The Most Common Spelling Errors among Omani Learners

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Abstract

Recently, there has been an increasing interest in error recognition among Arab learners. Spelling has captured many researchers' and teachers' attention. It can be of a great help or a barrier of developing and expressing ideas in writing (Cotterell, 1974). This paper reports a case study that is conducted in one of the classes in Omani second-cycle school for females. The aim of this study is to investigate the most common spelling errors patterns among Omanis. In an effort to explore spelling errors, the participants had a dictation test that combines both one syllable words and multi-syllable words. The errors found in this study are sorted into the categories suggested by Cook (1999). Then, they are analysed to explore the most common spelling mistakes made by learners. The reasons behind these errors are discussed with the support of an interview and correspondence with previous researches. Preliminary results indicate that substitution is the most common type of spelling errors. Such findings are consistent with previous researches (e.g. Al-Jabri, 2006 and Al-Hassan, 2006).

Keywords: phonetic language, omission error, substitution error, insertion or addition error, transposition error

1. Introduction

Cook (1997, p. 474) states that "… correct spelling is a sign of education; a spelling mistake is a solecism that betrays carelessness or plebeian origins." To produce competent writing, students should write accurately with less spelling mistakes. Poor spellers' main focus is often on the mechanic of their spelling rather than on the thread of their ideas and expressions (Graves, 1983). They usually tend to make their writing simple only because they are unfamiliar or unsure of how some words are spelled and this prevents them from expressing their thoughts and ideas more accurately and academically (Pratley, 1988). A way from the negative effect on writing, poor spelling can also be a barrier to the reader; a paper which has a lot of spelling mistakes probably would hinder the reader to follow his thoughts of ideas (Bolton & Snowball, 1993).

Spelling causes several difficulties to language learners not only among low level, but even among advanced level. Vaddapalli (2012) assumes that mother tongue interference is a common source of spelling difficulty for ESL learners. Misspelling is a problem in different languages and since each language has its own spelling system, the sources of difficulty in spelling are not necessary similar in different languages. For example, in China, words are represented through characters. Thus, Chinese learners of English may have difficulty in mastering letters to form words. Spanish, although, uses the same Roman alphabet system as in English; however, unlike English the letters always represent the same sounds (Pratley, 1988) and since English is not a phonetic language, spelling becomes a problematic issue for so many learners (Waller, 2002).. For instance, there are some cases when the same letter represents different sounds, e.g. the letter <c> represents both /k/ and /s/. Similarly, the same sound is represented by different letters, e.g. /f/ can be represented by the letters <f> and <ph>. Similarly, in Arabic, the relationship between sounds and writings is regular. Therefore, having almost no difficulty in their first language spelling, Arab learners of English would probably struggle to master English spelling.

In recent days, a large and growing body of literature has investigated English spelling difficulties among Arab learners such as Vaddapalli (2012), Fender (2008), Al-Jarf (2007), Kharma and Hajjaj (1989), and other studies. Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) and Smith (in Swan and Smith, 1987) argue that Arab learners mostly face difficulty in English spelling because of the irregularity of its spelling system which is totally different from Arabic phonetic language. Smith mentions some spelling problems encountered by some Arab learners such as problems with reading mirror shaped letters such as b and d, q and p and reading letters from right to left like the Arabic system (*form* rather than *from*). During a few years ago, more information has become available on spelling errors studies in Omani context such as the studies made by Vaddapalli (2012), Al-Jabri (2006) and Al-Hassan (2006). These studies were some attempts to explore the types of spelling errors done by Oman learners and suggest some spelling instructions. This paper is complementing the previous researches conducted in Oman; however, it studies spelling errors made by second-cycle learners in specific and offers spelling instruction in details. Generally speaking, the study seeks to:

1. identify the spelling errors made by Omani learners of English,
2. explore the reasons behind these types of errors, and
3. present some teaching and learning approaches in the field of spelling.

The study starts with an overview of some previous studies on classification of errors, sources of difficulties and suggestions and implications for teaching. Then, the paper describes the instruments used in collecting data, the participants of the study and data analysis. The results of the study are summarized using both quantitative and qualitative data. After that, they are further analysed and discussed giving proofs and evidence from previous studies. The paper ends with a summarised conclusion and some suggestions of various ways to teach spelling.

