

In Quest of Specific Teaching Methods for Reducing Spelling Mistakes and Enhancing Writing Outcome

Abstract:

The research paper in hand aims at investigating the effectiveness of teaching spelling rules as a means to reduce students' orthographic mistakes, and consequently to improve their writing outcome. The population under study was Second Year Students of English at Constantine 1 University. Data collection in this research has been done using a teachers' questionnaire and a students' test. The teachers' questionnaire, on the one hand, has revealed much information about different spelling-related aspects both on the part on the teachers and the students. Students' test, on the other hand, has come check two major points in our study. The pre-test results seek out to reinforce the teachers' questionnaire results. Meanwhile, the post-test results have confirmed the hypothesis we set at the beginning of the study: teaching spelling rules does indeed reduce students' spelling mistakes and improve their writing outcome.

ملخص:

البحث الذي بين أيدينا يهدف الى دراسة مدى فعالية تدريس قواعد الاملاء للطلبة بهدف تحسين مهاراتهم في التهجئة وتحسين أداءهم الكتابي. المستوى المستهدف في هذه الدراسة هم طلبة السنة الثانية انجليزية من نظام ال.م.د. بجامعة قسنطينة 1 خلال السنة الدراسية 2013/2012. ومن أجل اثبات صحة فرضيتنا، تم استخدام وسيلتي بحث: استبيان للأساتذة واختبار للطلبة. النتائج المحرزة من كلا وسيلتي البحث أكدت وبقوة صحة الفرضية التي طرحناها في هاته الدراسة: تدريس قواعد الاملاء يحسن مستوى التهجئة. بالإضافة الى ذلك، تحقق هذه الدراسة في العلاقة المتبادلة بين القدرة على التهجئة والمستوي الكتابي للطلبة. الشيء الذي تم التأكد من أهميته أيضا. لذلك يمكن اعتبار هذه الأطروحة كنداء لكل الأساتذة عموما وأساتذة الكتابة والقواعد خصوصا بأن يأخذوا بعين الاعتبار تدريس قواعد التهجئة في برامجهم لأنه تم التثبت من أنه مؤثر وفعال.

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Introduction :

1. Background of the Study

Writing, reading, speaking and listening are the four language skills. But the skill which is believed to be the most important, and yet most difficult to master, among these four is the writing skill. In fact, a great deal of research has been given to the writing skill. Indeed, a huge amount of attention was directed by researchers to writing. "*Improve your Written English*", "*The Student Writer*", "*Creative Writing: the Essay Way*", "*How to Write Great Essays*", "*Quick Guide to Essay Writing*", "*Writing from Start to Finish: A Six-step Guide*", and so many others are all published books aiming at promoting the writing skill.

One might inquire: why is there such a tremendous amount of books, articles, researches and researchers investigating in this area? Simply, because it is very important. A second reason why there are many publications on writing is that people, mainly language learners, have many difficulties with writing.

As it has just been pointed out, many language learners have difficulties with their writing. Weak grammar, poor vocabulary, absence of punctuation marks, misuse of link words, lack of phrasal verb usage, severe shortage in idioms, and repetition of ideas are just few examples. All these weaknesses might show learners' writing deficiency. However, there is one thing that can instantly reveal how strong or weak a learner is. It is his/her spelling. Language teachers in general and teachers of writing and grammar in particular pay a great deal of attention to spelling. It does not take much effort to evaluate a learner's ability to spell words as just one glance at his/her paper is quite enough to indicate how good or bad he/she is.

It is suggested that good spelling affects learners' grades. So does poor spelling, but in the opposite direction, unfortunately! Good spelling is believed to work as a cover-up of grammatical mistakes or vocabulary shortage, but bad spelling does, indeed, add insult to injury in this case.

