

Spelling Difficulties in Malayalam among Lower Primary Students

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Abstract

In spite of the general agreement that spelling difficulties if monitored and identified early during the schooling will help in giving appropriate support, teachers and teacher-educators using Indian languages including Malayalam, while discussing language difficulties refer more to errors from English than from their mother tongue. In this context, this study identifies spelling errors with respect to vowels, signs, glides, consonants and consonant doubling, in terms of addition, omission and substitution committed in Malayalam writing by Grade 3 students in Kerala. Ten selected pages from Malayalam notebooks of the 100 students were analysed for errors in writing. Most difficult area in writing Malayalam, for beginners, is signs - both vowel signs and diacritic signs. Substitution in large extent, and omission in lesser extent, causes spelling errors. Seven types of substitution of letters that cause spelling errors in a Malayalam are illustrated. A few suggestions for improving spelling instruction are added.

Introduction

It is important to help young learners to develop an affirmative spelling awareness. Students' spelling difficulties if monitored and identified early during the schooling will help in giving appropriate support in a consistent way. For this purpose, researches can help teachers in the primary classes to be equipped by helping them monitor, identify, categorize and thus better understand and control, at least stereotype errors, through support for effective practice in the teaching and learning of spelling. Such studies and support are more often available in the case of languages used by societies that are more affluent. Nevertheless, Malayalam with a great tradition and being used by millions of adults and young children for their learning and development has not yet started to systematically develop a teaching-learning procedure for fundamental skills of reading and writing that suits its peculiarities.

An earlier study has found that 1/5 upper primary students have spelling difficulty, 1/3 of them had difficulty in identifying letters in Malayalam alphabet, more than 1/3 of them using vowel symbols improperly (Gafoor& Sajeev, 2009). This indicates that students fail to master alphabet

during the explicit teaching of it in the lower grades. Lower primary teachers, in a pilot interview for this study, revealed that a noticeable share of their students commit a lot of errors in spelling. Teacher education practice in Kerala demonstrates that, even today when it comes to illustrate the type of writing difficulties students encounter in the early phase of learning Malayalam, teacher educators and texts refer more to errors from English than from their mother tongue. Due to its lineage deriving from both Sanskrit and Tamil, Malayalam alphabet has largest number of letters, at least among Indian languages. This factor makes learning to spell Malayalam more difficult and prone to spelling errors, than among other phonetic languages. The variety of letters confuses young children at early stage of language learning. Errors are an inevitable feature of learning. They provide valuable insight into the language learning process. By analyzing the errors, one could build up a picture of the features of language that cause learning problems. Once the problems are understood in right perspective remedial measures could be planned. The study of error is part of the investigation of the process of language learning (Corder, 1974). Hence, this study attempts to identify letter level errors in Malayalam committed by students in lower primary schools. Such a diagnosis will give direction for adopting remedial strategies for eliminating spelling errors and adopt teaching methods to improve basic language skills, including reading and writing.

Objective of the study

This study is to identify spelling errors committed in writing Malayalam by standard 3 students in Kerala. It proposes to identify spelling errors with respect to vowels, signs, glides, consonants and consonant doubling, in terms of addition, omission and substitution.

Methodology

The study was conducted on 100 randomly drawn 3rd standard students of 11 lower primary schools randomly selected from Thrissur revenue District. The schools are either government or government aided. Malayalam notebooks of the chosen students were collected at the end of the academic year, and 10 consecutive pages taken at random for error analysis. Error analysis of selected pages from each notebook was done carefully with reference to writing of vowels (n=13), vowel signs and diacritic signs (n=19), glides (n=5), consonants (n=36) and consonant doubling (n=46). For each letter, addition omission and substitution were noted. Error was counted only if a student omits, add or substitute a given letter more than once in the

analysed script. Percentage of students who commit error on each letter was found out. area of difficulty were identified by rate of error in each category of letters (viz., vowels, vowel signs and diacritic signs, glides, consonants and consonant doubling) by dividing the number of errors under the category with number of letters in that category. Within each area, difficult letters were identified by proportion of the number of errors on the letter to the total number of errors in that letter category. Finally, letters that are substituted one another was identified and tabled. Discussion of errors at the level of individual letters are minimized as it creates difficulty in manuscript and editorial works for reasons of mismatch of fonts at various stages of publication; and, hence, tables are made as detailed as the publishers permit.