2. Literature Review

There has been a considerable amount of research conducted on spelling errors. Several researchers have analysed the patterns of spelling errors during the last decade. These studies try to classify the errors made by language learners into different types to help them recognize the spelling problems more clearly. Cook (1999), for instance, highlights four types of spelling errors:

- omissions (deletions of some letters);
- substitutions (replacing one letter with another);
- insertions or additions (adding extra letters) and
- transpositions (reversing the position of letters).

Figure1 shows the proportions of the English spelling mistakes suggested by Cook. According to the figure, the most common type is related to pronunciation mistakes.

Figure 1. Types and proportions of spelling errors (Cook, 1999)
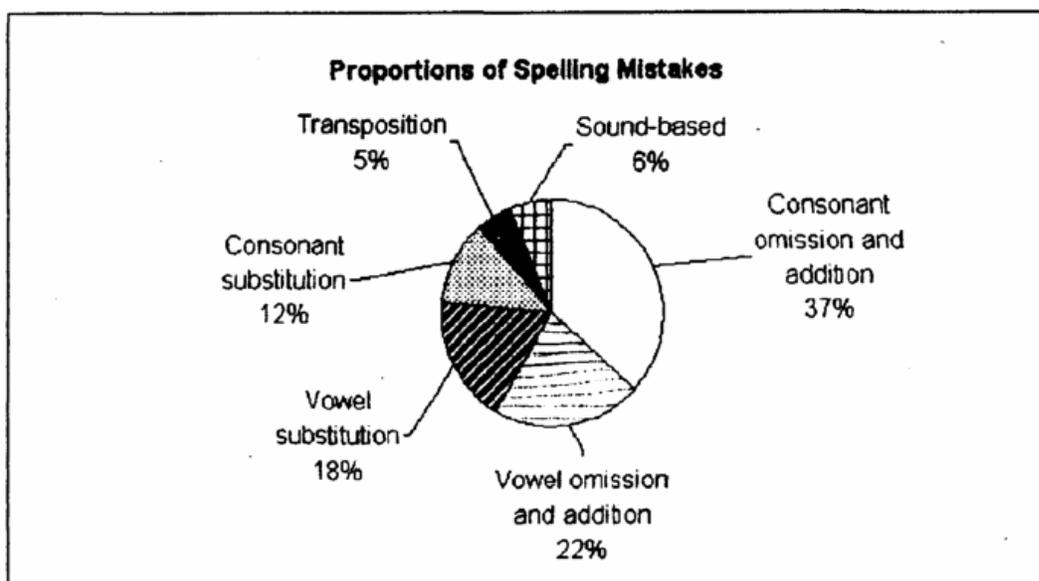
In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on classifying errors made by Arab learners; most of them are similar to the one presented by Cook (e.g. Emery, 1997; Al-Jarf, 2008; Vaddapalli, 2012; Al-Jabri, 2006; Al-Hassan, 2006). Table 2 shows categories of spelling errors made by Arab learners presented by Emery (1997).

Figure 2. Spelling difficulties of Arab learners (Emery, 1997)

Error Type	Target Word	Misspelling
Vowel substitution	family material	famely meterial
Vowel omission	one plastic	on plstic
Mis-ordering of vowels	holiday palm	holiday plam
Additional vowel	heavy types	heavey teypes
Consonant substitution	shopkeepers cylinder	shopkeebers sylinder

A part from the studies related to spelling errors patterns, there is also a large volume of published studies investigating the causes of English spelling errors (e.g. Cook, 1997; Fender, 2008; Spencer, 1999; Damerau, 1964; Peterson, 1986). Aronoff (1978), for instance, has discussed some of the variations between British spelling and American spelling (e.g. British: colour, rumour; Amarican: color, rumor) and declares that these differences may be a source of confusion for foreign learners. One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether this confusion is the only spelling difficulty for foreign learners. Pratley (1988) adds and

focuses on English spelling difficulties that yield from the development of English writing system. The major reason he mentions for English spelling difficulty is the different sources of English language origins such as French, Germanic, Scandinavian and Romance. Second, he declares that cultural and historical influences have a fundamental role in the growth of English language throughout history. For example, Latin was used in schools as a language of ritual and communication in the Middle Ages (*c*.AD1100-1500); moreover, most writers and scholars were using it in the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. The invention of machines and technology in Britain also leaded to the emergence of new technical terms which were mainly a mixture of Latin and Greek origins. Recently, more words are being borrowed from different countries through trade. Another reason for this development is the attempt to standardize the spelling patterns when the printing emerged to reduce the variations of English spellings. Once again, it can be noticed that Pratley's main focus was only on one aspect of spelling difficulties which is the development of English writing and its effects on spelling. However, there are other researchers, such as Al-Jaraf (2007), who discusses a group of spelling difficulties. Al-Jaraf's attempt is to classify the sources of spelling errors into two different categories: whole word errors like communication breakdown, interference between different English items and problems with short-term memory span; and the second category is sources of faulty graphemes like inadequate knowledge of English spelling rules, inter-changeability of Arabic and English spelling system, faulty pronunciation by students, misapplication of some rules of English spelling and ignorance of the differences between American pronunciation and British pronunciation.