1. Statement of the Problem

Throughout learning a foreign language, learners face some language-related difficulties. Such obstacles can be found in any aspect of the language being learned: grammar, phonology, syntax, and other aspects. Writing is no exception! Here, many learners seem to struggle in order to achieve a satisfactory level in Written Expression or what is often called *Creative Writing*.

In the case of the English language, there is one aspect which has been clearly noticed to be most puzzling, even to native speakers themselves. The great majority of learners of English throughout the entire world seem to suffer a lot, especially when it comes to this point. It is spelling.

From observation of students' writings, and teachers' conversations at Constantine 1 University, it has become evident that most learners seem to be deeply affected by this spelling spell. Therefore, should we teach students at the University of Constantine 1 spelling rules as an attempt to reduce the amount of their spelling mistakes, and consequently improve their writing outcome?

2. Aim of the Study

Spelling is one of the subjects which received and still receives a great amount of researchers' attention. The number of research and researchers investigating this aspect are simply more than to be counted. Many studies have been carried out about the English spelling system in order to understand its relatively complex nature. Also, such research tried to find out some effective methods and strategies to help learning it.

Some of the most recent strategies designed for spelling improvement are: the Orton-Gillingham Method, the strategy of Look, Say, Cover, Write and Check, the repeated writing strategy, the strategy of teaching spelling rules and many others are all aimed at improving learners' spelling ability.

In the light of the latest findings of the investigations concerned with spelling, one is aiming through this study at showing the urgent need of teaching students spelling rules as a means to enhance their writing skill in general and their spelling abilities in particular. As this study shall reveal later, there are many bad consequences because of poor spelling. Therefore, we also aim through this research at emphasizing on the great importance of good spelling in the writing process.

3. Research Questions and Hypothesis

In this research, one is aiming at answering the following questions:

- Is English orthography regular or irregular?
- What are the effects of poor spelling on the students' writing performance according to research findings?
- Would teaching spelling rules to students improve their spelling skills?

Based on the questions mentioned above, we hypothesize that: if spelling rules were taught to students, then their ability to spell would improve significantly and their writing outcome would develop consequently.

3.1. The History of English Spelling

If there was anything to blame for today's English spelling, it would be its history. The history of the English Language is very rich in events which shaped the ways the English language is used nowadays. The very early roots of the English language take us to the nomads who settled in southern Russia. And as they moved from their "*original homeland*", the language they used started to gradually develop into a diversity of languages like Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Celtic, Germanic and Hittite. Old English or what is often referred to as Anglo-Saxon is the language

brought to England by the Saxons and the Jutes who were Germanic tribes that came from northern Europe. Despite the fact that only 27 letters were used to write their language which had a sound system of approximately 40 different sounds, their spelling gave a good reflection to their pronunciation (Davidson, 2005).

Later, even with the establishment of the Danelaw (the Vikings' territory) in northern and eastern England, Old English did not alter much, because Old Norse (the language of the Vikings) was very close to Old English, the thing which helped to introduce many new words from Old Norse to Old English. Take for example the words *egg*, *leg*, *sky* and *window*. However, in 1066 when the Norman Conquest took place, starting from that time on, great changes started to happen to the English orthographic system. The Normans spoke Norman French which was a variety of French. Their Language was quite different from Old English. Thus, Anglo-Saxon started to witness major changes in vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling (*ibid.*).

By the 12th century, Old English continued to be spoken, but there were no more people using it for their written discourse. Simply, it stopped being written. And because the influence of the Norman French was so significant, great deal of Old English words were replaced by French ones. Even the words which survived were changed to be spelt according to the rules of the French spelling system. This made English differ a lot from what it used to be when it restarted to be written once again in the 14th century. The spelling *cw* in Old English was altered to the French spelling *qu* like in *cwen* and *cwic* which became *queen* and *quick* (*ibid.*).

Complications did not stop there, but rather further ones were on the way to mark their prints in the English spelling system. In the 15th and 16th centuries, printing started to take place and develop. And because many printers were of non-English origins, greater modifications were made to the English spelling. The early printers who were from the Netherlands did not know much about English introduced many new spellings into the language. The *gh* in *ghost*, for instance, came from Dutch (*ibid.*).

