

«Fluency is for everybody, accuracy for the few, and absolute accuracy for the very, very few.»

Guri Figenschou Raaen
Høgskolen i Nord-Trøndelag

This text is a presentation of some results from a survey of Norwegian pupils' written English that I carried out in 7th grade classes in a Norwegian municipality in 2006. My plans and intentions were presented at the conference FoU i Praksis in 2006, and results from a pilot study have been published before (Raaen, 2006; Raaen, 2007; Raaen & Guldal, 2007). My focus has been mainly on formal aspects like spelling, concord between subject and verb, and use of progressive forms. When studying spelling I have looked both at the spelling of some selected function words as well as the ratio between correct and misspelt words. I will here present the results from my work on spelling, hence the reference to Pit Corder in my headline (Simensen, 2007, p. 178). My findings document that spelling – even of basic function words – is not a skill that these pupils master at the end of primary school.

Background of the study

My interest in spelling and concord stems from my work with teacher trainer students, where I have observed a gradual weakening of their formal competence over years. This decline in students' formal competence has been thoroughly documented (Hellekjær, 2006; Lehmann, 1999). Similarly, the same discussion has been active after that time, not only among English teachers (Hagtvet, 2007). It is frustrating for the students – and admittedly also for the teacher – when basic spelling and concord errors continue to be a problem, even after a year of studying English at college level. The examples below are taken from texts written by college students in April 2008, at the end of a one year English course. It should also be mentioned that the texts are written at home, where the students have had ample time to work on their texts and access to spell checkers.

They also goes to hospital less often, their stay in hospital are also shorter [...]

[...] 9 million children, were 3 million of them are children, experience starvation in their everyday life.

It seems like they always have to *bee* on top.

It seems as if errors of the type described above have fossilised some time before the students reach college level. In order to get more insight into children's written level of English at various stages in their learning process, I decided to follow the same pupils over a period of three years. This article presents the findings from stage one of the process, where I have collected texts from various primary schools. By reading a substantial number of texts I am hoping to get more insight into their written competence at this level. At a later stage, texts by the same pupils will be collected when they are finishing lower secondary. These two stages will hopefully tell me something about written language development in general and spelling in particular.

Method

The sample

In order to get a good selection of texts, 11 schools were contacted. They are all, however, from the same school district, a point that is important to keep in mind when looking at the results. But even though the texts are from a limited geographical area, the number is still quite high – 8 schools¹ and altogether 172 texts – and it is therefore reasonable to assume that my conclusions will be relevant in a wider setting. In order to create a test situation that was familiar to teachers and hopefully also to the pupils, I used a similar test outline as the one used for national tests for this level the previous year. Even though there were no national written tests in English in 2006, I assumed that most teachers had used last year's test in their classes. The test consisted of two parts – one where the pupils were to describe three pictures – and then a second part where they were supposed to write a longer text. They were here given different options: again a picture description, a book or a film review, or a story where they were given the opening sequence.

Analysis criteria

Since the texts were similar to the national tests, I initially used the assessment criteria that had been worked out in connection with the national tests. If one looked at spelling, the different levels were defined quite precisely – from the highest level (B2 for grade 7), where you could expect correct spelling as long as the vocabulary was not too advanced – to a level where you would be able to recognize the words, even though spelling errors would occur even in the most frequent words. In spite of these detailed level descriptions there was gradually a need to go deeper into the material to see what they were actually able to spell correctly. I therefore decided to focus on some high frequency function words and see to what extent these words were correctly spelt. The function words that I studied were the numerals *two* and *three*, possessives pronouns – mainly *his* and *her*, the pronoun *who* and the preposition *with*. In addition to these high frequency function words I also counted the use of the conjunction *because* and the use of *genitive + s*. I have previously mentioned that I carried out a pilot study

¹ Three schools did not want to participate in the survey.

It seems like they always have to *bee* on top.