This paper extends the previous studies on exploring the common spelling errors in Omani context. Recently, a small amount of literature has been published on spelling errors in Omani context by Vaddapalli (2012), Al-Jabri (2006) and Al-Hassan (2006). These studies mainly classify the spelling errors into different types with their reasons. It seems that most of studies in the field of spelling errors do not take account of designing some spelling correction techniques. So far, however, there has been little discussion about some instructions to break

spelling difficulties such as the study done by Vaddapalli (2012) and one suggested approach by Al-Hassan (2006). Being acquainted with the sources of spelling difficulty and their types would be of a great support for language teachers. However, the studies might have far more benefits if the authors had illuminated them with various techniques for spelling instructions. This study, however, sets out with the aim of presenting some effective remedial teaching of spelling based on their difficulties.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and the Sampling Procedure

The study is conducted in Jamma School for Basic Education in the Sultanate of Oman where English is taught as a foreign language from grade 1 (age 7). Seventy learners (all females) from grade 6 (age 12) participate in the study and the participants are taking seven of forty minutes English classes per a week. The book the learners use called *English for Me* (EFM) which follows British spelling system.

With relation to the sampling procedure, Bouma and Atkinson (1987) acknowledge that in order to generalize the findings, the sample of the study must be representative. However, this study follows the convenience type of sampling; a particular class from a particular school has been selected**.** This may deduce the possibility of generalising the results to other educational institutes but it is easy to access and save timing and after all this paper is a preliminary research effort.

To validate the findings of the questionnaire used in the study and get a comprehensive picture of the sources of difficulties in making spelling errors, an interview with a supervisor of English language has been conducted.

3.2 Data collection and Analysis

The subjects have an oral spelling test which consists of 63 words. The words are read to the participants three times and then at the end of the test, the subjects are given time to write the missing words. After marking the test, the errors are sorted into different types and the scores of each type are subjected to statistical analysis to get the percentage of each category. The percentages are critically analysed to explore the common spelling errors made by students giving reasons behind making them.

The spelling test combines both one syllable words and multi-syllable ones; some of which correspond to their pronunciation and others do not; some have double letters, some have consonant clusters and others have silent letters (see appendix A). The words have been chosen from Cook's spelling test with the help of an English supervisor as they are frequently misspelt by Omani learners (Al-Harrasi, 2011).

4. Results

Classification of spelling errors is a crucial step to recognize spelling problems (Williams, 1974). Accordingly, the errors found in this study are analysed and further divided into categories which are suggested by Cook (1999). Table 2 shows the number of learners who make the spelling errors in each category with an example.

Table 2. Number of learners making spelling errors

Type of error	No. of learners	Actual word	Misspelling
Insertion	30 (42%)	Modern	*Moderen*
Omission	50 (71%)	School/dress	*Scool/dress*
Substitution	51 (73%)	Carbon/price	*Karbon/prise*
Transposition	23 (33%)	Begin	*Bigen*
No errors	21 (30%)	Mat	____

Generally, the results of the test revealed that 67 (almost 96%) learners committed at least one error in their tests. It can be inferred from Table (1) that most of the errors made by the learners are of substitution type: nearly73% of learners made this type of error, e.g. *prise* for *price*. Similarly, there is a large number of students who committed omission errors such as *scool* for *school* which constituted 71% of the total errors that all the subjects produced. On the other hand, they had relatively little problem with insertion and transposition errors: 42% of the learners made insertion errors such as *moderen* for *modern* and almost 33% of them did transposition errors such as *recieve* for *receive.*

5. Discussion

Generally, most learners in this study have spelling difficulty with one-syllabic words whether with long and short vowels (e.g. pot, wait, mat, bike). However, with regard to multi-syllabic words (e.g. pharmacy, sandals, successful), the study shows that the learners exhibi even more difficulty. Furthermore, the learners also tend to make spelling errors with words with inflections such as farmor*, communicasion*, ancover*, decishen*, etc.

