written grammar of students. He opined that students' inability to spell words correctly lead to the deduction of marks resulting in poor performance.

Again, reports of Chief Examiners on the performance of students in B.E.C.E. from 2001 – 2010 also revealed spelling errors as the type of errors most students commit in their final examinations. These reports buttress the previous reports that highlighted spelling errors as being common in written grammar of students.

The Chief Examiner's Report on the 2008 Basic Education Certificate Examination (B.E.C.E.) described the level of spelling during B.E.C.E. English papers especially, that of the year 2008 as "terrible". For this reason, the report suggested that English Language teachers in basic schools should intensify "the good old practice of spelling drills" in all schools and encourage dictation of single words and short passages during language lessons. These he emphasised, "will improve spelling" of students.

It is against this backdrop that the present study sought to analysis spelling errors in written essays of Junior High School students using some schools in the Cape Coast Metropolis as a case study.

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem

It was realized that there are some language problems that may serve as obstacles for a learner to excel in his/her linguistic behaviour. Errors especially, spelling errors in written grammar form a distinct problem that may retard a learner's overall performance, especially in English language. Graham et al (1997) cited in Kathleen (2007) also share in this view as they postulate that poor spelling is linked to overall essay quality, which determines performance.

The performance of students in English especially in Junior High School has been falling, and this has attracted the

attention of English language researchers, educational policy makers, the conscious masses as well as the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) (source: Daily Graphic, 17<sup>th</sup> April, 2000 and WAEC's 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Endowment Fund Lecture, Accra 12<sup>th</sup> March, 2001 by Prof. Florence Abena Dolphyne, p8). Due to the status of English language in the educational system in Ghana, failure in the subject at the Basic Education Certificate Examination (B.E.C.E.) and West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), serves as an automatic hindrance to the next level of education. Revelations from the reports of WAEC Chief Examiners from previous years to recent years or time on B.E.C.E. revealed several errors contributing to the poor performance of students in English. Prominent among them was spelling errors.

It was therefore imperative to investigate spelling errors made by JHS students (in some selected schools) to unearth the causes and prescribe solutions to them. It is of our view that even though a lot of researchers have worked on grammatical errors in the grammar of written essays of students whether specifically or generally, a few of them such as Geber (1984) and Twum (2011) who studied spelling errors in the written grammar of Junior High School students, Kirkpatrick (2009) who worked on spelling errors of American slang words, Kyte (1958) who explored common spelling errors made by intermediate students, etc., have delved into spelling errors and that most researchers focus on other types of errors. For this reason, the present study in an attempt to fill the gap in the literature, explores spelling errors evident in written essays of students in some selected schools in the Cape Coast metropolis. We chose this site, because, Cape Coast is considered as the seat of education in Ghana.

### 1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study is to find out the specific spelling errors that are evident in the written essays of Junior High Schools (JHS) students in some selected schools in the Cape Coast metropolis and also to determine the frequency of occurrence of those errors in both categories of schools. The study also establishes the extent to which social classifications of schools influence the performance of students in spelling. Additionally, this work examines the correlation between gender and performance.

### 1.3. Research Questions

The study is informed by the following research questions:

1. What type of spelling errors is evident in the scripts of J.H.S students?
2. How does the type of school influence students'

competence in terms of spelling in the target language?

3. What are the correlation between gender and competence?

#### 1.4. Significance of the Study

This study will be of immense importance to both the Ghanaian society, other countries where English is used as the second language and academia in general. For instance, it will create awareness which will draw the attention of language users to these errors and help them to avoid committing these errors. To this end, it was posited that the present study sheds more light or provides some insight on the kind of errors found in written essays of Junior High schools and, therefore, goes a no small way to prevent repetition of such errors. The study also adds significantly to the already existing scholarship on error analysis and, therefore, extends the frontiers of knowledge in this area of study. Besides, the study provides the impetus for further research by both undergraduate and postgraduate students in Error Analysis. Further, the study has implications for pedagogy in that it could guide teachers not only to identify the problematic areas of L2 learners (second language learners) but also to bring out areas for which remedial programmes are needed.

