

A STUDY OF THE SPELLING DIFFICULTIES  
OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS  
IN ILOILO CITY



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by  
Lucila P. Sobrepeña  
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

One of the skills being developed in the language arts program in the elementary and secondary schools today is writing, which includes spelling. A student's facility in the use of a language is determined not only by his ability to express himself orally but also by his skill in communicating his ideas in writing. This skill demands the ability to spell words in such a way that they convey the intended meaning to the reader rapidly and accurately. Unless the student masters this skill he would be depriving himself of one of the fundamental tools of human communication.

When English was first used in written communication, spelling was a matter of individual taste. Spelling was not uniform because there was no standard for spelling to follow. However, with the wider diffusion of common instruction and the printing of dictionaries, words began to be spelled in the same manner. Material that was to be read by others had to conform to the established custom of spelling, no matter what personal tastes might dictate.

The public expects any educated person to spell accurately. Poor spelling is generally associated with illiteracy; it is a handicap to success in business and a source of embarrassment to the individual. "Misspelling carries with

it a sort of stigma, and as long as it does, teachers will have to combat the evil vigorously with any method that is workable regardless of theory."<sup>1</sup> Since society has adopted this attitude toward spelling, it becomes imperative that students learn to spell according to group conventions.

Even in the prewar days when the school subjects were few and the periods for learning them were longer, and the teaching of spelling had a definite period in the language arts class, learning to spell was already a difficult task. Now that the curriculum contains so much to be taken up in such a short time and spelling has become incidental to the other language arts, learning to spell has become quite a problem to the students. Since spelling is one important phase of language development, this problem needs immediate attention. Students should be helped to overcome the difficulties attendant to its study if they are to develop a sense of confidence in their writing.

Background of the problem. Whenever teachers of English come together and discuss their problems, conversation inevitably turns to the poorly-written themes of their students. One of the faults of students in their written work, they point

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E. A. Cross and Elizabeth Carney, Teaching English in High Schools (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), p. 189.

out, is the inability of the students to spell the most common English words. They deplore the fact that high school students have never learned to spell accurately or are careless in their writing. Some students may know a word well enough to even spell it correctly orally; but when they write it down, they may yet misspell it. The inability of the student to spell correctly is blamed on the fact that students of today do little writing and reading outside of class hours. They read so little that they are not familiar with the words they use in their written work; hence, they misspell them. If they do any reading at all, they read comics in the vernacular or Pilipino, which activity is no help at all to the improvement of their spelling ability in English.

The investigator, who began teaching high school composition in 1950, met the same problem with her students. A study of their formal and informal themes, homework, test papers, and other written work revealed misspelling of very common words. English teachers in the upper years who were consulted made the same discovery in all the written work of their students. The complaints that the students were poor spellers were not confined among the teachers of English; they were echoed by all the teachers in subjects other than English who reported that their students simply did not know how to spell.

All these complaints and criticisms seem to lead to

but one conclusion--that most high school students are poor spellers and that spelling has become a bothersome though necessary discipline for them. To all teachers, especially of English, the status of spelling has become a grave problem. If they are to turn out students who are literate at all something must be done about this situation. The student should be helped in overcoming their spelling difficulties. They should be taught how to spell, or they would be deprived of the value of a most effective tool of human communication--the written word.

The problem. "So long as English remains a badly spelled language--that is, a language whose words are imperfectly and irregularly represented by its orthography, so long will the task of learning to spell remain severe."<sup>2</sup> English spelling is not phonetic. The English language has adopted and adapted words from other languages with which it has come in contact. Many of these words are difficult to spell because they are by no means spelled as they are pronounced. The same sound may be spelled in a number of different ways and the same letter or combination of letters may stand for a number of different sounds. It is but natural to

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<sup>2</sup> George R. Carpenter, Franklin T. Baker and Fred N. Scott, The Teaching of English in the Elementary and Secondary School (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1903), p. 152.

suppose that these difficulties and inconsistencies add greatly to the burden of spelling.

Just how complicated and difficult the task of learning to spell the English language is, with all its inconsistencies, can be gleaned from a letter written by Upton Sinclair to President Kennedy.<sup>3</sup>

. . . I think of the millions of children who come into our primary schools every year, as well as the tens of millions of foreigners who wish to adopt our language and make it into a world language. It is, of course, of the greatest interest to us that they should do it; but the chaos of our spelling makes the task one of unimaginable difficulty. No one can figure how large a portion of time and study of both children and foreigners is wasted on this futility . . . .

. . . to a foreigner these problems are not funny; he finds it hopeless to untangle them and may give up in disgust and go home to his native tongue. But your grandchildren and my great grandchildren cannot do that; they have to learn thousands of exceptions to spelling rules, and all their lives have to know that if they slip up with a written word, they will be taken for illiterate.

Like most students everywhere, the high school students at Visayan Central College of this city seem to have their share of spelling difficulties. Correct spelling of certain words in their written work has become a problem to them. They find great difficulty in spelling the most common words and persistently misspell these words in their written work.

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Upton Sinclair, "Letter to the President," Saturday Review, August 18, 1962, p. 45.

This study attempted to discover the spelling errors of high school students as found in their formal themes and to categorize these errors so that the students' basic difficulties might be pinpointed. It, therefore, sought to ascertain the words most frequently misspelled by the students in each year, the extent to which these difficulties persisted in the upper years and the importance of those words in a basic vocabulary as determined by the frequency of occurrence of each misspelled word, in a running count of a million words of text. It also aimed to find out the factors and causes underlying these spelling errors and to propose some remedial measures.