It seems as if errors of the type described above have fossilised some time before the students reach college level. In order to get more insight into children's written level of English at various stages in their learning process, I decided to follow the same pupils over a period of three years. This article presents the findings from stage one of the process, where I have collected texts from various primary schools. By reading a substantial number of texts I am hoping to get more insight into their written competence at this level. At a later stage, texts by the same pupils will be collected when they are finishing lower secondary. These two stages will hopefully tell me something about written language development in general and spelling in particular.

Method

The sample

In order to get a good selection of texts, 11 schools were contacted. They are all, however, from the same school district, a point that is important to keep in mind when looking at the results. But even though the texts are from a limited geographical area, the number is still quite high – 8 schools¹ and altogether 172 texts – and it is therefore reasonable to assume that my conclusions will be relevant in a wider setting. In order to create a test situation that was familiar to teachers and hopefully also to the pupils, I used a similar test outline as the one used for national tests for this level the previous year. Even though there were no national written tests in English in 2006, I assumed that most teachers had used last year's test in their classes. The test consisted of two parts – one where the pupils were to describe three pictures – and then a second part where they were supposed to write a longer text. They were here given different options: again a picture description, a book or a film review, or a story where they were given the opening sequence.

Analysis criteria

Since the texts were similar to the national tests, I initially used the assessment criteria that had been worked out in connection with the national tests. If one looked at spelling, the different levels were defined quite precisely – from the highest level (B2 for grade 7), where you could expect correct spelling as long as the vocabulary was not too advanced – to a level where you would be able to recognize the words, even though spelling errors would occur even in the most frequent words. In spite of these detailed level descriptions there was gradually a need to go deeper into the material to see what they were actually able to spell correctly. I therefore decided to focus on some high frequency function words and see to what extent these words were correctly spelt. The function words that I studied were the numerals *two* and *three*, possessives pronouns – mainly *his* and *her*, the pronoun *who* and the preposition *with*. In addition to these high frequency function words I also counted the use of the conjunction *because* and the use of *genitive + s*. I have previously mentioned that I carried out a pilot study

¹ Three schools did not want to participate in the survey.

before I looked at the whole texts. In the initial study I counted correct and wrong use of these function words in the short picture descriptions. The results from the pilot study showed me that it was useful to study spelling of selected function words in detail, since the error rate was quite high. The results from the pilot study and the full study are documented later, but I may at this stage mention that even basic function words like *with* and *two/three* proved to be difficult for many of the pupils, since the error rate was 31 % for the preposition and 24 % for the numerals. The initial results were verified in the main study.

After having concentrated on selected function words + the genitive construction, I made an overall count of spelling errors to find out the ratio between words that were correctly spelt or misspelt. I then went on to look at concord and use of progressive forms.

Results

Length of essays

Before dealing with spelling results, it is necessary to comment on the length of the essays. As previously mentioned, the test consisted of two different parts. Initially I had used the terms the short text (the three picture descriptions) and the long text, and I will still use these terms, even though many pupils wrote longer texts when they were to describe three pictures. As far as the short texts are concerned, differences in length were quite remarkable. In one class the average length was 59.7 words, whereas another class only produced an average of 22. Both these classes were so small that one can not read too much into the results. Overall average length is therefore a more interesting number. On average the pupils used 41.8 words to describe three pictures, i.e. 14 words per picture. The two excerpts below illustrate this range of length.

The shortest text:

Dei play fotbol/old agly ladi on PC/he stolen hadbog. (K4) (11)

The longest text:

I can see three girls who are playing football. I can see that one of the girls is kicking the ball. I can see a lady sitting writing on her computer. I can see lots of paper, she is using glasses, she is wearing a dress. She is sitting in her office. I can see: A man has taken a womans handbag, The man is a thief, the woman cries for help. That she is rich. That they stear at each other. (A6) (82)

When it comes to the long text, variations were even more visible. Here the range was from no text at all, to a text that had 338 words.