Another very significant factor which deeply influenced English spelling was the mismatch between pronunciation and spelling which took place in the 15th and 16th century. Huge changes happened then to the pronunciation of English (the Great Vowel Shift) which, unfortunately, were not accompanied by changes in spelling, because it had been fixed by the act of printing in an earlier time. Words like *deep* and *deal*, for

example, were pronounced differently in Old English. That is why they are spelt differently. The difference in pronunciation between those two words was like the difference between *day* and *dell* nowadays (*ibid.*).

One of the problems resulting from the mismatch between speech and writing is the problem of silent letters. The *k* in *know* and *knight*, and the *w* in *write* and *wrong* used to be pronounced in Old English, but because the writing system of English was fixed before the great vowel shift took place, the old spellings are still being used to this moment (*ibid.*).

All the events discussed above have gradually led us to the present day of English spelling. They have also led us to discuss two conflicting views: the Order theory against the Chaos theory. Either view has provided its arguments, evidence and research findings to support its stand. And both poles will be dealt with in the next heading.

3.2. The Regularity of the English Spelling

Under this heading, we will be discussing two opposing beliefs concerning the nature of the English spelling: the Chaos theory in contrast with the Order theory. Firstly, there is the Chaos view. The main ideas of this theory can be introduced by what a number of researchers have said about the nature of English spelling. Lerer (2007) stated that "*English spelling is, quite simply, against the law of nature*" (p. 127). It "*is, in its relationship to the spoken language, quite crazy*" (Ernest Weekley as cited in Upward & Davidson, 2011, n.p.). It is "*a chaotic connection of oddities without order or cohesion*" (Mont Follick, 1952 as cited in *ibid.*). Moreover, it is "*exceptionally complex and irregular*" (Trask & Stockwell, 2007, p. 327) as it frequently shows "*a high degree of linguistic uniformity*" (Mountford, 2007, p. 391). In other words, it "*is only a fairly loose representation of pronunciation*" (Harley, 2006, p. 22) as the connection between the forms of words and their pronunciation is very weak and it is almost similar to the Chinese orthography in which one has to learn each word individually (Trask & Stockwell, op.cit.). In short, English "*sound-spelling relationships are unsystematic and unpredictable, and in some cases seem to be almost beyond comprehension*" (Upward & Davidson, op.cit., n.p.).

In the same vein, what can be deduced from Chaos theorists' claims is that English spelling shows very weak correspondence between sound and spelling, the reason why there is too little predictability of how English words are spelt (Harley, op.cit.). Order theorists, however, claim the opposite through Upward and Davidson terms (op.cit.):

English spelling is often perfectly phonetic, representing with absolute clarity and consistency the actual sound of many words by appropriate string of letters. One study in the United States found that in a computer analysis of 17,000 words, 84 per cent were spelled according to a regular pattern and only 3 per cent were so irregular and unpredictable in their spelling that they would have to be individually learned, a state of affairs very far from a supposed 'chaotic connection of oddities'. One figure that is often quoted is that English spelling is about 75 per cent regular". . . "What makes the English spelling appear to be very irregular is simply that the majority of the 400 or so most irregular words are also the most frequently used words. It is their frequency, not their number that creates the impression of great irregularity in English spelling. (n.p.).

If the English spelling system contains such regularity as studies show, why is there such a problem in the first place? The answer to this question can be presented in two points

One: according to studies which involved direct observations of first- and second-grade teachers, it has been found that a minimum proportion of only 4% of the total bulk of reading instruction was devoted to spelling or any spelling-related activities (as cited in Reed, 2012). Other researchers such as Simonsen and Gunter added that spelling instruction is often "*marginalized*" due to the fact that most teachers assume that English spelling is "*too*" irregular and unpredictable. Therefore, they see no point in teaching it (as cited in *ibid.*).

