

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background Of Study

Children's writings have adorned the walls of almost every house and almost everyone has seen the scribble and proofs of school going children. These are clear attempts of children putting down their thoughts or spelling out words that they have learnt or read. Children want to communicate their ideas in a way that everyone can understand. According to Hanna & Hodges (1971), whenever children wish to set down their thoughts and feelings in writings, they engage in the act of spelling. So by placing graphic marks on some writing surface, they are able to make visible the 'spoken words' with which they ordinarily can communicate their thoughts and feelings to others.

Children use words that they have heard repeatedly from parents, siblings, relatives, friends, television and books. Children come to school with a wealth of oral language and speaking experience but spelling out words, requires totally different abilities and skills. Spelling according to Petty and Salzer (1990), requires putting into written form, words that are familiar from speaking, reading and listening. Two important abilities are needed. One of them is the ability to recall the appearance of words that children have studied or frequently appeared

in materials he or she had read and the other ability is the understanding of the language itself.

Sometimes their writings consist of words or letters that are quite alien to us. This situation can also be seen among secondary school children. The word ‘children’ is used here to represent the Form One students who are 13 years of age because according to the legal definition, ‘child’ is a person who has not reached the age of 14 (<http://www.fair-debt-collection.com/searches/minor-definition.html>).

An example of spelling errors is seen in a written work of a Form One student

“My granmather bot me choclet.”

(“My grandmother bought me chocolate”).

“She like’s aiskrim.”

(“She likes ice – cream”).

This student’s writing consists of many spelling errors. Usually these words or letters are ignored as they are made by a child who did not know how to write or spell properly in English. These words are ‘invented’ by children in their attempt to communicate. However their inventions of words are treated as ‘spelling errors’ as these words are not meeting the requirement of standard spelling. The spelling errors are part and parcel of children’s trial and error of learning to spell

the words that they are unsure of spelling. Spelling errors here refer to children's attempts to use their best judgments about spelling (Lutz, 1986). Children use idiosyncratic words to represent their thoughts. Children first scribble and mix letters and numbers in their first attempt to spell by using variety of idiosyncratic invented combinations of letters to express their thoughts in their effort to communicate through writing (Hitchcock, 1989).

Children are seen going back to the stage of idiosyncrasy because they do not have any knowledge to impart their thoughts or are unfamiliar with the spelling of words. Children still rely on the phoneme – grapheme correspondence because they do not have enough experience in understanding the complexities of the English orthographic system. Hence, children invent words because in their minds, their spellings are similar to the sounds that they hear or pronounce. But according to Chomsky (1965, 1968) and Venezky (1970) spelling is more than just phoneme – grapheme correspondence. Pronunciation of a word will not have a one – to – one phoneme – grapheme correspondence. When children experiment with spelling words, they become more aware of the continuity in the English orthographic system instead of viewing each word as an individual unit. Children go beyond phoneme- grapheme correspondence to use syntactic information as well as the phonemic and graphemic structure of the entire word in spelling.

Children who are still at the learning process of knowing and identifying English vocabulary make spelling errors. These errors are consistent with their grade

level, cognitive function and word complexity. The quality of spelling will improve as their grade level or even their cognitive function improves (Zuttell, 1979). Spelling errors are merely indications of the first rung in climbing the ladder of understanding English spelling system. It is the experimental stage for children in spelling before they progressively develop a solid foundation of English words and to gradually become correct spellers. Correct spellers are when children have established a solid foundation of the basic rules of English orthography and spell a large number of words correctly.

Basically, spelling errors occur because children lack knowledge of standard spelling. English spellings are different from the way the words are uttered. There are so many words in English orthography that can confuse children whose knowledge in spelling English words is at the preliminary stage. The English alphabet has been viewed as irregular and inconsistent by some researchers because there was not a one – to – one correspondence among letters, sounds and spellings (Pei, 1967) for example the words – ‘mosque’, ‘biscuit’, ‘choir’, ‘queue’ and many others. Many of these words in English ‘look’ different from how they sound. There is no phoneme – grapheme relationship in these words. These words are just the tip of the iceberg of English vocabulary.

So when children are stuck in a situation where they do not know the spelling of a word, they tend to solve their problem by filling in the gap of unknown spelling with letters that they invent as from sound – symbol relationship. They ‘invent’ spelling and it is a natural attempt by beginning writers to spell a word when the

standard spelling is unknown. It involves using whatever knowledge of sound or visual pattern that the writer has. According to Goodman and Burke (1972), spelling errors that children make are in fact indicatives of children's stage of intellectual development. The created words or the idiosyncratic words in their spelling errors reveal that these students are definitely not correct spellers but they are at a pre-correct spellers stage, which can be precommunicative, semi phonetic, phonetic or even transitional stage of spelling development (Gentry, 1982).

Precommunicative spelling is a stage when children use scribbles and symbols for the alphabet to represent words as in an example 'b4rt' (duck). At this stage, children cannot relate proper grapheme to phoneme.

In semi phonetic spelling stage, children start to use phoneme- grapheme correspondence when spelling words. Children use sound of the letter they hear for example 'kd' for kite.

In phonetic spelling, children use a systematic approach when spelling words. They use all the sound features in a word for example 'dras' (dress).

Transitional stage is the final stage when children write spellings that are characteristics of English spellings for the first time. They start to rely on visual and morphological representation and leave behind their dependence on phonetic spelling as in 'dragen' (dragon), (Hitchcock, 1989).

The researcher feels that the stages are crucial as they help us to perceive these spelling errors as errors and not treating errors produced by children as nonsensical words because the stages are stepping stones for children's spelling and intellectual development. Goodman and Burke (1972) claimed that each miscue must be examined because children's spelling errors tell something about their stages of spelling and how they think.