In examining the types of spelling errors of the test, 30% of learners made no spelling mistakes with one-syllabic words that correspond with their pronunciation such as 'mat'. It is generally the case that substitution and omission are the most committed errors in this study. A review of the literature has indicated that Omani learners of English mostly face difficulties in substitution (Al-Hassan, 2006) and omission (Al-Jabri, 2006).

The following shows an in -depth analysis of the four types of errors with the sources of difficulty. In general, the analysis of this study shows that the errors made by participants can be mainly attributed to mother tongue interference and then to incompatibility of the pronunciation with the spelling in English.

Cook (1997) shows that learners tend to make two types of substitution errors: vowel substitution and consonant substitution. The present findings seem to be consistent with his research. Firstly, the results of the current study declare that the learners mostly fail to discriminate between <e> and <a>, e.g. *sandels* instead of *sandals*; <e> and <i>, e.g. *dicide* instead of *decide*; <a> and <i>, e.g. *pencal* instead of *pencil.* A possible explanation for the first type may be mother tongue interference. This type of error can be attributed to the lack of confusion between various vowels in Arabic as there are only three distinct sounds that assimilate the English vowels but they are diacritics put on the letters. These symbols are not written most of the time, and their absence does not often affect the meaning of words because their major function is to show the syntactic functions of words in sentences. Thus, in their language, Arab learners of English are used to pronounce the vowels in reading or speech without having to write them. Moreover, unlike English, the diacritics in Arabic correspond with their spoken sounds while in English there is no one-to-one correspondence between vowels and sounds most of the time; e.g. <a> can represents /aː/ as in "farm" or /æ/ as in "hat". This finding is in agreement with Fender (2008), Al-Jarf, R (2007), Kharma and Hajjaj (1989), and other studies. Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) and Smith (in Swan and Smith, 1987) showed that because English is not a phonetic language, Arab learners struggle to master English spelling.

Similarly, consonant substitution seems to constitute a large difficulty for Omani learners. For instance, the learners appear to confuse the uses of some letters and alternate between them, e.g. <c> and <k> such as *karbon* for *carbon*; <s> and <c> such as *sourse* for *source*; <s> and <z> such as *buziness* for *busines*; <y> and <i> such as *cyrcle* for *circle*; <p> and <b> such as *pot* for *bot*; <f> and <v> such as *fife* for *five*. The basic reason for the first four confusions is that two letters can be used to represent one sound and such case does not exist in Arabic writing system. This explanation accords with Waller's observation (2002) which showed that most learners whose language is phonetic feel confused with English spelling. With regards to the last two cases, Arabic does not have the phonemes <p> and <v>, and thus the learners tend

to substitute them with their counterpart sounds <b> and <f> as they do not discriminate between them. This analysis further supports the findings of Vaddapalli (2012) which indicates that students mismatch <p> and <b> as they are the same in Arabic. However, it differs from one published study by Al-Jabri *(2006)* who found out that Omani learners do not face much difficulty in distinguishing <v> and <f>.

Another type of errors learners of this study seem to commit a lot is omission error. Apparently, learners tend to delete 'silent' letters (e.g. *gost* for *ghost*, *sin* for *sign*, *nife* for *knife*) and reduce doubled consonant letters (*necesary* for *necessary*). This shows similar results presented by AL-Jaraf (1999) who believes that this type of error is linked with transferring the Arabic system into English. Students of this study seem to omit silent letters as they almost do not exist in Arabic (Bughio & Shabbir, 2009) except in the case of definite article */al/* when /l/ in some cases is not pronounced. Moreover, the learners made some errors related to consonant doubling which Cook (1997) considers the most complicated aspect in English spelling system. They tend to omit one letter from doubled consonant letters, e.g. *succesful* for *successful* and *necesary* for *necessary*. This error also can be due to mother tongue interference. Although consonant doubling exists in Arabic, but unlike English it is represented by one letter with gemination.

In terms of insertion, most of the insertion letters are vowels. 42% of the whole subjects insert vowels within consonant clusters, e.g. *childeren* for *children*. Almost all words in Arabic do not have consonant clusters and therefore, it becomes difficult for language learners to produce words of consonant clusters (Aziz, 1974). To break the cluster, Arab learners usually insert vowels like in the previous example. In his study, Treiman (1991) assumes that difficulty with consonant cluster leads to misspelling.

