Investigating Spelling Difficulties, Contributing Factors, and Effective Teaching Approaches for Enhancing Spelling Proficiency among Iranian Student Teachers at Farhangian University

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Abstract

Spelling proficiency constitutes a fundamental component of English language competence and plays a particularly important role in academic writing. For English student teachers, accurate spelling is even more significant, as they are expected to demonstrate appropriate language use and eventually serve as linguistic models for their students. At Farhangian University in Iran, a number of first-level English student teachers enter higher education with persistent spelling difficulties, which may negatively influence their academic writing performance, language development, and professional confidence. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the major spelling difficulties experienced by Iranian English student teachers and to identify effective instructional strategies for addressing these challenges. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study gathered data through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with lecturers, focus group discussions with student teachers, and an analysis of students' written assignments. The findings indicated that students' spelling difficulties were primarily associated with phonological interference from their first languages, insufficient exposure to and familiarity with written English, and limited or inadequate previous instruction in English spelling conventions and rules. The study also identified several potentially effective pedagogical approaches, including explicit and systematic spelling instruction, phonics-based techniques, the development of morphological awareness, peer-assisted learning, and the purposeful integration of digital learning tools. Based on these findings, the study recommends that structured and systematic spelling instruction be incorporated into English language education courses at Farhangian University. Such instruction can contribute to improving student teachers' spelling accuracy and academic writing performance, strengthening their professional confidence, and preparing them to teach spelling more effectively in Iranian schools.

Keywords: English student teachers, multilingualism, orthographic competence, spelling problems, teacher education

1. Introduction

Spelling is a critical yet often challenging component of literacy development. It forms the basis for effective communication, academic writing, and professional competence. Mastery of spelling involves more than mechanical accuracy; it reflects the integration of cognitive processes connecting phonology, morphology, and orthography. According to Kahn-Horwitz & Goldstein (2024), successful spelling relies on orthographic mapping, whereby learners establish stable links between sounds, letters, and meaning. Proficiency in spelling enhances reading fluency, coherent writing, and confident participation in academic discourse. In contrast, recurrent spelling errors can compromise clarity, reduce the perceived credibility of the writer, and negatively affect judgments of their intellectual and professional capabilities

For student teachers, spelling proficiency holds particular importance. As future educators, they are expected to model correct language use for their learners, including adherence to English orthographic conventions. Their effectiveness in teaching literacy is closely tied to their own mastery of spelling, making their competence both a professional responsibility and a prerequisite for guiding students successfully. Weaknesses in spelling not only impair their personal academic success but also risk perpetuating literacy difficulties among the learners they will one day teach. A student teacher who regularly spells words incorrectly may unintentionally model these errors for their learners, perpetuating a cycle of poor literacy skills that can be difficult to overcome.

The challenge of spelling is particularly pronounced in English, a language often characterised by its deep or opaque orthography. Unlike transparent languages such as Spanish or many indigenous Iranian languag where the relationship between sounds and letters is consistent, English spelling contains numerous irregularities, largely stemming from its complex historical development. Goldman (2023) notes that only about half of English words follow predictable phoneme-grapheme patterns, while the rest require memorisation and morphological awareness. This irregularity poses significant difficulties for learners who come from language backgrounds with predictable spelling systems, as they are inclined to rely on phonetic strategies that do not always apply to English.

In Iran, the problem of spelling is situated within a broader multilingual context. The country recognises eleven official languages, with English often serving as the primary language of instruction in higher education. Many learners begin their education in their home languages before shifting to English as the medium of instruction in later grades. According to Zitha (2024), this transition often poses significant challenges, resulting in gaps in literacy development. Spelling remains a challenge as learners are likely to transfer phonological patterns from their mother tongues into English, producing errors such as becouse for because or fourty for forty. These challenges do not disappear at the school level but continue into higher education, where student teachers at institutions such as the Iranian University still struggle with orthographic errors in their academic writing.