## 2. Methodology

This study is rooted in both the qualitative research design and quantitative techniques. The qualitative design adopted describes observations in predominantly non-numerical terms and emphasizes description or interpretation of communication events (Priest, 1996); it observes how people interact with each other and how people's attitudes are translated into actions (Fraenkel, 2000). We employed this design due to its appropriateness and suitability for analyzing the data collected.

More so, the adoption of some quantitative techniques was to aid us to come up with a fair numerical representation of the errors in the data collected. Krugar (2003:18-19) confirms that "quantitative methods allow us to summarize (vast) sources of information and facilitate comparisons across categories overtime". This study used Cape Coast Metropolis as its research site. It used schools within the University of Cape Coast community and its surrounding communities. These communities include Amamoma, Apewosika and South campus of the University of Cape Coast. The choice of these sites for the study was underpinned by issues of proximity and resource constraints.

It would have been interesting for the present researchers to use all private and public Junior High Schools in the Cape

Coast Metropolis in the study, but this would have been tedious considering 78 public and numerous private Junior High Schools in Cape Coast. As a result of the above mentioned reasons, we focused on three Junior High Schools in an around the University community. The three schools selected for this study included University of Cape Coast J.H.S., Amamoma J.H.S. and Apewosika M/A J.H.S. Of the three schools, University of Cape Coast J.H.S. is a private school and the remaining two, Amamoma J.H.S and Apewosika M/A J.H.S. are public schools. A total of sixty samples were collected from these three schools and used for the study. Thus, twenty (20) samples were collected from each of the schools mentioned earlier. Also, in order to ensure reliable and accurate information, the random sampling method was adopted to determine the number of students selected from each class.

We adopted test tools (essay questions and dictation), questionnaires (close ended) and interview (unstructured). We set three essays questions -expository and narrative essay, and fifteen (15) words that were used for a dictation or spelling drill. The basis for the choice of both essay questions and dictation was to give the participants a free choice of vocabulary through the essay writing to express their views and at the same time find out their degree of mastery in spelling some words in the target language. We also administered questionnaires (close-ended) which sought for brief background information about the respondents. Lastly, we conducted an interview with three teachers; one from each of the three schools.

Concerning the essay questions, students were asked to choose to answer a question from three alternative questions. The essay covered topics on letter writing, article writing and a narrative essay. The questions for the essay writing were as follows:

1. Write an article to be published in a newspaper on the topic, 'Three causes of road accidents in Ghana'.
2. Write a story that ends, 'It pays to be obedient'.
3. Write a letter to a friend of yours in another school explaining to him/her three reasons why you like your school.

Dictation words: -Here, students were tested as they were asked to spell these fifteen words in the answer sheets given to them: Committee, embarrassment, pneumonia, photography, anaemia, jewellery, sergeant, yogurt, relegate, aggressive, vigorous, medicinal, approximate, aorta, psychology.

Questionnaire: -According to Best and Khan (1993), a questionnaire is an instrument in which respondents provide responses. A questionnaire, according to them, is used when

factual information is desired. Questionnaires may be personally administered or mailed to respondents.

Short-ended questionnaires were also used for learners so as to:

- a. Establish the age, sex, grade and resident of learners.
- b. Establish the languages they are proficient in, the major languages spoken at home by the learners.
- c. Establish parents' educational background and occupation.
- d. Establish post-school activities of learners; how many times they go to library to read on their own, and the number of books they read within a term.

*Interview:* -The main reason why we interviewed some teachers was to find out their opinions as to what could account for the (vast) difference in the performance of students in different types (private and public) of schools. We adopted unstructured interview type.

The nature of the present research demanded written responses from the pupils. These written responses were collected from pupils through composition. For each of the twenty students selected randomly in each of the schools, the same set of questions was given to them to answer. They were instructed to write within 200 and 250 words within an ample time of one hour. Also, the words for the dictation were dictated to them within a period of fifteen (15) minutes.

First, the twenty randomly selected J.H.S 1 and J.H.S 2 students were made to sit in one classroom. After they had all settled, we shared answer sheets and question papers to them and asked them to write. During dictation period, we asked them to number one to fifteen (1 – 15). Each of the fifteen words was mentioned twice. They were then given some few minutes to go through their work and edit before submitting them.