Table1 shows that transportation was a problem for almost 33% of the learners. Transposition errors are few; learners mostly switch the positions of the pairs <e> and <i> as in *recieve* for *receive* and *sceince* for *science*; <re> and <er> as in *meter* for *metre*; <ng>

and <gn>, as in *assing* for *assign*. Apparently, some participants do not seem to be knowledgeable of some basic spelling rules which apply to the previous words. Generally speaking, they may not have been exposed to some English spelling rules or proper spelling instruction during their school years (Alharrasi, 2010 and Vaddapalli, 2012). Therefore, the learners who made this type of error may be unaware, for example, <e> comes before <i> when it is preceded by <c>. These findings also support what the literature says that deficiency in spelling rules make learners have difficulty with the spelling of some words (Al-Jaraf, 2007; Jorm, 1981; Amorso, 1985).

6. Implications and Remedial Teaching

Writing is a means of communication through which people use it to express ideas. Spelling is an essential aspect to be a competent writer; good spellers are usually most able to express their ideas and opinions while poor spellers tend to substitute the right word with another alternative just because they are easier to spell (Pratley, 1988). Poor spelling gives a bad impression of the writer as well as it causes distraction to the reader (Schonell, 1985). Cook (1999) claims that spelling is the most common problem in English writing system. Therefore, it becomes essential for teachers to teach spelling in school and implement some effective spelling strategies to overcome spelling problems (Wade, 1974).

Throughout their school years, Omani learners have been taught spelling in primitive ways, mostly through dictation tests. Vaddapalli (2012, p. 272) declares that reasons for spelling problems made by Omani learners may be because of "lack of proper spelling instruction at schools and colleges, lack of motivation and seriousness among students, poor reading skills, poor listening skills …". In fact, students start learning spelling in their fourth year of studying English; however, it is not taught in depth. EFM includes very few exercises related to spelling which are basically not enough for practise; furthermore, it gives very limited emphasis on spelling rules. This leads us to the fact that most learners have no clear idea about some spelling rules that help in facilitating spelling. There is a possibility that some teachers might volunteer to show their students some mnemonics of spelling rules; however,

what will be taught would be probably forgotten as they are not practiced enough. In terms of writing, spelling corrections are not a big deal for some teachers as long as the massage can be understood by the readers because the basic focus of most learners' written work is the meaning rather than form (Alharrasi, 2010). Thus, there is not a lot of spelling correction, which leads learners to be careless about spelling accuracy, and if there is, it has to be done effectively. Teachers' attitudes towards the structures of words influence students' attitudes and so they should be cautious in their correction.

The research up to date suggests that systematic teaching of spelling is fundamental. Teachers who follow a systematic approach in teaching spelling usually progress more than those who do not (Moseley, 1974). Al-Jabri (2006) suggests a systematic study of spelling in which learners are explicitly taught the differences between English and Arabic spelling system. Spelling should be taught like any other subject and teachers should adopt a suitable and flexible teaching method that is appropriate to students' age, ability and needs (Schonell, 1985).

Several researchers propose some useful strategies for teaching and learning spelling. The following are some teaching suggestions adopted from Temple (1995), (Cotterell, 1974), (Schonell, 1985), Wade (1974), and (Pratley, 1988).

- Long words can be broken into smaller parts or syllables to make it easier to learn and memorize, e.g. part-ic-ul-arly.
- To help keep the spelling of new words stick in the mind of spellers for a long time, learners can get use of some mnemonics (memory tricks), e.g. a piece of pie.
- Learners can keep a list of new or difficult words and resort to them from time to time to keep them in the memory.
- Learning the rules for word formation might be a great help to solve some spelling problems associated with derivation and reflection. Learners can play with the words

by adding new prefixes and suffixes, e.g. interest, interesting, interestingly, uninteresting, etc.

- Dictionary work is a useful learning aid for practicing the structure of words. Teachers can get use of dictionary to identify how a word is spelt. If learners are not sure of word spelling or if they only know the initial letters of a word, then a good dictionary will be of a great help.

Spelling is associated with the ability to recall a word from memory (Cotterell, 1974) and it involves mastering different skills which might be related to each other such as word length, its pronunciability, its morphemic structure, its frequency, etc. (Moseley, 1974). It depends on the ability to recognize sounds and translate them into visual images. It is a false belief to think that learners will indirectly learn spelling by mere reading. Learning spelling involves learning auditory and visual skills along with the master of hand movements.