The persistence of spelling errors among student teachers presents significant challenges for teacher education. Research by Nel & Nel (2012) emphasises that English Additional Language learners need targeted support to develop literacy skills; however, universities often assume that incoming students already have sufficient spelling proficiency. This assumption fails to account for gaps arising from inconsistent language policies, varied schooling backgrounds, and the complexities of English orthography. Consequently, student teachers may

progress through their programmes without addressing foundational spelling weaknesses, which can negatively impact both their academic performance and their capacity to teach literacy effectively.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates spelling problems and teaching strategies for Student Teachers at the Iranian University. By identifying common errors, examining their underlying causes, and exploring effective teaching strategies, the study aims to strengthen the literacy foundation of future educators. Ultimately, it seeks to ensure that student teachers not only overcome their own spelling challenges but also acquire the pedagogical skills necessary to support learners in Iran's multilingual classrooms.

2. Literature Review

Spelling is widely acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of literacy, serving as the basis for effective reading, writing, and overall academic achievement. According to Mather & Jaffe (2021), accurate spelling relies on orthographic mapping, a cognitive process through which learners establish stable links between sounds, written symbols, and word meanings. Without this foundation, learners struggle to express themselves clearly, and their academic output loses both credibility and coherence. For student teachers, spelling is not merely a matter of personal competence but also a professional responsibility. They are expected to model accurate spelling, teach orthographic patterns, and develop learners' confidence in written English (Pittman et al., 2022; Moats, 2023). When student teachers struggle with spelling, the effects go beyond their individual performance and risk reinforcing literacy challenges within schools.

The complexity of English orthography adds to the challenge. Unlike indigenous Iranian language, where the relationship between sounds and letters is consistent and predictable (Matavire, 2024), English has what scholars describe as a deep or opaque orthography (Georgiou, 2021; Smith et al., 2021; Idris & Muhammad, 2025). Panquin (2024) observes that only about half of English words follow predictable phonemegrapheme patterns, while the remainder are irregular due to historical borrowing and linguistic evolution. This means that learners cannot rely on phonics alone but must also memorise irregular spellings, develop awareness of morphological patterns, and engage with a set of orthographic rules that often appear inconsistent. For second language learners, especially those who come from transparent orthographic systems, this irregularity frequently results in errors rooted in phonetic approximations.

Research in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts has consistently shown that spelling remains one of the most difficult aspects of language learning. Abbott, Berninger, and Fayol (2010) note that ESL learners develop spelling competence more slowly than native speakers because of limited exposure to written English and interference from their home languages (Kormos & Indrarathne, 2025). Similarly, Kemp & Treiman, (2023) stress that spelling is not a mechanical skill but an important element of second language acquisition, as it requires mastery of phonology, morphology, and orthography simultaneously. Studies in multilingual classrooms across the world indicate that ESL learners often rely on phonetic spelling, omit letters, or confuse homophones, patterns that were also evident among student teachers at the Iranian University.

The multilingual nature of the Iranian context introduces an additional layer of complexity. Zano, Mgijima & Mpiti (2025) emphasise that Iranian learners often begin their schooling in

their home languages before transitioning to English as the medium of instruction in later grades. This transition is seldom smooth, as many learners are not fully proficient in English when it becomes the language of learning and teaching. Magaba (2023) specifically identifies spelling as one of the most persistent challenges faced by English Additional Language learners in Iran, with common mistakes reflecting the direct transfer of rules from indigenous languages. These challenges do not disappear at the tertiary level. Instead, they resurface in the academic writing of student teachers, who must not only overcome their own problems but also learn to support learners who face the same obstacles.

