

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation and Goals

Spelling is usually regarded as a fundamental element in learning English. Spelling ability is also regarded as a prerequisite to reading and writing development (Templeton & Bear, 1998). To evaluate students' acquisition in this area, most teachers would examine their performance through vocabulary spelling.

This is especially true in high school. Spelling is considered as a basic task students should fulfill in learning new words. Teachers tend to evaluate students' effort or ability on their performance of spelling tests. If they fail the test, most teachers would attribute the cause to their poor preparing, thinking that they do not work hard enough and consequently cannot memorize the vocabulary clearly. And rote memory is usually emphasized here. Many of the teachers think in this way, so do many students. Therefore students are advised to improve the situation by studying harder and putting more efforts on memorizing vocabulary. But some students still cannot do a good job even though they have tried hard. Their spelling errors are viewed as products of their false recognition, poor memory, carelessness or even wild guesses. However certain kind of errors are repeated by many students. This interesting phenomenon intrigues this researcher to explore their spelling errors.

In the beginning, the errors look random and irrelevant, but after a closer observation, some of them appear to have certain patterns. Is it possible that behind these seemingly chaotic and irrelevant errors, there are some regularities shared by the

students?

To explore the hidden factors governing the students' spelling errors, phonological rules will be examined first. Since phonics instruction has been incorporated into the syllabus of the English textbooks for junior high school, students are expected to have acquired some phonics rules and thus tend to spell words according to how they pronounce them. In another word, the errors are not idiosyncratic, but carry some patterns which are related to the learners' own phonological awareness. If these are correct, then phonological rules must have played an important role in the spelling errors. Some researchers (Wang, 1994; Chiang, P. J., 1993; Chiang, T. H., 1981) also share the similar idea to attribute some spelling errors to inaccurate pronunciation, but they do not explain further how pronunciation influences spelling errors.

As vowel letter substitution occupies substantial portion in spelling errors. This research will focus on the spelling error of vowel substitution with a purpose to resolve the following questions:

- (1) Is there any tendency hidden behind the seemingly random and chaotic spelling errors?
- (2) What factors govern the spelling errors and have them occur repeatedly?
- (3) What kind of role does students' phonological awareness in pronunciation play in the vowel letter substitution?

The hypothesis in this study is that the spelling errors of vowel substitution are not random and irrelevant. On the contrary, the seemingly chaotic errors actually share some rules with each other, the phonological awareness in pronunciation of the subjects plays a crucial part in the substitution.

1.2 Methodology

The present study is based on empirical data of a two-stage experiment. One hundred and six third year students in junior high school participate in the first stage. In this stage, we collect the data from a vocabulary spelling task in which students are asked to translate Chinese words to English equivalents. The purpose of the first stage is to find out the error patterns of vowel letter substitution in spelling and the possible factors causing the patterns. The errors found in the data are classified according to the replacing vowel letters. The findings of this stage are then further tested in the next stage. Six students showing similar error patterns in stage one are singled out to participate in stage two. The experiment in stage two includes three tasks-- reading, listening and dictated spelling tests, which are designed to verify the findings of the first stage.

1.3 Organization of the Thesis

Following the present chapter, Chapter Two will review studies on spelling errors concerning vowel letter substitution. In addition, the phonological systems of English and Chinese (Mandarin) and their contrastive analysis are also included. The different distinguishing features between the different phonological systems will be pointed out and possible pronunciation problems resulting from such differences will be proposed.

Chapter Three will present the empirical method adopted in this study. The content includes the subjects involved, the questionnaire and the tasks in a two-stage experiment, the procedures to conduct the experiment, and the way to analyze the collected data.

Chapter Four will present an analysis of the subjects' vowel substitution in

spelling errors. We would further examine the results carefully by categorizing the errors according to the replacing letters. Attention will be on the roles of pronunciation and L1 transfer in the substitution to offer an explanation about the subjects' spelling errors. Last, Chapter Five will conclude the thesis with a summary of the proposed analysis, its pedagogical implications, and suggestions for further research.