Further, questionnaires were given to each of the participants to fill after which each person's questionnaire was stapled to his or her answer sheet to ensure correspondence of results. It was after this exercise that we interviewed three teachers, one from each school.

After the responses from the students were solicited, they were all marked and graded. All the papers in each school were re-examined to identify the kind of errors made by the students. Here, careful attention was given to misspelt words. After a careful study of these words, it was realized that there were six kinds of errors. They included addition of letters, omission of letters, substitution of letters, inversion or reversals, pronunciation errors and others classified as miscellaneous. Each misspelt word was recorded under a corresponding error type. The total number of each kind of

error was found. The total number of errors for each kind or type for each school was recorded. Again, all error kinds recorded by all the schools, both private and public, were found. Further, the percentages of each kind of error were found for both schools. The scripts were grouped according to private and public schools. These were done primarily to determine whether or not there was a difference in the performance of spelling between public and private schools.

### 3. Data Analysis and Discussion

Data analysis and discussion was based on the research questions.

#### 3.1. Types of Spelling Errors Evident in the Junior High School Students Marked Scripts

The major error types identified from students' marked scripts were categorised under six areas namely: Addition, Omission, Inversion, Substitution, Pronunciation Errors and Miscellaneous. These error types are in line with error types stated by Kyte (1958). Further, the analysis, apart from recording the patterns of the errors evident in the scripts, also found their related densities/frequency of occurrence in both category of schools and also found the five (5) most frequent errors among the types of errors identified in their essay. More so, plausible causes which condition the occurrence of these errors are presented in the analysis.

##### 3.1.1. Omission Errors

This is a spelling error type that has to do with exclusion of letters from words spelled. Based on the marked scripts of the participants, some of the omission errors committed by the students included;

*(Asterisks have been placed on wrongly spelt words)*

- Stopped - stopped
- Opponents - opponents
- Comitee - committee
- Aproximte - approximate
- Embarrasment - embarrassment

From the above examples, it was realised that, learners who were asked to spell these words omitted the sounds /p/, /t/, /r/, /s/ and /e/ respectively. This could be as a result of ignorance, that is, incomplete grasp of certain rules of spelling. We agree with Antwi (2006) who discusses that in certain cases, final consonants preceded by one vowel should be doubled as in



- Stop - stopped
- Commit - committee

However, we disagree with Antwi (2006) on the rule that, final consonants in cases where the suffix begins with a consonant such as 'ment' or 'ness' as in 'equip – equipment' as he cites should not be doubled. This is because even though the word 'embarrassment' follows the same rule, the correct spelling demands that the final consonant |s| of the word 'embarrassment' is doubled.

### 3.1.2. Addition and Substitution

Since language acquisition is considered a hypothesis testing as established by Chomsky (1959), most learners in their trial and error testing, tend to add certain letters which are not required or in other cases, substitute certain letters which are rather required in a word with other different letters which are rather not required. Examples of such errors as we identified in the scripts of the students include:

#### Addition and Substitution

- |                              |                             |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| *Writing – writing           | * approsimate - approximate |
| • hurmble -humble            | * pacient-patient           |
| • interlligent - intelligent | * addressive - aggressive   |
| • teache-teach               | * figorous-vigorous         |
| • yougurt - yogurt           | *no-know                    |

For example, \*interlligent, could be considered as a result of false analogy in that, it is possible that they have drawn from his already knowledge about the spelling of "inter" to spell the word.

### 3.1.3. Inversion

(Asterisks have been placed on wrongly spelt words)

- amenia - anaemia
- foriegn – foreign
- sergaent – sergeant

Edu-Buandoh (1997) captures the spelling 'foreign' by students as a result of carelessness. The present researchers disagree with her caption because in our view, an error of this type committed by a student could be as a result of ignorance and not mere carelessness. This assertion is also confirmed by Antwi (2006). It was also realised that as a result of inconsistencies in the American English Language spellings with British spelling. The example Anemia (AmE); Anaemia (BrE) depicts this.