There is an underlying cognitive process that children use in spelling because according to Read (1975), spelling is not only a memorizing process but it also reveals the development process of understanding a language. Learning to spell culminates in a much greater understanding of English spelling than a simple relationship between speech sounds and their graphic representations (Read, 1975).

In the child's sample writing given earlier, the child spelt 'granmather', 'bot' and 'choclet' as how he pronounces them. He has used sound symbol relationship in spelling the words. In contrast, he spelt 'bot' for 'bought' and he omitted 'ugh' because the sound 'ugh' was silent. In another example, he used apostrophe for 'like's' which should be spelled 'likes'. He added an apostrophe to plural words. This addition of apostrophe is also considered as a type of error. Influence of another language, as Bahasa Melayu has also warranted him another type of error as in 'ice-cream' which was spelt as 'ais krim'.

Therefore from these samples, we can deduce that a child's writing hold tremendous knowledge to the threshold of his spelling development in English. The development of the spelling stage is a natural and gradual process. This may coexist between stages of development but does not fluctuate radically between the stages. The change from one spelling development stage to the next stage is a gradual one and the examples from more than one stage may coexist in a particular sample of writing. However, children do not fluctuate radically between stages passing from phonetic back into semi phonetic spelling development stage (Gentry, 1982).

The researcher is also concerned with the spelling errors made by his students in English in spite of having studied the language from the first year of primary school. They have had six years of formal instructions in English. The students at Form One level are expected to have reached the stage of correct spellers.

One explanation to this problem could be the difference in their mental age and academic age. Their spelling development is still far behind when basic English words are concerned although these children are thirteen years of age. Some of these children are still groping at the stages before correct spellers such as phonetic, transitional or even semi phonetic due to various reasons.

The task of writing or spelling out the sounds that children hear from the environment is not an easy task. This is more obvious for children whose mother tongue is not English. English is a second language in schools and only taught

during English lessons that add to the difficulty when compared to native speakers. The difference between the structures of the source and the target language is said to be the chief source of difficulty in learning a second language (Fries, 1945). This view is further supported by Richard (1976), who says that the task of learning a second language is two- fold, as the learners need to re-adjust and learn to acquire new set of rules expressed by the new language.

## **1.2 Statement Of Problem**

The main objective of the study is to examine the written works of Form One students and determine the types and frequency of spelling errors made by them. Therefore, students' spelling errors will not be regarded as factors in gauging their lack of proficiency but will be looked into as indicators of the students' developmental stages of spelling. Thus this study looks into a systematic analysis of the spelling errors made by the language learners, which further gives insights into their stages of development in the process of learning spelling skills. Once the stages of this process are identified, teachers can help students develop strategies for learning standard English spelling and assess students' progress more accurately (Lutz, 1986).



### 1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to look at the spelling errors made by Malaysian secondary school children by examining their written work at Form 1 level. It also attempts to identify, classify their spelling errors and to indicate the developmental stages of spelling as implied by the spelling errors.

### 1.4 Objectives And Research Questions

The objectives of this study are to:

- a. identify the spelling errors that Malaysian secondary school children in Form One make when writing in English.
- b. classify the spelling errors made.
- c. determine the frequency of spelling errors students ( Form One ) make in each type of error.
- d. determine their metalinguistic competencies.
- e. relate the spelling errors to the general spelling developmental stages

This study aims to achieve the objectives by answering the following research questions:

- a. What type of spelling errors do the Form One students generally make ?
- b. What is the frequency of the error types ?

- c. Can students explain their spelling errors ?
- d. What are these students' spelling developmental stages ?

### 1.5 Significance Of The Study

There has been considerable criticism about the standard of English amongst secondary school children. There has been a decline in the standard of English among Malaysian secondary school students as cited by Gaudart (1987). In addition to that, Schonell (1934) had given another reason for the cause of bad spellings. When young children say words aloud as they spell, they tend to rely on the phoneme – grapheme relationship. But when they grow up and there is minimal articulatory movement, their spelling obviously will be affected because they cannot rely on auditory recall. Thus spelling errors are inevitable.

According to Lutz (1986), spelling is not an easy task because the acquisition of spelling rules is now viewed as a complex developmental process. A great deal of research has been carried out in the field of spelling but according to Hitchcock (1989) the focus of most of these researches is on the spelling errors made and no attempt was made to analyse the spelling errors. He added, most researchers have looked at spelling errors from the traditional system of percentage correct versus incorrect rather than looking at specific types of spelling errors made.

It is hoped that this study will shed some light on more creative ways of approaching the spelling errors rather than making an assumption that these spelling errors are words created by students who are bad in spelling.

These findings too would contribute to the teachers in understanding spelling errors and be useful for them in undertaking remedial work with their students. Hence teachers can be more creative in approaching this problem as spelling continues to be an important part of the language art curriculum. The teaching of Mathematics and Science subjects in English has been implemented in Malaysia beginning from Primary one in year 2004. This reflects the growing importance of English in our country, Malaysia.

## **1.6 Limitations Of The Study**

This study was exploratory in nature. There were limitations to this study. The use of only one school was a limitation of this study. This study did not cover all the secondary schools in Malaysia.

The small sample size, 92 students was a limitation of the study. Only 276 written works collected from students. This study focused only on the usage of written spelling and children's responses during interview and did not cover the oral and verbal skills in spelling.

## **1.7 Definition Of Terms**

The following terminologies were used in this study.

### **i. Invented Spelling / Error**

Invented spelling refers to young children's attempts to use their best judgments about spelling in their beginning attempts at learning to spell. (Read, 1975).

Children detect phonetic characteristics of words that English spelling represents.

### **ii. Metalinguistic competencies**

The ability to use language to discuss and analyse language. This is the ability to rationalize the usage of language (Holden, 1972).