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Orthographic Struggles: Root Cause Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The pressing issue of poor spelling skills among secondary students became the basis for this study which aims to determine the root cause of the problem. Teachers pointed to just one reason - the implementation of MTB-MLE of the K-12 curriculum. To have better understanding whether the claims is true, and to know other possible reasons of the problem, this study was conceptualized.

Using qualitative method specifically a descriptive phenomenological model, the researcher conducted focus group discussions to selected Cabucgayan National High School students from Grades 7 to 12, and interview seven (7) conveniently selected teachers. Integration of literatures completes the triangulation method. There were 7 themes formulated after a thorough thematic analysis. The themes that described the very reason of spelling difficulties among secondary students are lack of word recognition and phonological awareness, long-term effect of Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education, poor reading culture and reading difficulties, excessive gadget use, irregularity of spelling to sound affecting auditory processing, low retention, and absence of spelling drills. With the result, schools and parents should work hand-in-hand to make a need-appropriate intervention.

Keywords: Spelling, Orthography, Root Cause

1. INTRODUCTION

Orthography refers to the study and practice of proper spelling based on established conventions (Nordquist, 2019). It consists of written symbols that represent a language and plays a vital role in communication. For native speakers, orthography ensures consistency in writing, while for non-native learners, it provides a structured way to study and master another language's written form (Proofed & Proofed, 2023).

In recent years, spelling difficulties have become a major concern in secondary schools. Although spelling is widely acknowledged as a complex skill, many teachers now suspect that the widening gap in students' spelling ability may be linked to the implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) under the K to 12 Curriculum.

The DepEd institutionalized MTB-MLE through DepEd Order No. 74, s. 2009, aligning with global efforts to use learners' home language in early instruction. A DepEd press release dated October 24, 2016 explained that children begin their education in the language they understand best—their mother tongue—and must build a strong foundation in it before effectively learning additional languages. The policy mandates that from Kindergarten through Grade 3, the mother tongue serves as the primary medium of instruction in all subjects except Filipino and English. Its central aim is to ensure that young learners build a solid understanding of foundational concepts with greater ease.

While MTB-MLE has shown positive short-term results in elementary education, teachers in secondary schools have observed challenges. At Cabucgayan National High School, for example, students struggle with English fluency, comprehension, and spelling. Even simple words are often misspelled—for instance, "my" is commonly written as "may." To address these issues, the school introduced interventions such as SVF (Spelling, Vocabulary, Fluency) drills before lessons and Project ARNOLD (Advanced Reading and Numeracy to Overcome Learning Deficiency), which included daily literacy and numeracy activities. Despite these efforts, many students continue to face difficulties in English proficiency and orthography.

To better understand the problem, the researcher conducted a preliminary focus group discussion with Grade 9 students. The students identified several reasons for their spelling struggles: limited exposure to English vocabulary, influence of gadgets and social media, and the adoption of trending words like *istetik*, *forda*, and *ferson*. Many linked their difficulties to mother-tongue instruction in elementary school, noting that the transition to English left them unfamiliar

with basic words. On social media, they often use their vernacular language, which they can spell more confidently, or imitate phonetic spellings based on Bisaya pronunciation.

These insights highlight the need for deeper investigation. Although studies abroad and locally (Zbyr I., 2017; Mohammad T., 2015; Zarei et al., 2022; Namanya, 2017) have examined the effects of MTB-MLE on literacy, none have focused specifically on spelling ability among secondary students. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap by using a triangulation approach—analyzing perspectives from students, teachers, and scholarly works—to determine whether MTB-MLE contributes to spelling difficulties or if other factors are involved. The findings aim to guide educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in designing effective solutions.

Literature Review

Research highlights that spelling is a complex skill requiring multiple abilities. Learners must connect sounds to written symbols, and difficulties often arise from conditions such as dyslexia, ADHD, or dysgraphia (Rosen, P., n.d).

Mother tongue has also been identified as a contributing factor to spelling challenges. UNESCO has encouraged the use of first languages in instruction, and the Philippines stands out in Southeast Asia as the only country with a national policy mandating MTB-MLE in primary schools (Mandis, 2020). While this approach has been praised, studies have also noted long-term consequences.

For instance, Zbyr (2017) found that first-year students in Korea committed numerous spelling errors due to interference from their native language. Similarly, Zarei et al. (2022) reported that ESL students in Malaysia struggled with fluency because they often thought in their mother tongue while speaking English. In the local context, Namanya (2017) found that children instructed in their mother tongue experienced a decline in their English literacy, a result that aligns with established theories of language acquisition.