### 3.1.4. Pronunciation Errors

It was realised that most of the students' difficulty in spelling certain words was as a result of incorrect pronunciation,

either inculcated on their own or grasped from their teachers. It was also realised that at their stage, there is high dependence on what is said or since most students do not check up correct pronunciation (transcription of words from the dictionary). More so, it is expected that as students read more books, they come into contact with new words; however, the habit of reading as evident in the statistics is poor or lacking in public schools. This depicts why the general performance in terms of spelling in the private schools overrides that of the public schools. Drawing specifically on errors students make as a result of pronunciation, it was realised that it is the third most common errors made generally by the students. However, in terms of types of schools, it was found out that the rate at which students in public schools make this type of error overrides that of the private schools.

Pronunciation errors could be as a result of transfer (in terms of transfer of training or from the native language), or ignorance of the forms of certain words. Again, they can result from inconsistencies of English spelling (that is, the phonology of English language). It was also realised that, the inconsistency of English spelling is traced historically to English borrowing from French and Latin words like "suite", "machine" and "burlesque". Worse, some French and Spanish words are also given English pronunciation like "Envelope" and "Don Quixote" respectively (Antwi, 2006).

*(Asterisks have been placed on wrongly spelt words)*

- cycology - psychology
- nemonia - pneumonia
- animia - anaemia
- iyota – aorta
- sirgent - sergeant
- acadamic - academic
- yogot - yogurt

### 3.1.5. Miscellaneous

This type of errors captures all other words which in no way resembles the word spelt.

*(Asterisks have been placed on wrongly spelt words)*

- inimia -Anaemia
- jueary -jewellery
- yolgot -yogurt
- irotal - aorta

The examples above depict students' ignorance of most words in English Language.

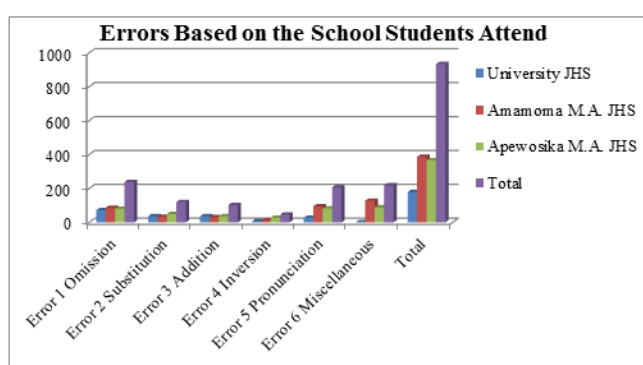
### 3.2. How a Type of School Influences Students' Competence in Terms of Spelling in English Language

Table 1 below shows the types of spelling errors committed by the students in all the three schools. A critical look at the error types identified with the two groups of schools revealed 6 main types. They were omission, addition, substitution, inversion, pronunciation errors and miscellaneous.

For the error types committed in each of the three schools, it was realised that University JHS, Amamoma and Apewosika Junior High Schools committed 72, 86 and 81 omission errors respectively. In the same order, the substitution errors committed by the three schools recorded 36, 34 and 50 errors respectively. More so, addition errors committed recorded 36, 31 and 36 respectively whereas inversion spelling errors committed was 6, 3 and 28 respectively. Lastly, pronunciation errors committed were 28, 95 and 89 respectively whereas miscellaneous regarding miscellaneous 2, 128 and 89 errors were recorded.

**Table 1.** Errors Based on the School Students Attend.

	University JHS	Amamoma M.A. JHS	Apewosika M.A. JHS	Total
Error 1 Omission	72	86	81	239
Error 2 Substitution	36	34	50	120
Error 3 Addition	36	31	36	103
Error 4 Inversion	6	13	28	47
Error 5 Pronunciation	28	95	83	206
Error 6 Miscellaneous	2	128	89	219
Total	180	387	367	934



**Figure 1.** Errors Based on the School Students Attend.

From table 1 and figure 1 below, the total number of all the types of errors in University of Cape Coast, Amamoma and Apewosika Junior High Schools which totals 180, 387 and 367 depicts that in terms of spelling errors, University JHS performed better than Apewosika JHS while Apewosika JHS also performed better than Amamoma JHS. Thus, in terms of

spelling performance, University JHS performed better than both public schools – Amamoma and Apewosika JHS. However, participants in Amamoma JHS performed least. In our view, these results placed private schools above public schools in terms of performance in spelling.