Two: even where there is some spelling instruction, it does not take a proper form. Learners are not taught "*how*" to spell. That is to say, students are not taught why a word is spelt the way it is. They are often asked to learn the spelling of words by rote instead of providing explanations to the words they are being exposed to. Consequently, the task of learning to spell becomes vague, demotivating and time consuming (Crystal, 1995).

As we have seen, Chaos theorists see English spelling as a total mess. Studies following the Order view, however, showed that it is mostly regular. So, a thoughtful question can be asked here. Where is the truth between those two opposing views? Crystal (*ibid.*) answered that the truth

about the English spelling is somewhere in between the two poles. However, it is not known exactly where. The amount of irregularity is not fixed at a given number. It depends on the inclusion and exclusion of certain types of words. If we include proper nouns and rare foreign terminology, the irregularity will increase. But if we include long technical terms, it will decrease because those words' spelling follows some strict rules. Crystal ends saying: "*We should not exaggerate the size of the problem . . . nor minimize it either*", but rather be reasonable in our estimation of the issue (p. 272).

3.3. The Spelling Skill and the Writing Outcome

Being successful in today's world requires strong literacy skills that include proficient writing skills. An essential component of the writing skill is good spelling. State (1998) said that "*learning to write well involves learning to spell*" (p. 7). Furthermore, correct spelling is a very important component of good writing just like content, style, punctuation and so forth (Brophy, 2002; Dixon & Johnston, 2002). In addition, a strong spelling ability is not only important in writing, but it is also required to save one's image in society. Most people judge a person's education and literacy level through his/her ability to spell (Westwood, 2005; Bauer, 2007) and think of good spellers as being good in most, if not all, aspects of the language (Greenbaum, 1996).

There are a number of other researches which have been conducted about the importance of spelling and the effects of spelling mistakes. Such studies have resulted in alarming findings. Those results shall be discussed in the few following notes:

- Firstly, spelling mistakes result in creating bad impressions in the mind of the reader. Starkey (2004) stated that misspellings make the writer seem "*sloppy*," "*unprofessional*," "*lazy*," and even "*foolish*." (p. 33).
- Secondly, misspellings annoy the readers and cost them valuable time. Harstell (2008) stated that "*nothing is more annoying than reading a message that has so many errors that it takes twice the time to read*" (p. 621). Johnston (1997) added that misspellings do not only annoy readers, but also make them lose confidence in the writer and start to question whether he/she has checked the facts and arguments he/she cited the way he/she checked his/her spelling (as cited in Finn, 2005).
- Thirdly, spelling mistakes destroy understanding and result in low marks. According to Johnson and Johnson (1999) "*spelling errors*

are sometimes felt to have the greatest effect on intelligibility" (p. 116) as they distract the reader's attention and cause him/her to diverse from focusing on content to concentrate on form. Consequently, some very valuable, inventive and imaginative pieces of writing are being devalued and marked poorly because they contain lots of misspellings (Smith & Laslett, 1993; Grenville, 2001; Stark, 2003; Davis, 2005).

- Fourthly, spelling difficulties affect the quality of the piece. Being constantly concerned with spelling, learners with spelling difficulties waste most of their cognitive abilities on "*lower-level processes*" instead of investing them on other "*higher-order processes*" such as content, organization and purpose of the piece. In contrast, good spellers write with "*maximum efficiency and minimum effort*". The thing that allows them to have "*sufficient cognitive resources available for other important aspects of writing*", such as content, purpose, and organization of the piece (Graham, 1982, as cited in Graham, 2007, p. 1509; Folk, 2008, p. 932).
- Finally, poor spelling can cause getting one's job application rejected. Greenbaum (op.cit.) stated that poor spelling is one of the reasons why job applications get rejected, especially where good writing skills are required (p. 558). Some employers stated that "*if they see a job application with spelling mistakes, it goes into the pin straight away*" (Crystal, 2012, n.p.).