Spelling of selected function words

As previously mentioned, my target has been both frequent function words including *because* (which was not often used in the material) and *the genitive + s*. Since I had looked at the short texts already, I was interested in seeing whether the results would be different in the long texts. I had perhaps expected the results to be poorer, in so far as the pupils now were encouraged to write more creatively, which logically might lead

to more errors. I have already mentioned, however, that the so-called «long» texts were not always long. The pupils had perhaps not found the topics interesting enough, or they were perhaps not used to free writing and therefore more familiar with the more controlled picture descriptions.

When the results from the two different parts were compared, the results were relatively comparable, as we can see in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: Correct and incorrect spellings of selected function words in the short texts

Word	Use	Correctly spelt	Wrongly spelt
Numerals (two/three)	136	104	32
With	61	42	19
Because	12	6	6
Who	152	109	43
Possessive pronouns	81	56	25
Genitiv+s	52	15	37

Table 2: Correct and incorrect spellings of selected function words in the long texts

Word	Use	Correct Use	Wrong Use
Numerals (two/three)	105	74	31
With	75	56	19
Because	36	17	19
Who	83	58	25
Possessive pronouns	183	133	50
Genitive + s	48	27	21

When the results from the two parts were combined, the error rate was as follows:

Numerals 26.1 %, With 27.9 %, Because 52.1 %, Who 29 %, Possessives 28.4 %, and Genitive + s 58 %.

It has admittedly been tempting to look at differences between schools and classes within the same school, since internal variations in the material are quite substantial. I do realise, however, that my selection of schools and classes is not big enough to make individual variations an issue. One poor (or excellent) pupil performance may have considerable influence on the result. Also, classes were to some extent reshuffled the year prior to my study, since catchment areas were changed, a thing that has also made individual class results less interesting. One could not, even if that would have been desirable, look at one excellent class result and link that to an individual teacher's work.

Ratio correct/misspelt words

As a final attempt to get more insight into pupils' spelling competence, I looked at the ratio between words that were spelt correctly and words that were misspelt. It is in this context necessary to define what is meant by a «word». Paul Nation (Nation, 2001) speaks of tokens, types, lemmas, and word families, and I will use his definition of a token, where you count every word in the text, regardless of how many times it appears. In the text below, which has 31 tokens and 22 types, the error rate will be different, according to your choice of definition:

I can see tre girls plaing fotbal.

I can see a åld woman stitting wic a pc.

I can see a mann ho run avei wis a bag in his hand.

A focus on tokens would give an error rate of 9/31, whereas a use of types would increase the error rate – to 9/22, since you here only count a word the first time it appears. In this study, one needs to keep in mind that the error rate refers to tokens, not types, which means a more generous error rate.

Defining what was to be counted as an error was more problematic. It is necessary to clarify what is actually a spelling error, and not a grammatical error. I finally landed on the following categories:

1) Ortographical error/The word does not exist:

She [skriker] after help **beacuse** she has been robbed. (E 1)

The man **runned** to ...”(D1)

Kim just stand there and looked on her and **thinked**. (D4)

2) Ortographical error/The word is misspelt in this context:

The police didn't *now* that. (E1)

I see *tree* girls are playing football. (E2)

3) Morphological errors are not counted as long as the first morpheme (base) is spelt correctly:

Emely has two *bullet* in her head. (E1)

He *shoot* Emely. (E1)

But the girl didn't *wanted* to be rich. (E7)

The boys had *catch* him. (E20)

..and the married couple *been* put in prison. (B1)

The two last examples under point 1 above could have been accepted under category 3), but I have made a distinction between morphological errors where the wrong grammatical form exists, and forms like *runned*/*thinked*, which are clearly misspelt.

Norwegian words are deducted from the word count. It was sometimes difficult to define whether the word was a Norwegian word or not, but most often the

Norwegian word was used deliberately because the pupil lacked the English counterpart:

I can se three *folk*. (C8)

She [*skriker*] after help beacuse she has been robbed. (..)