Earlier research also pointed to spelling problems even before MTB-MLE was introduced. Sobrepeña (1963) documented frequent misspellings of common words in students' written work. Terry (2023) explained that spelling difficulties may stem from instructional methods, creative spelling practices, or reading struggles. She emphasized factors such as dyslexia, visual memory, visual discrimination, and auditory processing.

Shankweiler et al. (1996) further revealed that decoding skills strongly predict spelling ability. Their study showed that phonological awareness and morphological awareness also play significant roles, especially when spelling complex words. Differences in decoding and spelling were linked to variations in comprehension, even among experienced readers.

Overall, literature confirms that spelling has long been a persistent issue in schools. While MTB-MLE may have intensified the problem, spelling challenges existed long before its implementation. Addressing these difficulties requires deliberate and sustained action.

Research Questions

This study will analyze the root cause of orthographic struggles to secondary students.

Specifically, with an integration of literatures, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the students' point of view on the causes of their spelling difficulties?
2. What are secondary teachers' analysis on the causes of students' spelling difficulties?
3. What scholarly documents have to say on the causes of secondary students spelling difficulties?

Scope and Limitation

This study triangulates evidences on what causes orthographic or spelling difficulties of the secondary students. It utilized three different datasets (students' view, teachers' view, literary documents) to have a comprehensive analysis of the existing problem. Different qualitative data collection such as focus group discussion, open-ended interview, and literature integration was employed. It was conducted at Cabucgayan National High School on SY 2024-2025. This study limits only on the causes of spelling struggles and not to other aspect of English literacy like reading, syntax, and academic writing.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Methodology

This descriptive phenomenological study used triangulation method to validate what causes students' spelling difficulties. The following specific methods was employed.

- a. Sampling

The participants of the study were the secondary school teachers and students of Cabucgayan National High School. The study utilized qualitative sampling specifically convenience sampling in collecting data through FGD for the students and personal interview to the teachers.

b. Data Collection

The researcher collected data through Focus Group Discussion and interview among students and teachers respectively. Since this employ triangulation method, existing documents and literatures were also analyzed to validate the phenomenon.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Deficiencies in Word Recognition and Phonological Awareness (Most Prevalent)

This emerged as the top reason, with 22 participant transcripts highlighting the issue. Students struggle to spell words they haven't encountered before due to limited vocabulary and poor phonological awareness—the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds in spoken language. Word recognition is the immediate, effortless association of a written word with its pronunciation.

Key Findings:

Students reported misspelling unfamiliar words, admitting they have a small English vocabulary and are more accustomed to their local dialect ("Bisaya"). They often resort to spelling an English word using Bisaya phonetics if it's unfamiliar. Even simple words were sometimes misspelled, and many noted that unique or advanced words were "first time encountered."

Examples: "We don't know the words because we are used to Bisaya." "Sometimes the spelling is Bisaya when the word is not familiar." "We have few English words known."

Teachers corroborated this, stating that students are generally "not familiar with the term," and that spelling often depends on how the teacher pronounces the word, especially if they haven't "encountered the words" before. One teacher noted a lack of "exposure to vocabulary" and "new words."

Underlying Principle: Spelling and reading rely on shared concepts like phonological (sound) and orthographic (written language) knowledge. Research indicates that developing speech-sound awareness significantly helps alleviate reading and spelling issues (Hill Learning Center 2020, adapting various sources). Phonological awareness is a known predictor of poor spelling outcomes (Moats & Tolman, 2009).

Recommendation: Classroom instruction, particularly in primary grades, must actively incorporate phonological awareness activities to build a stronger foundation for word recognition.

3.2 Long-Term Impact of Mother Tongue Instruction

With 18 transcripts, the sustained effect of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in lower grades was identified as a major culprit.

Key Findings:

Students strongly linked their spelling difficulties to the use of the mother tongue as the primary medium of instruction in elementary school (Grades 1-3). They felt the constant use of Bisaya/local dialect led to them being unfamiliar with English words and subsequently spelling in their mother tongue's phonetic style.

Examples: "From Grade 1-3, mother tongue was the lesson, we don't know the words because we got used to Bisaya." "Because of mother tongue, the spelling is also mother-tongue style." Students expressed a wish for the mother tongue component to be minimized so they could become more accustomed to English.

Teachers unanimously agreed, citing that students write based on what they hear in their dialect ("kon ano an nabatian based han kayakan, amo an isurat"). They noted that in the foundational years, students were "deprived" of exposure to English because teachers would constantly translate words, resulting in a weak "foundation."

Underlying Principle: This finding aligns with studies (e.g., Mohammad, 2015) that found significant writing errors in learners influenced by their mother tongue's structure.

Recommendation: The Department of Education's MTB-MLE implementation needs review. Mother Tongue should be primarily taught as a subject, rather than being used as the exclusive medium of instruction, especially for technical subjects like Science and Mathematics, to ensure students are not deprived of English exposure during critical foundation years.