4. Data Collection

In this study, data collection has been carried out using a teachers' questionnaire and a students' test.

4.1. Participants

4.1.1. Teachers

We submitted a questionnaire to 42 teachers of writing and grammar in the English department at Constantine One University. We have done so, because we believe that teachers of those two subjects are the most expected ones to be dealing with our subject of interest: spelling. It is important to say that the subjects of this questionnaire were mostly teachers of the Bachelor degree, i.e. first, second and third year teachers.

4.1.2. Students

From the parent population of 817 second-years students, we randomly selected a sample of 57 to conduct our experiment. The three

main reasons behind selecting this particular level are: firstly, spelling mistakes can be more noticeable in this level than the others. Secondly, second year students possess the needed cognitive knowledge to learn the spelling rules we will present. Some spelling rules, for instance, require from the learners to make clear distinction between short and long vowels. Thirdly, we wanted to study the problem and to try to cure it while it is starting to develop its early roots.

4.2. Description of the Research Tools

4.2.1. Teachers' Questionnaire

Teachers' questionnaire, on the one hand, consisted of 14 questions. We did not use any questions of personal information about the subjects because such data is of no value for our research.

The first question was a ranking one in which teachers evaluated students spelling ability in general. Questions 2 to 8 were related to some particular spelling mistakes which are believed to be most committed by students. Thus we wanted to know how serious such problems are in our department. The questions from 9 to 12 were closely related to an important point we discussed: *The Spelling Skill and the Writing Outcome*. It is important in the sense that it enlightened us with information about teachers' reactions towards a poorly-spelt piece of writing. Question 13 aimed at knowing whether or not teachers use any strategies to help students spell better, and what kind of strategies, if any. The final question aimed at discovering the teachers' assumption(s) regarding the complexity of the English spelling system.

4.2.2. Students' Test

Students' test, on the other hand, was divided into three phases: a pre-test, an intermediate phase, and a post-test. The pre-test consisted of twenty words of the commonest and most frequently misspelt words in English. Those words were read aloud to the students contributing in the pre-test so that they could write them down on pieces of paper given to them. Before the test took place, two important points were asked to the students. First, students were asked not to copy the spelling of any word from any friend or classmate, but rather to write the words the way they know or think they are written. The aim behind this request is to raise the level of credibility of this test. Secondly, students were told not to write any word unless they have clearly heard it, and to ask for repetition in case of any doubt about the words presented. This second request aims at the same thing as the first one.

The intermediate phase of this research lasted for only one session of one hour and a half. In fact, the session took less than that. It lasted for no more than one hour. During this session, learners (subjects of the test) were taught five different spelling rules: the ie/ei rule, the -ck/-k, the -ly/-lly, the -ch/-tch rule and the 1-2/2-1 rule.

Firstly, students were asked whether or not they knew what the word *spelling* means. As nobody knew that, the definition of the verb *to spell* along with an illustration have been given to the students so that to put them in the image of the lesson. Secondly, and in order to put students in a clearer image as well as to motivate them to the lesson, few results of the teachers' questionnaire were presented. The thing we observed after giving the statistics of those questions is that students paid more attention throughout the lesson than that at the beginning of the session. Thirdly, the five spelling rules were presented one after the other in an inductive way of learning. How? First, four words related to each spelling rule were written on the board in colors. The words related to the ie/ei spelling rule, for instance, were written: (grieve niece) (ceiling perceive). Then students were asked about the differences they could observe between each pair of words. This technique has shown great results as most students could get very close in guessing the rule even before we give it to them in a more scientific phrasing. Finally, it was made sure that every and each student practiced at least one word of each rule. We did so as we used a list of words and moved around the class asking each student by turn to give the spelling of a word we dictated, and which is related to the spelling rule being discussed at that time.

Similarly to the pre-test, twenty of the most commonly misspelt words in English were presented orally to the students in the post-test. Again, students were advised to listen carefully to the words before they write any of them. Also, they were asked to avoid copying from their classmates or friends. In addition, the test maker himself has made sure to repeat each word for several times so that to eliminate any chances of doubt or confusion for students.

5. Analysis of the Questionnaire

6. Discussion of the Results

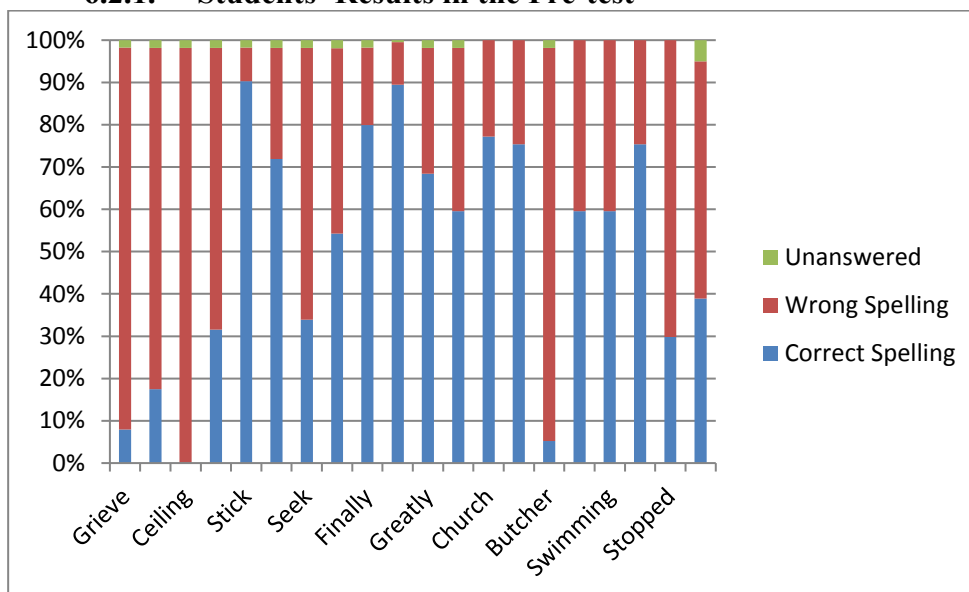
6.1. Teachers' Questionnaire

Teachers' questionnaire results have come to the following: they have come to show that most students are poor-to-average spellers. In addition, teachers' answers have shown, as expected, that students have a difficulty dealing with silent letters. Similarly, the results have revealed

students' inability to deal with hyphens. In the same vein, the answers have indicated how seriously astonishing students' deficiency in making difference between American and British spelling is. Another difficulty was revealed by one of the questions which has shown that more than a half of students confuse when and when not double the consonants. An important question in teachers' questionnaire has resulted in already expected findings: the great majority of students lack the knowledge of the well-known ie-ei spelling rule. Another significant question to teachers has revealed that 90% of teachers find spelling mistakes irritating, and sometimes annoying! Two questions in the questionnaire have shown that our teachers appreciate good spelling in the clarity of delivering any piece of writing. Not only that, but they also favor correctly-spelt papers with some extra marks. The thing which makes good spelling an important factor in students' academic success. A result before the last in teachers' questionnaire has indicated that 76% of teachers believe that teaching spelling rules would improve students spelling ability. The final result concerns the fact that more than a half of teachers of Writing and Grammar at Constantine 1 University do not use any strategies whatsoever to help improve students' spelling. The thing which one believes to be one of the most paramount reasons for learners' spelling deficiency.