Addressing these challenges requires carefully designed pedagogical interventions. In their meta-analysis of spelling instruction, Van den Boer & Bree (2024) argue that explicit teaching of spelling rules and irregular words produces far more effective outcomes than incidental correction or rote memorisation. While phonics-based methods have long been central to spelling instruction, scholars warn that phonics alone is inadequate for English because of its high frequency of irregular word forms. Supporting this perspective, Sulistyawati, Nugroho, & Bram (2021) show that developing morphological awareness, understanding prefixes, suffixes, and root words, not only improves spelling accuracy but also enriches learners' vocabulary and reading comprehension. In the same vein, Hamilton-Hinch et al. (2023) highlight the benefits of peer-assisted learning, noting that collaborative activities enhance engagement, motivation, and collective responsibility for learning. Moreover, the incorporation of technology into spelling instruction has grown increasingly significant. Yen, Hashim, & Yunus (2022) demonstrate that digital tools, including spell-check software and online writing platforms, boost learner motivation and provide immediate corrective feedback, helping prevent the consolidation of errors.

The theoretical foundations of spelling instruction are crucial for understanding the difficulties encountered by student teachers. Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist theory suggests that learning is a socially mediated process, with knowledge constructed through interaction and scaffolding (Taber, 2025). This framework highlights the importance of peer learning and technology as scaffolds that help learners function within their Zone of Proximal Development. In a complementary vein, Ehri's (2014) theory of orthographic mapping provides a cognitive perspective on how learners encode, store, and retrieve word forms, processes that are essential for both spelling and reading proficiency. Together, these theories emphasise the need for instructional approaches that are interactive, structured, and responsive to learners' linguistic backgrounds.

Despite the rich body of international research on spelling, there remains a noticeable gap in studies focusing on university-level student teachers in Iran. Much of the existing scholarship, such as the work of Zitha (2024) and Kubuzie, Rwodzi & Smith (2025), concentrates on spelling challenges at the primary and secondary school levels. Yet the difficulties experienced by student teachers are more critical, as these individuals are preparing to become the very professionals responsible for teaching literacy in schools. This study therefore contributes to filling that gap by exploring the spelling problems and teaching strategies for student teachers at the Iranian University to improve their academic writing and enhance their pedagogical competence.

3. Research Methods

This study used a qualitative descriptive research design to examine spelling problems and teaching strategies among student teachers at a Iranian University. The approach was considered suitable because it provided a platform to explore participants' experiences, uncover the nature of spelling challenges, and identify pedagogical interventions in a detailed and contextsensitive manner (Hirose & Creswell, 2023).

The participants were purposively selected to include those most directly engaged in the teaching and learning of spelling. The sample comprised twenty Level One English student teachers, five English Education lecturers, and two language development specialists. This composition allowed student teachers to share their spelling challenges and coping strategies, lecturers to reflect on classroom practices and instructional approaches, and specialists to provide professional insights into language acquisition and development.

Data were collected through four complementary methods to provide a thorough understanding of spelling difficulties and instructional approaches. Semi-structured interviews allowed students, lecturers, and specialists to reflect on spelling difficulties and suggest practical solutions. Focus group discussions with student teachers provided collective insights, revealing shared struggles with commonly misspelt words such as fourty, begining, becouse, imediately, and stationary. Classroom observations allowed the researcher to observe spelling difficulties and instructional strategies firsthand, noting how students tackled unfamiliar words and how lecturers offered guidance. In addition, analysis of students' written assignments helped identify recurring errors and patterns, such as the confusion between stationary and stationery or dinning and dining.

The data were analysed using thematic content analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2023). This process involved coding transcripts, categorising recurring ideas, and developing themes that reflected both the nature of students' spelling problems and the strategies applied or suggested to address them. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking with participants, peer debriefing with colleagues, and maintaining a detailed audit trail. These measures enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

Overall, the methodology provided a clear and flexible framework that captured spelling difficulties in depth while also documenting strategies from those directly involved in teaching and learning English at the foundation level.