Results

Spelling difficulty in Malayalam by category of letters

Numbers of students who add, omit or substitute a letter within a category of letters along with rate of error within the category (Number of Errors in the Category/ Total Number of Errors on All the Categories) are given in Table 1.

Table 1

Number and Rate of Errors on Five Categories of Letters in Malayalam

Letter category	Number of letters	Addition of letter	Omission of letter	Substitution	Total no. of errors	Rate of error /letter	% of error (to total errors)
Vowels	13	1	0	37	38	2.92	2.83
Signs	19	91	211	289	591	31.11	44.01
Glides	5	4	23	19	46	9.20	3.43
Consonants	36	9	60	265	334	9.28	24.87
Consonant Doubling	46	5	19	310	334	7.26	24.87
Total	119	110	313	920	1343	11.29	100

Table 1 shows the following. On an average the students at the end of 3rd grade make error on more than 10 letters of 119 letters considered in the study. Students make least number of errors (rate of error=2.92) with vowels; and the most number of errors (rate of error=31.11) with signs for vowels. Glides and consonants are having errors rate of approximately 9 per letter. Consonant doubling has error rate of 7.26 per letter. Again, proportion of errors is highest (44%) from signs, 24% each from consonants and consonant doublings, and relatively less from glides and vowels. Thus, spelling errors

Vowel signs and diacritic signs, it may be recalled (Table 1), are the most difficult (i.e., number of errors=591, percentage of error to the total spelling errors=44%) for students while writing. Vowel signs and diacritic signs in Malayalam on which grade 3 students err while writing are listed below, in the order of rate of errors per sign (Table 3).

Table 3

Malayalam Vowel Signs and Diacritic Signs in the Order of Percentage of Error

Signs with high difficulty (>5% of error)					Signs with less difficulty (<5% of error)				
signs	Addition	Omission	Substitution	% of errors (N=591)	signs	Addition	Omission	Substitution	% of errors (N=591)
ഓ	4	8	1	13	ഓ	0	0	4	4
ി	3	5	4	13	ഓ	0	0	4	4
ഓ	0	4	5	9	ഓ	1	2	1	3
ഓ	1	1	6	8	ി	0	1	2	2
ഓ ഓ	0	1	6	7	ഓ	0	1	1	2
ഓ ഓ	0	0	7	7	ഓ	0	0	0	1
ഓ	3	2	2	7	ഓഓ	0	0	0	0
ഓ	2	5	0	7	ഓ	0	0	0	0
ഓ	2	3	1	6	ഓ	0	0	0	0
ി	0	1	4	5	Total				
					%	15	36	49	100

Table 3 shows that error in writing signs (vowel and diacritic) is also more due to substitution (49%), though omission is also is very high for signs (35%). Unlike vowels (and consonants, and consonant doublings), additions of vowel signs (15%) also contribute to writing errors. However, in table 3, it is notable that some signs are omitted more than substituted, and for a few signs, addition also is a major contributor to error. Error from substitution of signs could further be divided as 1) Interchange of signs, 2) Error due to similarity in script

and 3) Error from influence of colloquial language. Illustration of the types of substitution of signs, from the analysed script, is given below.

Interchange of signs	<p>൭ → ൭ ൧, ൫</p> <p>൫ → ൭, ൭ ൧, ൫ ൧</p> <p>൭ ൧ → ൭, ൫ ൧</p> <p>൫ ൧ → ൭ ൧, ൫</p>
Error due to similarity in script	<p>൩ → ൩</p> <p>൫ → ൧</p> <p>൧ → ൧</p> <p>൧ → ൧</p> <p>൫ → ൧, ൭ ൧</p>
Influence of colloquial language	<p>൩ → ൧</p> <p>൧ → ൩, ൭ ൧</p> <p>൧ → ൭ ൧, ൫ ൧, ൫ ൧</p> <p>൧ → ൩</p>

Spelling difficulty in consonants and consonant doublings in Malayalam

The total number of errors committed is equal for Consonants and consonant doublings (334 each; percentage of error 24.87 each), but rate of error per letter is more for consonants (i.e., rate of error/letter=9.28) than in consonant doubling (i.e., rate of error/letter=7.26) (Table 1). Consonants and consonant doublings in Malayalam on which grade 3 students err while writing are listed below, in the order of rate of errors per letter (Table 4).