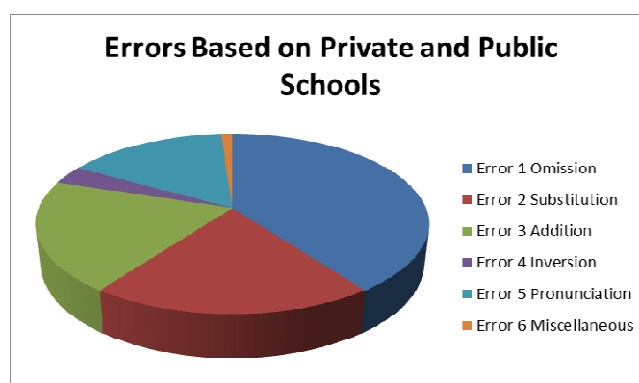
#### 3.2.1. Error Count In Private and Public Schools

Placing the schools on their categories (private and public), the private school, University JHS, committed 180 errors in general whereas the two public schools, Amamoma and Apewosika JHS, committed 754 errors in general.

From table 2 and figure 2, the results of types of errors committed by students reveal that omission spelling errors are the most common errors committed by JHS students followed by miscellaneous errors, pronunciation, substitution, addition errors and lastly, inversion.

**Table 2.** Errors Based on Private and Public Schools.

	Private School	Public School	Total
Error 1 Omission	72	167	239
Error 2 Substitution	36	84	120
Error 3 Addition	36	67	103
Error 4 Inversion	6	41	47
Error 5 Pronunciation	28	178	206
Error 6 Miscellaneous	2	217	219
Total	180	754	934



**Figure 2.** Errors Based on Private and Public Schools

#### 3.2.2. Correlation between the Type of School and Performance

In an interview with one of the teachers from the private school, he confirmed that there is very strict supervision in the school. He drew on his experience of teaching in some public schools and confirmed that the level of supervision in both categories of school is not the same. He also confirms that the salaries of the teachers are encouraging as the person who receives least is equivalent to 400USD per month. He

added that almost all the teachers have their own cars because they are well paid and motivated. As a result, teachers are encouraged to put in their very best in order to ensure that students perform better.

Unlike private schools most of the teachers in the public schools least care about the performances of their students. They do not ensure children are resourced with all the textbooks and materials prescribed for them to be used in class. The interviewee added that some of the students even go to school without pens, notebooks and exercise books and when these students are sent home to go and get these materials, the parents rather tend to blame the teachers. He affirmed that there are instances where some of the teachers had to use their own money to get some textbooks and other materials/items for some of the students. They also claim that there is no motivation from the parents. Parents do not ensure that homework of their wards are done thus, most of the students take their homework back to school to do them early in the morning before classes begin. This confirms teachers' accountability and students' responsibilities in Masko & Bosiwah (2012).

### 3.3. Correlation between Gender and Performance

Table 3. Errors Based on Gender of Students.

	Male	Female	Total
Error 1 Omission	100	139	239
Error 2 Substitution	55	65	120
Error 3 Addition	42	61	103
Error 4 Inversion	25	22	47
Error 5 Pronunciation	71	135	206
Error 6 Miscellaneous	37	182	219
Total	330	604	934

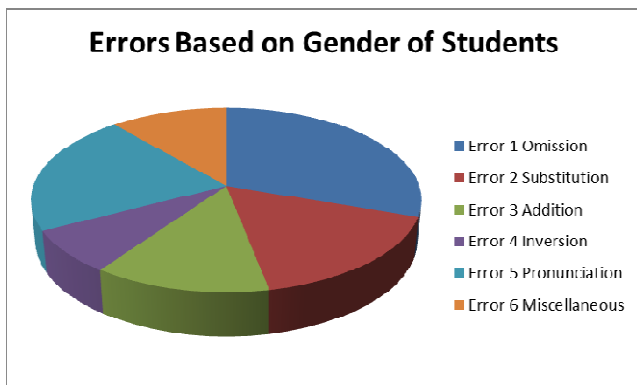


Figure 3. Errors Based on Gender of Students

30 males and 30 females representing 50% each participated in essay writing and dictation. In the analysis, the males committed 330 errors representing 35.3% whereas the females committed 604 errors representing 64.7% indicating a vast difference in terms of spelling performance. This is elaborated in table 3 and figure 3. It was realised from the