4. Results

The findings of this study revealed two broad patterns: the common spelling difficulties experienced by foundation student teachers at the Iranian University, and the strategies considered effective by students, lecturers, and language development specialists in addressing these challenges. These patterns emerged consistently across interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and analysis of written assignments. a) Student Teachers' Spelling Challenges.

The first theme focused on the consistent spelling difficulties of foundation student teachers. Analysis of the written assignments showed that certain errors appeared repeatedly, including fourty for forty, begining for beginning, becouse for because, imediately for immediately, stationary instead of stationery, theoratical for theoretical, and dinning room for

dining room. The recurrence of these errors suggested deep-rooted habits and misunderstandings about English orthography rather than isolated mistakes.

During focus group discussions, students openly reflected on these challenges. One participant pointed out:

> "I always write 'becouse' because that is how it sounds when I say it. Even when the lecturer marks it wrong, I still repeat it in the next essay."

Another student described the challenge of doubling consonants:

> "Words like 'beginning' confuse me. I never know when to put double 'n' or not. Sometimes I just guess."

Interviews revealed that mother tongue interference played a central role in shaping these errors. Several students explained that their home languages lack certain phonemes or orthographic conventions found in English. One participant pointed out:

> "In Persion we don't have the same sounds, so when I write English I spell it the way I pronounce it. That is why I write 'imediately' without the double 'm'."

Lecturers confirmed this trend, observing that many students relied on phonetic spelling rather than orthographic rules:

> "They spell as they speak. The influence of home languages is strong, and they have not been taught to look beyond pronunciation when writing."

Language development specialists also noted that many errors reflected underlying gaps in learners' knowledge of word structure and morphology, not just pronunciation issues. One specialist explained:

> "When students consistently write 'theoratical' instead of 'theoretical,' it shows that they have not internalised the morphological rules of English. Understanding prefixes, roots, and suffixes is essential."

Students additionally reported that earlier schooling did not adequately prepare them for English spelling. A participant stated:

> "At school, we were told to memorise words for tests, but no one explained the rules. After the test, I would forget, so now at university I still struggle."

Collectively, these perspectives indicate that spelling difficulties arise from phonological interference, insufficient prior instruction, and reliance on memorisation rather than understanding word structures.

b) Strategies to Overcome Spelling Problems

Despite these challenges, participants suggested several strategies for addressing spelling problems. A common recommendation was explicit teaching of spelling rules, including word formation, consonant doubling, and the distinction between commonly confused words. One student remarked:

"If lecturers can explain why 'stationary' is different from 'stationery', I will remember it better. Just telling me it is wrong does not help." Repetitive practice was also highlighted:

> "We need to write the words many times, not just once. When I write it again and again, it stays in my mind."

Peer-assisted learning emerged as effective. Students valued working in pairs or groups to identify and correct mistakes:

> "When my friend shows me my mistake, I don't feel bad. We laugh and correct each other, and then I remember the right spelling."

Lecturers emphasised the role of technology, such as spell-check tools, online quizzes, and educational apps:

> "When students use spell-check, they become aware of their mistakes immediately. Technology gives them feedback faster than waiting for an essay to be marked."

Language development specialists also recommended morphological instruction. Understanding roots, prefixes, and suffixes helped students spell complex words correctly:

> "If students learn prefixes, roots, and suffixes, they can understand why 'theoretical' must have an extra 'e' before the suffix. It is not just memorising but understanding the structure of words."

Finally, both students and lecturers emphasised the need for consistent feedback. One student reflected:

> "When lecturers underline mistakes and show the right word, I try to use it correctly next time. Feedback helps me not to repeat the same error."