Table 4

Malayalam Consonants and Consonant Doublings in the Order of Percentage of Error

	<u>Consonants</u>				Low / Zero Error	<u>Doublings</u>				Low Error	Zero Error
	High Error			% of errors		High Error			% of errors		
Consonants	Omission	Substitution				Doubling	Omission	Substitution			
ത	1	7	8	ഹ	ക	0	10	10	ജ	ശ്ശ	
യ	4	3	7	ഓ	ത	1	8	9	ന	ജ്ജ	
ഗ	1	6	7	വ	പ്പ	0	8	8	ദ	ഞ്ഞ്	
ക	0	6	6	ഷ	ല്ല	0	7	7	യ്യ	യ്യ	
ദ	0	6	6	ണ	ട്ട	2	4	6	ങ്ങ	ഡ്ഡ	
സ	2	3	5	സ	ന്ന	0	5	5	റ്റ	ത്ത്	
ര	0	5	5	റ	ത്ത	0	5	5	ര്ര	ബ്ബ	
ച	0	4	4	ഖ	മ്പ	0	5	5	ഞ്ച	നന	
ഥ	2	2	4	ഘ	ക്ഷ	0	5	5	ച്ഛ	ശ്ശ	
ധ	0	4	4	ഞ	ണ്ട	0	4	5	ണ്ഡ	തത	
മ	0	3	4	ഡ	ച്ച	0	4	4	യ്ക	ഫ	
ന	0	4	4	പ, ഘ	മ്മ	0	3	3	ബ്ബ		
ല	1	3	4	ജ	ഡ	0	3	3	ജ്ജ		
ര	2	1	3	ഹ, ബ	ക	0	2	2	തത, സ		
ശ	0	2	3	ങ, ഹ	ഞ്ഞ	0	2	2	ശ്ശ, സ്സ		
ജ	1	2	3	ത, ഡ	ണ്ണ	0	2	2	വ്വ, ത്ത		
Others	5	16	22			1	15	16			
Total	18	79	100¹			6	93	100²			

Table 4 shows that for both consonants and consonant doubling in Malayalam, spelling errors from addition are negligible. Spelling errors in Malayalam from omission of consonants is ≈ 18 percentage, but that from omission of consonant doublings is near 6%. Most of the spelling errors related to consonants (79%) and consonant doublings (93%) are from substitution of other letters. Most of the errors in spelling from consonant (78%) and consonant doublings (84%) are from errors on sixteen letters each from these categories, listed in the extreme left columns of the respective sections of the table 4. Other consonants and consonant doublings with fewer errors or no error are categorized as ‘others’, and are listed at the extreme right columns of the respective sections in table 4. Error from substitution of consonants and conjugated consonants could further be divided as 1) Error due to similarity in script and 2) Error from influence of colloquial language, 3) Error from Similarity in pronunciation, 4) Needless doubling, 5) Lapse in doubling, and 6) Swapping conjugated and non-conjugated consonants. Illustration of the types of substitution of signs, from the analysed script, is given below.

Similarity in script	Influence of colloquial language	Similarity in pronunciation	Doubling	Lapse in doubling	Swapping conjugated and nonconjugated consonants
ഭ → ദ	യ → ന	ഗ → ക,ങ്ങ	ത → തത	ക്ക → ക	ഷ → ക്ഷ
ര → രീ	ഭ → വ	ദ → ത,ധ	ക → ക്ക	തത → ത	ത → നത
ശ → ശീ	ന → നെ	ട → ട	ട → ട്ട	പ്പ → പ	ക → ക്ക
ഹ → ഹി	ശ → ഷ,സ	ധ → ദ,ത	ച → ച്ച	ൽ → ല	ക്ഷ → ഷ
വ →	ഹ → ക	ഭ → ബ	മ → മ്മ	ട്ട → ട	ദ്ധ → ധദ
ഖ,പ,മ	ഷ → ശ	ച → ജ	ന → നന	ന → ന	
ഗ → ശ	ഴ → യ,ഷ	ഥ → ദ,ത	ല → ല്ല	ച്ച → ച	
ഞ്ഞ → തത,	ന → നത	ത → ദ	ള → ല്ള	മ്മ → മ	
ന്ന	ഞ്ഞ → ച്ച	ഖ → ഗ,ക	ണ → ണ്ണ		
സ → ധ	നീ → മ	റ → ട,ട്ട	സ → സ്സ		
റ → ര		ന → ന്ന,ഞ്ഞ	റ → റ്റ		
മ്പ → ബ,വ		ട്ട → ട്ട			
ക → ക്ക		ദ്ധ → നത			
ണ്ട → ന		ക → ക,ഗ			
യ → ള		ണ്ട → ട			
നീ → ന		നത → ദ,ത			
		മ്പ → പ			