Finally, a word is never counted as more than one error.

With these considerations in mind, 2701 out of 22931 tokens were misspelt, which means an error rate of 11.77 %. As previously mentioned, a focus on types would have meant a higher error rate. Still, it is interesting to note that the overall error rate is substantially lower than the results from the count of function words.

Analysis of spelling results

I have previously mentioned that my interest in spelling has arisen from my work with teacher training students, and what I see as a gradual decline of their spelling competence. The results of the study must be read from this perspective. Are then the results better or worse than expected? First, I would like to stress that one can not expect pupils at primary level to be able to use the *genitive + s*. Language learning seems to follow a natural order (Thornbury, 1999, p. 10), and aspects like the genitive are learned late in the learning process. At this stage, it is positive that they have used the construction. It is also interesting to see that the error rate for the genitive construction is lower for the long texts. A possible reason for this discrepancy is that the short texts encourage the use of the genitive, since the pupils are to explain that somebody has stolen a lady's handbag. They also need to explain that the same lady is crying *because* a man has stolen her handbag, and one could therefore assume that there would be many occurrences of the conjunction *because* in the short texts. This is not the case, however. The word is used in only 12 of the short texts, which means that few of the pupils have managed to explain this cause-effect situation. More information about sentence types in the short texts is found in Raaen and Guldal (2007). When it comes to spelling of *because*, the figures show that the word is more often misspelt than spelt correctly.

As far as the high frequency function words are concerned, especially numerals like *two* and *three*, the preposition *with*, and the possessive pronouns *his* and *her*, the error rate must be said to be high. It is here important to remember that the percentages do not refer to the number of students who make mistakes, but to the number of times that the words were misspelt. When studying the texts, it is quite clear that many pupils have not internalised the spelling patterns of basic function words. They are spelt correctly in one sentence and then misspelt later in the text. These are all words that the pupils have been familiar with since they started English. Still, nearly three out of ten instances of the numerals *two* and *three* are misspelt. Likewise, possessive pronouns like *his/her* are also some of the first words they pupils learn, and therefore words you would expect them to be familiar with.

When studying the results for the ratio correct and misspelt words, it is important to keep in mind that there are many mistake categories that were excluded from the count. One may here refer to sentences where there was no concord between subject

and verb; there are words with wrong verb tense and conjugation, nouns without the plural ending, for example. It is therefore important not to put too much emphasis on this result. Furthermore, the ration between correct and misspelt words is only interesting when it is seen in connection with the pupils' vocabulary level. Since the texts used in this project are all stored electronically, it is possible to use vocabulary programs to study language maturity. I am hoping to start this work soon, and will then be able to say more about the results. My hypothesis, after having done a manual count of the texts and in that way formed an impression of the vocabulary level, is that the error rate is quite high for what looks like a limited vocabulary. In hindsight I can see that a focus on types and not on tokens would have given me a more precise impression of the pupils' spelling.

Can one draw general conclusions from this material? One may of course say that texts from a limited geographical area can be used to say something about language levels in the area in question, but not anything about spelling in Norwegian primary schools in general. I would like to argue that the results can at least say something about the level of English in the region, since this school district does not score badly on regional statistics over 10th grade exam marks in English. When the texts that have been examined show a poor performance in spelling, there is no reason to believe that these results would have been better if I had used other schools in the region. Also, other finds support the results from this study. In a comparison between Norwegian and American upper secondary school students, it was found «that the learners made many mistakes for using such a basic vocabulary» (Skoglund, 2006, p. 69). Similarly, a «high frequency of formal errors» was apparent in the majority of the English texts in a comparison between Norwegian and English texts at the same age level as the pupils in my study (Drew, 2003, p. 349).