Overall, the findings suggest that a multimodal approach combining explicit instruction, repetitive practice, peer-assisted learning, technological support, morphological awareness, and consistent feedback is most effective in addressing persistent spelling difficulties. The integration of perspectives from students, lecturers, and language development specialists highlights the need for a holistic and context-sensitive framework for spelling instruction at the foundation level.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that foundation student teachers at the Iranian University experience consistent spelling problems, which are influenced by phonological interference, insufficient prior instruction, and reliance on rote memorisation rather than morphological or rule-based knowledge. Errors such as fourty, begining, becouse, imediately, stationary, theoratical, and dinning room demonstrate the depth of these challenges and confirm observations in previous studies showing that spelling difficulties among ESL learners often stem from both cognitive and linguistic factors (Ehri, 2014; Nation, 2019). The interference of mother tongue phonology, as reported by students and lecturers, aligns with research indicating that transfer from home language to English can create systematic spelling errors when learners apply familiar phonetic patterns to English orthography (Odhiambo, 2021).

The analysis also highlights that inadequate prior instruction in spelling rules leaves students dependent on memorisation, which is fragile and context dependent. As one participant explained, repeated memorisation without understanding leads to persistent errors, a finding consistent with Kessler & Treiman (2019), who argue that explicit instruction in orthographic patterns, morphemes, and word structures is essential for long-term spelling mastery. The role

of language development specialists in emphasising morphological awareness highlights the importance of teaching word structures, as students who understand roots, prefixes, and suffixes are better able to generalise spelling rules to unfamiliar words (Carroll & Snow, 2020).

In response to these challenges, both students and lecturers identified strategies that can enhance spelling proficiency. Explicit teaching of spelling rules, including distinctions between commonly confused words and guidelines for consonant doubling, was emphasised. The literature supports this, noting that clear, rule-based instruction reduces reliance on guesswork and phonetic approximation (Graham et al., 2018). Repetitive practice, particularly when guided and scaffolded, was also highlighted as an important strategy, consistent with evidence that distributed and repeated practice strengthens memory for correct spellings (Ehri, 2014).

Peer-assisted learning emerged as another valuable approach. Students reported that working collaboratively helped them identify and correct mistakes without feeling embarrassed, suggesting that social learning can foster engagement and self-correction. This is supported by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasises the role of interaction and scaffolding in language development (Vygotsky, 1978). Technological support, such as spell-checkers, online quizzes, and educational apps, was noted by lecturers as an effective feedback mechanism, confirming research that digital tools can provide immediate reinforcement and reduce the lag between error and correction (Chen et al., 2021).

Morphological instruction, highlighted by both lecturers and language development specialists, is particularly relevant for addressing errors like theoratical and begining. Teaching students to analyse the structure of words, understand suffixation rules, and recognise morphemes enables them to apply patterns systematically, reducing reliance on memorisation. Finally, consistent feedback from lecturers, both written and verbal, was emphasised as crucial in helping students internalise correct spellings and avoid repeated mistakes, aligning with research on formative assessment and corrective feedback in literacy (Black & Wiliam, 2018).

6. Conclusion

Based on these findings and the reviewed literature, several recommendations can be proposed. First, universities should incorporate explicit spelling instruction into foundation-level English curricula, with a focus on orthographic rules, word formation, and morphological patterns. Second, scaffolded, repetitive practice should be incorporated in classroom activities, allowing students to encounter target words multiple times in meaningful contexts. Third, peer-assisted learning should be promoted, as it provides both social support and cognitive reinforcement. Fourth, technology should be strategically employed, including interactive spelling quizzes, spellcheck tools, and applications that deliver immediate corrective feedback. Fifth, formative feedback from lecturers should be systematic and continuous, emphasising explanations that reinforce understanding rather than mere error correction. Finally, collaboration with language development specialists can support the design of interventions that address both phonological and morphological challenges, offering students a comprehensive foundation for accurate spelling.

In conclusion, effectively addressing spelling difficulties requires a holistic, multimodal approach that integrates explicit instruction, guided practice, peer collaboration, technology, constructive feedback, and professional support. Implementing these strategies at the

foundation level can equip student teachers with the linguistic competence, confidence, and awareness necessary for successful academic writing and teaching in the future.

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