The findings of the study suggest various approaches in learning spelling. The first approach is learning spelling through auditory skills; the learners write the words as they hear it. This approach might be useful for some words in English like one-syllabic words that correspond with their writing (e.g. mat) which this study approves to be the less difficulty to spell. It is apparent that this approach seems to work effectively with Arab learners as it applies to their first language spelling system. So, it is easier for them to spell words as they pronounce them. Moreover, this approach might help with words with consonant clusters such as 'modern'. However, learners have to deal with the phonological obstacle first; they have to pronounce the words with consonant cluster accurately before spelling them. In this regard, reading aloud, repetition and dictation may be efficient for such words. Repetition can also be used to discriminate between confusing vowels in English; e.g. *pin, pan, pen, pun.*

On the other hand, if the learners follow merely the auditory skills, then they most probably make many spelling errors. This study proves that Arab learners face difficulty in English spelling because of the irregularity of English system. Following just this approach gets students use their Arabic phonetic methodology in writing. Consequently, for example, they

will spell "office" as "ofis" and "circle" as "syrkel". Apart from making errors, this approach causes confusion to the learners when they learn English spelling. Therefore, in such case visual skills may help; the learners memorise the shape of the irregular spelling patterns in their minds before writing them. For example, learners visualise –tion as /ʃ/ . After visualising the pattern to the sound, the learners may over-generalise it to other words with the same sounds; e.g. dic**tion**ary, excep**tion,** interna**tion**al, ac**tion**, activa**tion**, etc. For the substitution errors, the learners need to visualise the words with the help of some activities; e.g. the use of colours or to highlight confusing vowels and letters such as **ph**armacy and tele**ph**one.

A part from the previous strategies, learners can follow the "rule" approach for the transposition type of errors. There are some basic spelling rules learners need to be familiar with to facilitate their spelling; e.g. i before e except for c.

The following table lists misspelt words with their types and suggested teaching approach.

Table 3. Suggested Approaches for Spelling Error

MISPELT WORD	INTENDED WORD	TYPES	APPROACH
Telfone	Telephone	Substitution	Visual
Bottel	Bottle	Transposition	'rule' approach
Diress	Dress	Insertion	Visual
pen	pin	Substitution	Auditory
scool	school	Omission	Visual
sipoon	Spoon	Insertion	auditory
beleive	Believe	Transposition	'rule' approach
nock	Knock	Omission	Visual

7. Conclusion

From the results presented in this research, it can be concluded that the most common types of spelling errors made by Omani learners are substitution and omission. Transposition and insertion type of errors take the smallest proportion of error types. These findings correspond with some previous studies (e.g. AL-Jabri, 2006 and AL-Hassan, 2006).

English spelling system is not easy for Arab learners who need time and a lot of practice to master the most frequent words in English language. Quite few people internalize English spelling system completely. It is apparent that spelling is not taught systematically in Oman. Omani learners seem to have little knowledge of spelling and some have not been taught how to visualize a word or make use of mnemonics of spelling rules. It is not adequate to teach spelling by mere reading. Poor readers are not necessarily poor spellers and the contrary is possible. Teachers need to adopt a suitable approach to teach spelling effectively. Analysing the types of errors made help them a lot to choose the appropriate teaching approach.

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9. **Appendices**
   Appendix A

Oral Spelling Test

Pencil	Telephone	School
Carbon	Bike	Friend
Source	Mat	Phone
Actress	Success	Cross
Business	Beautiful	Purple
Pot	Computer	Cycle
Circle	Spoon	Knock
Bicycle	Beauty	Modern
Necessary	Ambition	Dress
Ghost	Actor	Pharmacy
Sign	Butterfly	Price
Receive	Line	Begin
Assign	Farmer	Doll
Metre	Address	Ambitious
Centre	Useful	Bottle
Science	People	Wall
Scientist	Successful	Boot
Communication	Wait	Sandals
Uncover	Bowel	Hat
Knife	Decide	Jar
Colou	Decision	Believe

Appendix B

Interview

When do Omani Learners start learning spelling?

How is spelling taught in Omani schools?

What do you think the most common type of errors that Omani learners make?

What do you think the sources of difficulty in spelling among Omani learners?

Does EFM include a variety of spelling activities and exercises?

Is there any emphasis on some spelling rules in EFM?

Do teachers do dictation after each unit as in OWTE?

How do learners practice the spelling of new words?

What do you suggest to Omani teachers to do to avoid spelling errors?