6.2. Students' Test

6.2.1. Students' Results in the Pre-test



Graph 01: Students' Results in the Pre-test

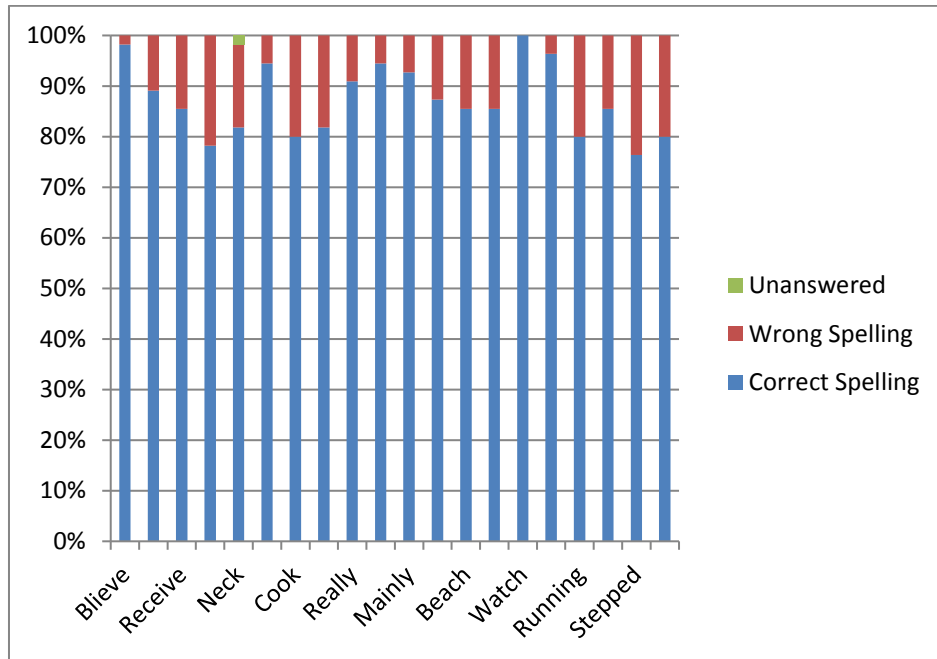
The graph above resembles students' results in the pre-test. These twenty words relate to five different spelling rules. What one can deduce from these poor results is that:

First, most students' poor results are due to their ignorance of these spelling rules. For instance, none of the students could spell the word *ceiling* correctly while less than 10% of them spelled the words *grieve* in a correct way, which are both related to a very common spelling rule.

Second, students' inconsistent results within words of the same spelling rule can be explained by their reliance on intuition to spell words rather than on solid knowledge. This can be noticed in the words *butcher* and *witch* that were spelled by about 5% and 60% respectively.

Despite the fact that some spelling rules are, indeed, simple and straightforward (e.g.: the -lly/-ly rule), many students seem not to know how to apply them due to ignorance. The graph above shows that 40% of students could not spell the word *commonly*, and about 20% of them spelled *finally* incorrectly, which is one of the most commonly used words in English.

6.2.2. Students' Results in the Post-test



Graph 02: Students' Results in the Post-test

The graph above stands for students results in the post-test. These results show that students' stable results indicate that they spelt words depending on knowledge instead of whim or guessing. The graph above shows that in almost all of the 20 words used in the post-test, from 80% to 100% of students spelled them correctly. This is an indicator of the significant improvement of students' spelling ability after the intermediate phase in which they have actually mastered the spelling rules presented to them.

7. Conclusion

Spelling is a very important aspect of writing. In this research paper, one has tried to shed light on few facts about English orthography, such as its history, its controversial regularity, and most importantly its great effects on one's writing outcome. More particularly, the objective of this study has been to test the effectiveness of teaching spelling rules as a strategy to improve learners' spelling ability, and the quality of their written production consequently. The study has been carried out using a

teachers' questionnaire and a students' test. It is fairly true to say that the teachers' questionnaire has, and to a far extent, enlightened us with valuable information of the current state of students' orthographic ability, but it is fairly true to state that the students' test does contain the clear-cut evidence of the high effectiveness of teaching spelling rules as a spelling improvement strategy.

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