3.3 Excessive Gadget Exposure

The prevalence of technology and gadget use, while offering some benefits, was found to have a negative correlation with accurate spelling.

Key Findings:

Students admitted that their spelling is influenced by texting and online chat styles, which often involve using local dialects, shortcuts, or "jejemon" slang. They noted that phones have automatic spelling corrections, which prevents them from having to learn or remember the correct spelling.

Examples: "The spelling is the same as what is chatted, mostly Bisaya." "When using a cellphone to post, messages are shortened, 'jejemon' and slang are used because it's trendy, no concern for the actual spelling." "Don't know the spelling because of the pandemic, submerged in gadgets."

Teachers concurred, observing that the incorrect spelling used in texts and games is a contributing factor.

Underlying Principle: Misspellings are common in online communication (Plester, et al., 2009), and the use of "shortcuts" in mobile texting negatively impacts spelling success because children often read less and rely more on visual/auditory media (Woronoff).

Recommendation: Parents and teachers must supervise and control children's gadget use to mitigate the negative influence of informal online spelling habits on academic writing.

3.4 Poor Reading Culture and Reading Difficulties

The lack of a reading habit among students was strongly linked to poor spelling outcomes.

Key Findings:

Students (10 transcripts) noted that they are poor spellers because they "are not fond of reading" or "don't have the time/interest to learn" through reading. They noted that when they do read, it is often in Tagalog rather than English.

Teachers confirmed the deficit, stating that students "no longer read text," are "more on visual now," and have stopped visiting the library. One teacher mentioned, "It's possible they don't know how to read."

Underlying Principle: Research confirms the strong interconnection between reading and spelling. Re-reading helps build comprehension and improves spelling skills by reinforcing the connection between letters and sounds (Scholastic Parents Staff, 2022; Hill Learning Center). Accurate spelling relies on storing a complete and correct visual representation of the word in memory, which is strengthened through reading (Whyte & Whyte, 2022).

Recommendation: Reading must be actively strengthened and promoted at school and at home. Teachers and parents should collaborate to instill a consistent reading culture and improve students' reading skills.

3.5 Irregularity of Spelling to Sound Affecting Auditory Processing

Difficulty arises when English words are not spelled as they are pronounced, such as with silent letters or non-phonetic words.

Key Findings:

Students across grade levels reported spelling words exactly "how the teacher pronounces it," even if the spelling is incorrect, citing that the pronunciation and spelling are often different or that there are "tricky words, [with] silent letters."

Teachers agreed, stating that students "spell how it is pronounced." An English teacher confirmed that students apply a "say-what-you-spell" logic ("kon ano an imo, ang bigkas ay siya ring baybay"), which leads to errors in non-phonetic words.

Underlying Principle: A solid foundation in oral language and strong auditory processing (the brain's ability to make sense of sounds) are crucial for reading and spelling development (Terry, 2023; Chen, 2019, adapting Speech Pathology Australia, 2005).

Recommendation: The school should provide necessary interventions focused on phonetics and phonological awareness. Intensified read-alouds should be included in school programs to develop students' oral language and the auditory processing of English words.

3.6 Low Retention and Focus

Factors external to the subject, such as lack of focus and poor memory, were also found to contribute to spelling errors.

Key Findings:

Students admitted to "having no focus in class" and being easily distracted ("too many things on their mind"). Senior High students also cited being overwhelmed by numerous activities as a reason for forgetting things quickly.

Underlying Principle: Poor writing, including spelling errors, is often linked to a lack of focus and attention (Lasisi, 2022), which hinders the ability to retain words in memory.

Recommendation: Parents should closely monitor their child's learning. Schools could develop programs, possibly with the aid of school nurses or guidance counselors, to improve student concentration and focus.

3.7 Absence of Spelling Drills

A lack of consistent, dedicated practice was noted as a missing component in the educational process.

Key Findings:

Students from high school and teachers admitted there have been "no spelling drills since elementary." One teacher noted that "spelling is no longer part of the culture."

Underlying Principle: Spelling practice is vital for developing strong connections between letters and sounds and for memorizing high-frequency "sight words." Consistent practice increases the likelihood that a child will recognize, spell, and appropriately use a word (Kid Sense, 2023).

Recommendation: Spelling drills must be intensified in schools, particularly in the elementary grades, to ensure students enter high school with adequate foundational spelling skills.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Dissemination and Advocacy Plan

Result of this study may be disseminated through Parent Teacher Association (HPTA or GPTA) assembly and during School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) sessions among different field of practice. A copy of the paper will also be furnished to the school SBM Hub and the Research and Planning Committee of SDO - Biliran.

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