figures or percentages that males are good spellers or perform better in terms of spelling than their female counterpart. This result however confirms the findings of Edu-Buandoh (1997) which indicates that the performance of boys in terms of spelling is better than that of girls.

## 4. Summary of Findings and Conclusion

At the end of the study, it was revealed that students in Junior High Schools had a problem with spelling which attributes to their poor performance at the B.E.C.E. level. The study showed a generally low level of proficiency in the written essays of Junior High School students as some of them found it difficult to even write a single error-free sentence. Some of the essays written by the students also did not make sense or were not readable and some found it difficult to write an essay within 200-250 words. Regarding the dictation, it was realized that some of the students left blank spaces on the sheets given them and did not make any attempt to spell certain words. This pre supposes that the students in Junior High Schools would not be able to perform any better in other subjects; since almost all the other books are written in English language and they have to read and answer questions in such subjects in English.

We attribute the low level of performance of students in spelling to reasons such as;

- L1 interference
- Ignorance
- Transfer
- False analogy
- Lack of interest in reading wide among students and
- Exposure (that is post school activities, parent's educational background, major language spoken at home) and
- Carelessness

When errors made by learners in the three schools were marked and critically analysed, it was realised that, University Junior High School performed better than Amamoma and Apewosika thus placing private schools over public school in terms of spelling. We realized a vast difference between the performance of learners in private schools and those in the public schools. Our in-depth analysis of data-collection revealed six main types of spelling errors committed by student in Junior High School. These were omission, addition, substitution, inversion, pronunciation errors and others grouped as miscellaneous.

The study also revealed that amongst all the six types of



errors, omission spelling error type was the error type which was most frequently committed by the JHS students. More so, it was realized that the type of school a learner attends has either a negative or positive impact or influence on the performance of students in spelling. It was further revealed that boys perform better than girls in terms of spelling. This is confirmed by Edu-Buahdoh (1997) whose work also revealed that in terms of gender, boys perform better than girls. The related questionnaire for the study also revealed that factors like form, major language spoken at home, parents educational background, reading wide, library visitation, post school activities also can have a negative or positive impact on the performance of learners in terms of spelling. Lastly, the interviews with the teachers also established that the reason why some schools perform better than others is as a result of strict supervision of teachers, role of parents, motivation by the school and also parents.

## 5. Suggestions

In the view of the present researchers, the following suggestions will be useful in addressing the spelling problems of students:

- Students should be encouraged and restricted to use English Language more often, since proficiency in any language of which English Language is not an exception comes with constant practice.
- Students must learn rules of spelling religiously to master them.
- Students must develop the habit of reading extensively novels or story books of different kinds to improve their vocabulary power and spelling abilities.
- Students must maintain a habit of looking up the spelling of words in the dictionary for correct spelling and stop assuming the forms of words.
- Teachers must try and identify problematic areas of students and engage students in more spelling drills or contests to help them to overcome the flaws in spelling.
- The ministry of education should also support and see to the organization of more spelling drills 'bee' contexts such as that of the "National Spelling bee context" which is organized each year.
- The government should intervene to ensure that both external and internal supervisors are well motivated and that they perform their duties as expected of them.

## Recommendations

It is important to state that the present researchers were not

able to delve into everything that is associated with spelling errors and therefore recommend for further research into spelling errors in other levels of education such as the Senior High Schools and tertiary institutions which were not captured in this study.

It is further recommended that research should be conducted to bring out the differences in spelling errors committed by students in private and public schools, both in rural and urban centres and further try to establish the influence of the setting of the schools on the performance levels of students.

It is also recommended that much attention should be channelled to students especially, in the public schools to help them back-up in building their spelling proficiency.

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