Spelling difficulty in Malayalam glides

Glides in Malayalam contribute 3.43% of the total spelling errors, and have a relatively high error rate of 9.20 per letter (Table 1). Glides in Malayalam on which grade 3 students err while writing are listed below, in the order of rate of errors per glide (Table 5).

Table 5

Malayalam Glides in the Order of Percentage of Error

Glides	Addition	Omission	Substitution	% of errors
ൽ	2	26	11	39
ർ	7	11	15	33
ൺ	0	7	9	15
ൺ	0	7	7	13
ൺ	0	0	0	0
Total	9	50	41	100

Unlike other letters, errors on glides are more from omission (50%), than from substitution (41%) (Table 5). Error from addition of glides is also high (9%), and is second only to addition of vowel and diacritic signs. The major substitutions of glides in Malayalam, noted from the analysed scripts are given below.

- ൽ → റ്റ, ത
- ർ → റ്റ
- ൺ → റ്റ
- ൺ → റ്റ, ള്
- ൺ → ല
- ർ → റ, റ്

Conclusion and Implications

The most difficult area in writing Malayalam, for beginners, is signs - both vowel signs and diacritic signs. Both substitution and omission of signs cause extensive spelling errors. For a few signs, addition also is a major contributor to error. The category of letters with least spelling difficulty in writing Malayalam is vowels. Addition and omission of vowels are negligibly few. Spelling errors related to consonants and consonant doublings are mainly from substitution of other letters. Glides in Malayalam also have a relatively high error rate while writing. Substitution of letters that cause spelling errors in a Malayalam for beginners can be from seven reasons. They are 1) Interchange of signs 2) similarity in script and 3) influence of colloquial language, 4) Similarity in pronunciation, 5) Needless doubling, 6) Lapse in doubling, and 7) Swapping conjugated and non-conjugated consonants. One limitation of estimating error rate from available scripts is that, students may not be using words that require a particular letter at all. Hence, the chance for making an error on that letter may not arise. This is especially true of a few

vowels, vowel signs and conjugated consonants that have limited use in Malayalam vocabulary. This might have caused in failing to identify difficulty with these letters, but that does not negate the legitimacy of difficulty identified from by this study.

Findings call for effective spelling instruction in specific categories of Malayalam letters. Teachers can concentrate on the identified difficulty areas, especially on substitution of signs and consonants. They may develop instructional strategies for reducing difficulty in spelling involving these letters. Teachers may keep a record of letters and type of error -addition, omission, or substitution- that creates difficulty in spelling. Teachers may further note which letters are prone to be substituted, and, during instruction, sensitize students of this type of errors in spelling. Teachers ought to provide an explanation with regard to the possible source or cause of error to bring about an awareness of what could be the potential contributory factor. They should make constructive criticisms of their students' work. Over-insistence on 'correctness' hinders the learning process. Further, when students are sufficiently exposed to the language through the various language skills of reading and listening, the possibility of making errors is minimized.

Early identification of difficulties through development and use of appropriate tests must be made part of primary school teaching-learning process. Teacher educators , especially, those who deal with language education may research and learn about spelling errors in Malayalam and the reasons thereof and make their realizations part of elementary teacher education curriculum. Teachers and educators ought to discuss with their students how to identify their errors and what the possible causes are. This would bring about a greater understanding of the pedagogical and psychological factors that contribute to linguistic errors.

Reference

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