Are there factors in the way Norwegian is being taught in Norwegian classrooms that explain why pupils have problems in spelling basic English function words correctly? One reason might perhaps be that many teachers, in their wish to achieve communicative competence, have underestimated the time it takes to master English spelling. Even though I do not see this as a sign that the communicative method has failed (Lehmann, 1999), it is perhaps a sign that we have been too optimistic as to how quickly unfamiliar spelling patterns are learnt. It is here tempting to refer to English classrooms, where spelling is heavily stressed, and where spelling tests, even on the national level, abound.

Another reason for the poor spelling results may be the prevailing attitude to correction. There has been a tradition for being tolerant of errors, especially at primary level. There are signs that this «tide may be turning» (Thornbury, 1999, p. 116). The same author argues that if the learner does not get concrete feedback on his errors, there is no incentive to learning to write correctly. This is a difficult field, since there always has to be a balance between encouragement in the use of the new language and feedback on mistakes.

The 7th grade pupils that took part in the survey were the last group before the new teaching plans were being used. If one studies the competence aims from the new plan, one sees that one of the aims after grade 7 is that the pupil shall be able to «use basic rules and patterns for pronunciation, intonation, spelling, grammar and various sentence structures» (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2006). It is here fair to add that the new plan also means more teaching hours at primary level, but it is still interesting to see the finds

in relation to the wording in the plan. The old plan was by many teachers found to be too general when it came to basic requirements. One may assume that more detailed competence requirements will lead to better spelling.

Another factor one may take into account is the qualifications of the teachers. Nationwide, we know that only 50% of the teachers in grades 5–7 have studied English as part of their general teacher training (Lagerstrøm, 2007). I have not asked the teachers involved in this study about their formal qualifications, but there is no reason to believe that the situation here is different from the rest of the country.

Further work

As mentioned above, the next move is to look at vocabulary profiles of the pupils and also to test the pupils again. These pupils will finish grade 10 in 2009, and they will be asked to sit for a test in their final spring term. It will be interesting to see whether they have a better grasp of concord and progressive forms at this stage. As far as spelling is concerned I will concentrate on the same function words to see to what extent their spelling has improved. Hopefully, one might then be able to say that Pit Corder was too pessimistic when he pronounced that accuracy was «for the few, and absolute accuracy for the very, very few».

References

- Drew, I. (1998). *Future teachers of English. A study of competence in the teaching of writing*. Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget.
- Drew, I. (2003). A comparison of early writing in Norwegian L1 and English L2. In K. Fraurud & K. Hyltenstam (Eds.), *Multilingualism in global and local perspectives. Selected papers from the 8th Nordic Conference on Bilingualism, November 1–3, 2001, Stockholm-Rinkeby* (pp. 341–355). Stockholm: Stockholm and Rinkeby Institute of Multilingual Research.
- Hagtvet, B. (2007, October 1). Good that we have oil to fall back on. *Aftenposten*. Retrieved 01.10.07 from www.aftenposten.no/meninger/signert/article2023422.ece.
- Hellekjær, G. O. (2005). *The acid test: Does upper secondary EFL instruction effectively prepare Norwegian students for the reading of English textbooks at colleges and universities?* Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oslo.
- Lagerstrøm, B. O. (2007). *Kompetanse i grunnskolen. Hovedresultater 2005/2006*. Statistisk Sentralbyrå. Rapport 200721. Retrieved 16.06.08 from http://www.ssb.no/emner/04/02/20/rapp_200721/rapp_200721.pdf.
- Lehmann, T. M. (1999). *Literacy and the tertiary student: Why has the communicative approach failed?* Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Bergen.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raaen, G. (2006). Engelsk skriftlig – en forsømt ferdighet på barnetrinnet? In T. M. Guldal, G. Karlsen, G. Løkken, F. Rønning, & T. Steen-Olsen (Eds.), *FoU i praksis 2006. Rapport fra konferanse om praksisrettet FoU i lærerutdanning* (pp. 301–305). Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag.