English Spelling in Swedish Secondary School
Students’ attitudes and performance

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Abstract

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Abstract: English spelling is without a doubt a complicated matter, and learners around
the world have trouble getting the letters right. My aim in this paper is to
investigate what words are particularly difficult to spell for Swedish students in
the ninth grade, what they think about spelling and English as a subject in
general, and how important they consider correct spelling to be. In order to
find this out, I distributed a questionnaire in two classes at secondary school.
According to my study, a large number of the students find it important to spell
correctly, and they also believe that their teacher would agree. A high
percentage of the participants are positive towards studying English. Their
most common way of getting in contact with English on a regular basis is via
TV and movies. 97% of the students wrote that TV was their biggest source of
contact with English. The results show no differences in spelling skills
between the sexes and neither did the origin of the parents have any effect. The
respondents find both Swedish and English spelling easy, but a number of
frequently misspelled words have been identified.

Nyckelord: English spelling, spelling characteristics, English as a foreign language,
attitudes to spelling, spelling proficiency.
English

I take it you already know
of tough, and bough and cough and dough?
Others may stumble, but not you
on Hiccough, through, slough and though.
Well done! And now you wish, perhaps
To learn of less familiar traps?

Beware of heard, a dreadful word
That looks like beard and sounds like bird.
And dead, it's said like bed, not beast!
For goodness sake, don't call it deed!
Watch out for meat and great and threat.
(They rhyme with suite and straight and debt)
A moth is not a moth in mother.

Nor both in brother, broth in brother.
And here is not a match for there.
Nor dear and fear for bear and pear.
And then there's close and rose and lose --
Just look them up -- and goose and choose.
And cork and work and card and ward
And font and front and word and sword.
And do and go, then thwart and cart.
Come, come, I've hardly made a start.

A dreadful language: Why, man alive,
I'd learned to talk when I was five.
And yet to write it, the more I tried,
I hadn't learned it at fifty-five.

Richard N. Krogh
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Introduction and aims

English is spoken by a great many people around the world today, and in Sweden, most of us come across it, in some way, every day. It is important to be able to express oneself properly and to communicate with other people in English, not only orally, but in writing as well. Letters of different kinds, instructions, and work and university applications are only some examples of writing as a way of communicating. One crucial factor to take into account when discussing writing is spelling. In the worst case, one single misspelled letter can change a word and alter the whole meaning of a text. In the popular view, correct spelling is a sign of education. Bad spelling simply does not look good.

Some words, such as believe, weather and even misspell, are, for some reason, words that are often misspelled. One can easily misinterpret them if they are spelt incorrectly and stand without a context. The misspelling wether might be either whether or weather. It is hard to tell what the writer means since there is no difference in sound, although the context would normally sort this out. English is quite a difficult language when it comes to spelling, due to its irregularity and many exceptions. In many cases, one cannot tell for certain how a word should be spelt merely on the basis of how it sounds.

In this paper, I will first introduce some history and characteristics of English spelling, and the reasons why it is regarded as difficult. I will also briefly compare English and American spelling. Furthermore, I will take a look at Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and at theories of how a person learns a foreign language and what kinds of mistakes a person learning a second language might make. My aim of this paper is to discover what the students think about spelling, what words are particularly hard to spell and what the spelling situation is like among Swedish students at secondary school. In order to observe this and also to confirm some of the claims in the literature, I have distributed questionnaires in two classes, and it is on these that I base the empirical part of my study.

2. Background

2.1 The history of English spelling

Before the printing press was invented, there were no particular spelling patterns with regard to English. People spelled the words almost the way they wanted, according to education and temperament (Baugh, 1965:251). Spelling standards were not established until the 17th
century, when dictionaries were introduced. By the 19th century, most words had fixed spellings (Wikipedia 2006b).

The complicated English spelling, or orthography, is to a large extent due to “the evolution of the spoken language and conservatism in writing” (Rollings, 2004:43). The spelling in Old English was affected by the Norman Conquest of England in the 11th century, when changes in culture, language and writing occurred. The monks had brought Church Latin to England, and the Normans brought French, which became the official language. Over the next two centuries, English took up many French words and anglicised them, i.e. made them more English-like, especially with respect to pronunciation. The spelling remained mainly unchanged (Calfee, 2005:6). However, some changes in spelling did take place. One example is the word *ambiance*, which has preserved the original French spelling, with an *a*, especially in America (Robbins, 2005). But another way of spelling the same word in English is *ambience*, which is also the most common spelling in Britain (Wikipedia, 2006b).

English has many loan words not only from French and Latin, but also from other languages. Most loan words have kept their original, foreign spelling, even when the pattern is decidedly un-English. However, some spellings of words have changed towards more English patterns, even though the original spelling may still be in use. Loan words are one of the reasons behind the spelling varieties that exist in English today (Wikipedia, 2006b).

The Great Vowel Shift, which started in the 15th century and marked the separation of Middle and Modern English, was another reason for changes in spelling. The vowel shift had mainly to do with pronunciation, but the spelling was somewhat affected too. The Middle English long vowels were raised and those already raised were diphthongised. For instance, /e:/ changed into /i:/ as in *deed* and /i:/ changed into the diphthong of, e.g., *mice*. The vowels in the Old English forms of many words such as *deed* were different from words such as *clean*, not only in pronunciation but in spelling as well. Later on, in Middle English, these sounds became identical, but the spelling did not, and this is another reason, among many, for the difficult English spelling (Wikipedia, 2006b).
2.2 Characteristics of English spelling

The English language is basically phonographic, i.e. sequences of written symbols represent sequences of spoken sounds. However, English spelling is difficult because the correspondence between sound and spelling is not phonetically exact (Venezky, 2005:7). One reason for this difference is, as mentioned earlier, that the spelling did not undergo the same changes as the sound system did after the printing press and spelling conventions were developed. The k in knife, for example, is a remnant from the Middle English pronunciation that included a /k/ sound (Rollings, 2004:27).

Almost all the letters in the English language have more than one pronunciation. The English alphabet consists of 26 letters, but the English language contains 24 separate consonant phonemes and 14 to 20 vowels, depending on the dialect, which shows that there cannot be an exact correspondence between letters and sounds (Wikipedia, 2006b).

The main complexity in English orthography is the spelling of vowel sounds (Rollings, 2004:14). The same combination of letters can produce different pronunciations and different combinations of letters can suggest the same pronunciation. One difficulty is the combination of the letters ou, which can be pronounced in many different ways. Examples of words containing ou are famous, loud, through and rough. Conversely, the vowel sound /ı/ for example, can be spelt in numerous ways. Seat, seem, key, ceiling and phoenix may serve to illustrate this (Wikipedia, 2006b).

Another aspect of the difficult English spelling is the way a word is stressed. For example, courage has the same initial spelling as courageous. However, they are certainly not pronounced the same (Rollings, 2004:31).

The English language is thus quite irregular, but it is easier than some other languages when it comes to the alphabet. By way of comparison, a person learning English only needs to have knowledge of 26 letters, whereas a person learning Chinese has to learn thousands of different characters (Rollings, 2004:10).

Today, chatting on the Internet and the use of SMS affect the spelling. Simplifications and abbreviations are used in order to speed up conversation and one can find spellings like nite.
instead of *night*, just because it is easier to write. *C u l8r* instead of *See you later* is another short form frequently used in chat rooms (Wikipedia, 2006b).

### 2.3 British and American spelling

There are hundreds of differences between British English and American English, which have developed since the first settlement of America. Words that have the exact same meaning can have different spellings in Britain and America. For example, in the United States, many nouns and verbs derived from nouns (such as the verb *analyse/analyze*, derived from *analysis*) are spelt with a *z*. Therefore, *organization* and *analyze* are the American spelling, while British English for the most part uses *s* instead of *z* in such words (AskOxford). However, the American *-ization* and *-yze* are becoming more and more common in British English as well and are in the process of developing into the standard varieties (Modiano, 1996:109).

British English mostly has the ending *-our* in words like *colour* and *flavour*, whereas the American way of spelling these words is normally without the *u*, i.e. *color* and *flavor*. Another example is the use of the ending *-tre* (in British English) and *-ter* (in American English) in words like *centre/center* and *theatre/theater* (Baugh, 1965:428).

A further difference concerns the use of *-se/-ce*. In American English words like *license* and *offense* have the word ending *-se*. In British English, on the other hand, the same words are spelt with the ending *-ce*, resulting in *licence* and *offence*. However, in British English, the difference between nouns and verbs is crucial for the spelling in these cases. The British English spellings *practice* and *advice*, for example, designate nouns. When these words are used as verbs, the *-ce* ending is replaced by *-se* (Modiano, 1996:108).

American spelling in general has moved towards simplified forms of spelling more rapidly than British. Redundant letters have been dropped, such as the *u* in British English *colour*, and simple consonants have displaced compound ones. One example is *traveller*, which has been changed into *traveler* in American English (Mencken, 1921:225).

Noah Webster (1758-1843) is the father of many of the changes that American spelling has undergone. He considered the available English schoolbooks unsatisfactory and was determined to simplify the spelling of American English. He is the main reason why words like *honour* and *fibre* are spelt *honor* and *fiber* in American English today, although the loss
of \( u \) had been witnessed earlier, for example in some of Shakespeare’s works (Mencken, 1921:231). Webster’s *The American Spelling Book*, published in 1793 and edited several times after that, was a huge success and sold more than 80 million copies in a hundred years (Baugh, 1965:425). The majority of the American spellings are due to Webster and the use of his dictionary, published in 1806 (Baugh, 1965:429).

The differences in spelling between British and American English often pass unnoticed since there are a number of British spellings still current in America, because some of the American innovations have become common in England too, and because most of the spelling alternatives mentioned above are accepted in both Britain and America (Baugh, 1965:428).

### 2.4 Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

The term SLA refers to the conscious or subconscious process that takes place when a language other than one’s native language is learnt, either in a natural or a tutored way; it covers all the aspects of language that the learner needs to master. There is no single way in which a learner acquires knowledge of a second language. Different learners have different ways of learning a second language, so the subject is complex. The study of SLA has therefore concentrated on the general aspects that are common for large groups of learners (Ellis, 1985:1).

An L2 (second language) user is any person who uses a language that is not his/her first language (L1), i.e. the one learnt first as a child. Using an L2 is nothing unusual. There are not many places in the world where only one language is used. For example, in London over 300 languages are spoken and in Australia 15.5% of the population do not speak English as their main language at home (Cook, 2002:1).

EAL (English as an additional language) refers to the use of English by people with other mother tongues than English. EAL covers both ESL (English as a second language, referring to speakers within an English-speaking area) and EFL (English as a foreign language, where English is used in a region where English is not the first language) (Wikipedia, 2006a). Nowadays, English is regarded as the most widespread L2 of the world, as it is used in many contexts: business, tourism, TV, Internet, music etc (Wikipedia, 2006c).
There are many issues to be considered in the study of SLA, such as the role of the first language, the natural order of development, individual learner differences and processes, the L1 input and the methods of the teacher (Ellis, 1985:6-16).

2.5 Spelling problems among users of English

A regular alphabetical spelling system is easier to learn than irregular ones. It has been observed that dyslexia occurs more often among speakers of languages whose spelling differs a lot from the way they sound. For example, in languages like Finnish or Spanish, it is much easier to learn how to spell, due to their very regular spelling systems (Wikipedia, 2006b).

It takes some time for children to learn how to spell. First of all, they have to have the knowledge of how the conventional spelling systems work, which includes knowing about the relationship between phonemes and graphemes and how to divide pronunciations into phonemes. Secondly, they have to be able to memorise the correct spellings of words, also referred to as lexical knowledge (Ehri, 1989:357), which involves remembering sequences of letters in particular words and knowing how phonemes in words are symbolised by these letters. When spelling, many actions are involved. To begin with, people go through their own lexicon to check whether they have the knowledge of the spelling of a specific word. If they do not have that word, they search in their lexicons for possible spellings and make a guess based on earlier experience (Ehri, 1989:357).

Writing and spelling were invented by human beings and nature does not help much in learning to use these systems (Venezky, 2005:4). The problems users of English as an L2 have with the spelling often find their expression in substitutions and omissions of single letters or pairs of letters (Cook, 1997:479).

In substitutions, the users replace one letter with another. The majority of vowel substitutions concerns the letters a, e and i. For example, in a study carried out by researchers at the University of Essex, e was replaced by a in misspellings such as catagories and machinery and vice versa in misspelled exactly and persuaded. Furthermore, e was often used instead of i, which resulted in misspellings like definitely, and i was used instead of e, resulting in errors like convinient. Consonant problems mostly involve the choice between s, c, z and t, causing errors like courses, persent and revoluzion (Cook, 1997:480-483).
The letter most often omitted by users of English as an L2 is, according to studies, \( n \) in words like *biligualism* and *designs*. When it comes to pairs of consonants, *ct*, *cq*, *ch* and *gh* involve the most common omissions. These lead to misspellings like *attracts*, *acquisition* and *scolarship*. The study actually showed that there is no great difference between L1 and L2 users of English in this area (Cook, 1997:483).

Another type of omission common among L2 users affects the final \( e \). *Blad*, *before* and *software* are some examples of spellings where a silent final \( e \) has been left out. The omission of \( e \) is also frequent before *-ly* and in the past tense and past participle forms, leading to *completely* and *likely*, as well as *happen* and *prefered* (Cook, 1997:485).

A third complexity concerns *consonant doubling*, which is one of the most difficult areas of English spelling as it involves aspects like the length of the preceding vowel, word divisions and differences between British and American English. Both L1 and L2 users have problems with this and misspellings such as *agreement*, *professional* and *proficiency* are to be found. Double *ll* is particularly difficult, to both types of users, where spellings like *control*, *already* and *carefully* are common (Cook, 1997:483-484).

According to Cook, the ten most frequently misspelled words among L2 users are *because*, *career*, *choose*, *interest*, *kindergarten*, *knowledge*, *necessary*, *professional*, *study* and *which* (Cook, 1997:485).

### 3. Methods

The aim of this paper is to find out what the spelling situation among Swedish students of English at secondary school is like today, including the thoughts and attitudes they have towards English in general and spelling in particular, and how good they are at it. I have based my study on a questionnaire distributed in two classes.

#### 3.1 Subjects

I chose to take a closer look at the spelling situation among students in ninth grade. The students are 15-16 years of age and most of them have been studying English in school for approximately six years. The school is located in a small town in central Sweden. The total number of classes in the school is 19, from 6\(^{th}\) grade up to 9\(^{th}\), with approximately 400 students in total. I managed to get 36 students, in two different classes, to participate in my
study. I have not separated the classes, but looked at them as one group. A larger number of participants might have been preferable, but considering the time pressure and other constraints, I considered 36 a sufficient number for my purposes.

### 3.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of different parts that together represent a broad approach to the topic of ESL learners and spelling. First of all, I was interested in finding out a little about the respondents, including their gender and interests as well as their parents’ native language. I also wanted to know in what ways the students came in contact with English on a regular basis, what they thought of English as a subject in school and whether they liked learning English or not, in order to see how important motivation is as a source of good spelling. Furthermore, I wanted to know how difficult they considered Swedish and English spelling to be, how important it was to themselves and their teacher to spell correctly and what they did when they did not know the spelling of a word, both at home and in school. Moreover, I wanted to see if the learners were familiar with any differences in spelling between British English and American English.

After the section concerning the attitudes towards spelling, I asked them to translate some, quite basic, Swedish words into English in order to test which ones were particularly hard for them to spell and which ones were easy. I chose words representing the kinds of problems discussed in section 2.5 of this paper, such as consonant doubling, omission and substitution, in order to confirm Cook’s (1997:483-485) claims. This section of the questionnaire was followed by an exercise where two spellings of a word were printed next to each other. The participants’ task was to underline the spelling which they thought was correct. Here too have I based the exercise on some of Cook’s (1997:483-485) claims. The last item on the questionnaire was to let the students tell me about their plans for the summer, giving me the opportunity to also study misspellings in their free writing. The entire questionnaire has been reproduced in the Appendix.

When I got the questionnaires back, I went through them question by question, summed up the students’ underlined answers and wrote their comments down. In connection with the “translation exercise” (question 12) and the “right or wrong exercise” (question 13), I tried to see whether there was any correlation between the students’ gender, ethnic background and
motivation on the one hand and their spelling skills on the other. The results of this can be found in section 4.3.3.

### 4. Analysis and results

In the following sections I will present the results in practically the same order as the questions occur in the questionnaire. I will use diagrams, tables or quotations in most of the sections. I will not use any decimals when giving percentages, but round off to the nearest whole number.

#### 4.1 Background information about the respondents

##### 4.1.1 Gender

The first question on the questionnaire concerned the gender of the respondents and as Figure 1 illustrates, there were more boys than girls participating in the study. 21 (58%) were boys and 15 (42%) girls. I will not go deeply into the gender aspect, but I will draw conclusions concerning the boys’ and girls’ spelling capacity and opinions of English in section 4.3.3.

![Gender](image)

**Figure 1.**

##### 4.1.2 Origin of parents

Question number two had to do with the origin of the students’ parents. I wanted to see if the students’ background had any effect on their spelling abilities. As one can see in Figure 2, 88% of the participants’ parents were native Swedes, 2 students had parents who were originally from Bosnia, one student had parents from Norway/England and one of them had Spanish parents. One person refused to answer this question, so I have calculated with the sum of 35 students here and 36 in most of the other questions.

The results showed no sign of differences between the spelling capacity of students with ethnic backgrounds other than Swedish, and those with Swedish backgrounds. I had not expected any either (cf. section 4.3.3).
4.1.3 Students’ regular contact with English

In connection with this question, the students were told to underline as many words as they liked since I did not expect them to come in contact with English in only one way. This means that the total percentage of the options in Figure 3 is not 100%. I have looked at each option individually and counted how many of the students underlined it.

Here I regard “books”, “magazines”, “chats”, “mail”, “e-mail” and “manuals” as things students read or write. These are different from “school”, “family” and “friends”, which can represent both written and spoken contact, and “TV”, “movies” and “radio” where the students definitely hear English more than they read or write it.

The results show that TV was the students’ most common source of contact with English. As Figure 3 reveals, 97% of the students wrote that a lot of their contact with English was through TV\(^1\). “Movies” (94%) was number two, meaning either through TV, cinema or computer etc. In third place came “school”. Not surprisingly, a large number of the students (78%) wrote that “school” was a way for them to come in contact with English. However, the percentage should have been 100%, at least in theory, since all of them study English at school for approximately 2-3 hours a week. After “school” came “chats”, which had the highest number of the six “read and write” options mentioned earlier. 53% of the respondents come across the English language by way of Internet chat. However, “chat” does not reveal whether the students have chatted with English-speaking people or chatted in English with other Swedes in Swedish chats.

33% of the students regarded “friends” as a regular source of contact with English. As with “chats”, this does not tell what nationality the friends have. They could be English or Swedish and so forth. Four options ended up with the same percentage (31%): “books”, “magazines”, “e-mail” and “manuals”. All these four options entail reading. 17% of the participants underlined “other” and wrote games, phone and computer\(^2\). “Radio” and “mail” appeared not to be such a big source of English for the students - 14% for “radio” and 11% for “mail”.

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\(^1\) After getting the questionnaires back, I realised that it would have been better if I had asked the students to rank the most common contact with English down to the least common one, instead of just telling them to underline all possible alternatives.

\(^2\) I discovered, when going through the filled-out questionnaires, that I should have thought of more alternatives in the section concerning the students’ regular contacts with English. Games for example, as some of the students wrote under “other”, is of course quite an obvious alternative. If I had suggested this as a possible answer on the questionnaire, even more students would probably have marked it.
4.2 Students’ views

4.2.1 Fondness for learning English

It is often said that motivation is of great help when one needs to learn something. With question 4, I was interested in finding out how much or little the students liked learning English, in order to see if there really is a connection between fondness for the subject and good spelling proficiency.

I gave the students four options to consider in connection with the question “Do you like learning English” and the most common answer was “Yes, a little”. Overall, as the results show, the students were positive towards studying English. 54% of the participants chose the
alternative “Yes, a little” and 27% chose “Yes, very much”. Only three students (8%) underlined “No, not at all”. In Table 2 in 4.3.3 I have listed all the respondents’ results, gender and interests in the subject. I will also discuss the possible connection between motivation and skills in that section.

4.2.2 Swedish spelling

This question does not reveal whether the students are good spellers in Swedish; it merely aims to discover their general opinion of it. The reason why I included this question is because I wanted to compare the students’ views on Swedish vs. English spelling in order to see if they thought either language to be harder than the other. 50% of the students found Swedish spelling to be easy, and almost equally many (44%) even regarded it as very easy. One student thought that Swedish spelling was difficult, and only one student found it very hard.

4.2.3 English spelling

The results I received for questions 5 and 6 were what I had expected. The participants considered English spelling to be harder than Swedish, although a high percentage (53%) found English spelling easy. 36% chose “hard” whereas only one student (3%) chose “very easy”. Not many students considered English spelling to be “very hard”. In my study, only three (8%) chose that alternative. As I have written in section 2, English is a language that has a difficult spelling. Many students agree with this, but still, the majority of them claim that it is easy.

Figure 6. English spelling is:
4.2.4 Importance of correct spelling

In this section I am referring the students’ views as to how important it is for them to spell words correctly. As one can see in Figure 7, correct spelling is “quite important” to 57% of the students and “very important” to 17% of the students. 26% chose “No, not very important”. None of the respondents chose the alternative “No, not important at all”. In their following comments, many of the respondents stressed that people would understand them, without everything having to be completely correct.

Some example comments from students who underlined the alternative “No, not very important” are:

The main thing is not to spell words correctly. It’s more important that you can understand.³

I like English so I do not care if what I write is right or wrong.

Because you can understand from the sentence what a word means even if it is misspelled.

Furthermore, examples of comments from students who chose “Yes, quite important” are expressed here.

If you spell incorrectly all the time, people might not understand.

I don’t want to be wrong in my writing.

³ I have chosen not to keep the students’ own spelling errors etc. in their comments, but to correct the language and focus only on the content. The same goes for section 4.2.8.
Finally, with their comments, the students let me know why they consider it “very important” to spell correctly.

Of course it is important to spell words correctly, because otherwise they could look like other words. It just looks bad if words are spelt incorrectly.

I do not like when others spell incorrectly, so I try to write correct myself.

I like spelling correctly.

As one can see, the most common word found in the comments is understand. Many students do not consider spelling as something extremely important. Instead they lay emphasis on the whole sentence making sense anyway. On the other hand, other students say that it is important to spell correctly and that people might misunderstand them otherwise. Another issue one can spot in the students’ comments is connected to their own self-esteem. Many of them expressed a willingness not to make mistakes and not to be wrong and claimed that it simply does not look good when words are spelt incorrectly.

4.2.5 Beliefs concerning the teacher’s view on spelling

Different teachers have different opinions of how important it is to spell correctly. Some find it important to be correct, whereas others are less exacting in this matter and try to focus on the content instead. Naturally, this has to do with what type of exercise one is dealing with. Sometimes one can feel the pressure from the teacher to spell correctly and I wanted to get an idea of the respondents’ notion of their teacher’s acceptance level⁴.

![Figure 8. Is spelling correctly important to the teacher?](image)

⁴ As in the other sections of this paper, I have considered the two classes not separately but as one group, even though they have different English teachers.
As Figure 8 shows, almost half of the students (49%) think that their teacher finds it very important that they spell correctly. 42% underlined “Yes, quite important” and two students (6%) chose “No, not that important”. No one chose “No, not important at all”. With these results it is evident that the teacher, or rather what the students think that their teacher believes, and the students do not agree on the importance of correct spelling. On the whole, the students believe it is more important to their teacher than it is to themselves to spell accurately.

4.2.6 Checking spelling at home

When coming across words that one is not really sure how to spell, there are different possibilities to consider. The alternatives that the students were given in the questionnaire were “ask a parent”, “ask brothers or sisters”, “look it up in a dictionary” and “make a guess”. I wanted to see what they were used to doing when not being sure about words. The students were allowed to underline as many alternatives as they wanted, since they might do different things at different times. The alternative underlined by the highest number of participants was “look it up in a dictionary”, which was underlined by 25 of 35 students or 71%. However, some of the students underlined other alternatives as well. The second most common answer was “make a guess”, which was chosen by 49% of the students, and 40% of the respondents ask their parents for help. One person (3%) wrote “Internet” under other, probably meaning some sort of dictionary on the Internet or the use of search engines.

Figure 10: What do you do when you do not know the spelling of a word when you are at home?

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5 Here too, it would have been better to let the students rank the alternatives instead of merely have them underline all possibilities (cf. 4.1.3).
6 One student did not answer this question.
4.2.7 Checking spelling in school

Just as in the preceding question, the students were allowed to underline as many options as they wanted.

![Bar chart](chart.png)

**Figure 11.** What do you do when you do not know how to spell a word when you are in school?

Just as at home, using a dictionary was the most common strategy when students not were certain of a word’s true spelling is the most common way. 89% of the students underlined this alternative. 63% would ask the teacher for help and 46% would ask help from a friend. 26% would make a guess, which is a considerably lower percentage for this option than in 4.2.6. In school, the students would rather either ask help from their teacher or a friend or use the dictionary.

4.2.8 British and American spelling

Question 11 in the questionnaire concerned the difference between British and American spelling. I thought it would be interesting to see whether students in the ninth grade were aware of any differences between British and American spelling and, if so, which spellings they knew about. 82% of the respondents were aware of differences and 18% were not. However, only 12% of those answering “yes” could give any examples. The rest (88%) did not have any examples to share or wrote something that was not a spelling difference between British and American English.

All the students who were able to give a correct example gave the following:
Color is the American spelling and colour is the British.

4.3 Students’ spelling skills

4.3.1 Swedish words translated into English

This part concerns the students’ actual spelling skills and includes items 12, 13 and 14 on the questionnaire. The first one is a translation task where the students were asked to translate 18 Swedish words into English. In general, the words are quite basic and perhaps what one can be expected to know at the end of the ninth grade. I have of course regarded a blank answer, which occurred in many of the completed questionnaires, as a wrong answer. In section 4.3.3 I have combined the results for both exercise 12 and 13, so most of the discussion will take place there.

When going through the answers in this exercise, I realised that apparently this was more difficult for the students than I had expected. No one had all the right answers, but some were close. Common mistakes that I have come across are, for instance, misspellings such as allways, onest, bye or by (instead of buy), controll, disapear, libery or libary, famely, orginize and disscuss. These examples confirm what Cook (1997:483-385) claims in that the misspellings in this study are very often cases of consonant doubling (controll, allways and disscuss), substitutions (famely, bye, libery and orginize) and omissions (Onest, by, libery/libary and disapear) (c.f. section 2.5).

In this exercise, American spelling seemed to be the preferred option. 56% of the students used American spelling and 44% British. The words concerned were colour/color, favourite/favorite and organise/organize. It would be interesting to know whether the teachers of today take this up in their classes, and whether they let the students choose for themselves which type of English to use when writing.

4.3.2 Address or adress, etc?

Table 1 shows, in the order of frequency, the most common mistakes made in exercise 13. This task does not really reveal the students’ skills since they have a 50% chance of getting the answer right through guessing if they are not sure about the correct spelling. I was also interested in finding out whether the students would choose the British or the American spelling of realise/realize.
As the table demonstrates, the word that was misspelled the most was *address*. As many as *77%* of the students considered *adress* to be the correct spelling. This might have its explanation in the way the word is spelled in Swedish – with only one *d*. The next most common misspellings were *belive* (51%) and *hopefull* (48%).

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Misspelled word</th>
<th>Number missed of times</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;adress&quot;</td>
<td>27/35</td>
<td>≈ 77 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;belive&quot;</td>
<td>18/35</td>
<td>≈ 51 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;hopefull&quot;</td>
<td>17/35</td>
<td>≈ 48 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;allready&quot;</td>
<td>16/34</td>
<td>≈ 47 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;wich&quot;</td>
<td>12/34</td>
<td>≈ 35 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;careles&quot;</td>
<td>11/35</td>
<td>≈ 31 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;exercice&quot;</td>
<td>9/34</td>
<td>≈ 26 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;diffrent&quot;</td>
<td>8/34</td>
<td>≈ 23 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;softwar&quot;</td>
<td>8/34</td>
<td>≈ 23 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Wensday&quot;</td>
<td>8/34</td>
<td>≈ 23 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;forrest&quot;</td>
<td>8/34</td>
<td>≈ 23 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;articel&quot;</td>
<td>8/35</td>
<td>≈ 22 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;invicible&quot;</td>
<td>7/34</td>
<td>≈ 20 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;necissary&quot;</td>
<td>6/34</td>
<td>≈ 17 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;difficoult&quot;</td>
<td>6/34</td>
<td>≈ 17 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;affraid&quot;</td>
<td>6/35</td>
<td>≈ 17 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;dicide&quot;</td>
<td>3/34</td>
<td>≈ 8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;does'nt&quot;</td>
<td>3/35</td>
<td>≈ 8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;catagory&quot;</td>
<td>3/35</td>
<td>≈ 8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;befor&quot;</td>
<td>2/35</td>
<td>≈ 5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;of coarse&quot;</td>
<td>0/35</td>
<td>≈ 0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I used some of Cook’s (1997:483-483) own examples in my questionnaire to really confirm her claims. For example, I used *software*, *category* and other examples similar to the ones in Cook’s article. The only item that all participants knew how to spell correctly was *of course*.

---

7 One student missed the last page of the questionnaire, which was the place for the other half of the exercise, and another student did not do this exercise at all, resulting in only 34 or 35 students as the total number of respondents for most part of the exercise.
As to realise vs. realize, 55% of the participants chose realize and 45% chose the more British way of spelling the word.

4.3.3 Overview of questionnaire exercises 12 and 13
In Table 2 I have put together the individual results from exercises 12 and 13, also including the students’ gender, the ethnic background of their parents and the students’ fondness for learning English (referred to as motivation in the table).

The table shows that there are no obvious differences between boys and girls as their answers are quite evenly distributed in the table. However, if one draws a line in the middle, there are more girls than boys in the upper section. 9 out of the 15 girls are to be found on the top half of the table, whereas there are only 9 boys out of 21 on the same half. Without trying to make this look like a competition one can find a boy at the top. He got the highest number of points on the two exercises, followed by three girls and another two boys. The last person on the list is a girl, but she did not write anything in either of the exercises.

Also when it comes to the parents’ background, no clear differences can be found. The students with parents from other countries than Sweden did not score particularly low and cannot generally be regarded as either better or worse than the others. Not even the girl with English/Norwegian parents got better scores than anyone else. Her results are somewhere just below the average.

When it comes to motivation, the ones who liked learning English and had answered “Yes, very much” and “Yes, a little” generally scored higher than the ones who did not like learning English that much. The 15 best results were achieved by students who chose the alternatives with yes as the first word (corresponding to a 3 or 4 in the table). Not surprisingly, the few who did not like learning English at all ended up below the middle or even at the bottom of the list.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality of parents</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Score on exercise 12 in the questionnaire</th>
<th>Score on exercise 13 in the questionnaire</th>
<th>Sum of exercise 12 and 13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17/18</td>
<td>21/22</td>
<td>38/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17/18</td>
<td>20/22</td>
<td>37/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15/18</td>
<td>21/22</td>
<td>36/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16/18</td>
<td>17/22</td>
<td>33/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13/18</td>
<td>20/22</td>
<td>33/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13/18</td>
<td>20/22</td>
<td>33/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15/18</td>
<td>17/22</td>
<td>32/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12/18</td>
<td>19/22</td>
<td>31/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10/18</td>
<td>21/22</td>
<td>31/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15/18</td>
<td>15/22</td>
<td>30/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13/18</td>
<td>17/22</td>
<td>30/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Bosnian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13/18</td>
<td>15/22</td>
<td>28/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13/18</td>
<td>15/22</td>
<td>28/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11/18</td>
<td>17/22</td>
<td>28/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9/18</td>
<td>19/22</td>
<td>28/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11/18</td>
<td>16/22</td>
<td>27/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9/18</td>
<td>17/22</td>
<td>26/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Bosnian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7/18</td>
<td>18/22</td>
<td>25/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7/18</td>
<td>18/22</td>
<td>25/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6/18</td>
<td>19/22</td>
<td>25/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8/18</td>
<td>16/22</td>
<td>24/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9/18</td>
<td>14/22</td>
<td>23/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8/18</td>
<td>15/22</td>
<td>23/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>English/Norwegian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7/18</td>
<td>15/22</td>
<td>22/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7/18</td>
<td>15/22</td>
<td>22/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6/18</td>
<td>16/22</td>
<td>22/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6/18</td>
<td>15/22</td>
<td>21/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7/18</td>
<td>13/22</td>
<td>20/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6/18</td>
<td>14/22</td>
<td>20/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3/18</td>
<td>16/22</td>
<td>19/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5/18</td>
<td>13/22</td>
<td>18/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3/18</td>
<td>14/22</td>
<td>17/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>17/22</td>
<td>17/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12/22</td>
<td>12/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2/18</td>
<td>5/22</td>
<td>7/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0/40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* With motivation I refer to question 4 in the questionnaire where the students should indicate how much they liked learning English. 1 = No, not at all, 2 = No, not that much, 3 = Yes, a little and 4 = Yes, very much.

\* Some students did not do exercise 12 and one did not do either exercise 12 or 13.
4.3.4 Spelling mistakes in students’ free writing

In the last exercise on the questionnaire (item number 14), the students were supposed to tell me, in short, about their plans for the summer. Some of them used all lines available, others wrote only one or two sentences and a few wrote nothing at all. Going through the questionnaires and looking at what the students wrote in connection with the last exercise and in their comments in response to certain other questions, I have noticed a lot of spelling mistakes. Table 3 reveals some of the misspellings found in the questionnaires.

It is hard to say which mistakes were most common, since the students seldom used the same words in their texts. I was prepared for a lack of regularity in this exercise, but I still wanted to see some of the students’ free writing in order to give me an opportunity to discover misspellings of words that I had not provided them with in previous exercises.

Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Misspelling</th>
<th>Intended spelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>becouce, becouse, becuse, becaus</td>
<td>because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>correct</td>
<td>correct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dose’nt</td>
<td>doesn’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>driv</td>
<td>drive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>easier</td>
<td>easier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hole</td>
<td>whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may be</td>
<td>maybe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meat</td>
<td>meet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>min</td>
<td>mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moore</td>
<td>more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>otherwise</td>
<td>otherwise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shod</td>
<td>should</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ther</td>
<td>there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tripp</td>
<td>trip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vacation</td>
<td>vacation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viset</td>
<td>visit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Discussion

Concerning the gender aspect of this study, I did not expect to find any particular differences and the results showed that it was quite even between the genders in exercises 12 and 13 of the questionnaire.
Nor am I surprised to find that the biggest sources of English would be TV and movies (cf. section 4.1.3). Furthermore, I got the feeling that fewer and fewer students read books, apart from the ones that they read in school. I believe that one improves one’s spelling skills when reading and writing a lot. The percentages on chats were quite high (53%) and that I can understand. Many Swedish people use English expressions both when talking and writing to Swedish friends and a chat room is the perfect place to write in just the way you want. I know from personal experience that people mix languages all the time, so even if the students did not mean chats as in ‘chatting with people from other countries’, they would still come in contact with English by chatting with other Swedes.

For a teacher, the result concerning question 4 of the questionnaire, must be encouraging. Many students had a positive opinion of learning English and very few had negative views on the matter.

With respect to Swedish and English spelling, possible reasons for why the students found Swedish spelling very easy and English spelling just a little more difficult, are a) that the students might find themselves to be good spellers of Swedish and English and do not see spelling as a problem, b) that they do not really think about how they spell and therefore find it easy, c) that they find Swedish spelling easy when comparing it to English spelling, or d) that Swedish spelling actually is easier than English.

That so many students look up words in dictionaries is very good from a teacher’s point of view. Naturally, we learn things differently, but when we do not know the correct spelling of a word, one good solution is to discover and read the correct spelling oneself, e.g. in a dictionary. If a friend or the teacher provides you with the answer, one may more easily forget the correct spelling. My teacher at upper-secondary school refused to tell us the correct spelling of words and ordered us to look them up ourselves. Although I sighed and thought it would be much easier if the teacher just told me the correct spelling of the word right away, I am actually thankful for my teacher’s persistence, since I learned a lot from that method. To make guesses is of course not a very safe road to take. Sometimes your guess is correct, because your own spelling lexicon in your head may well be useful at times, but if your spelling lexicon is not very big, you will probably make a wrong guess sooner or later. I agree with one of the comments reproduced in section 4.2.4:
[...] It just looks bad if words are spelt incorrectly.

I am not surprised that so many students knew about spelling differences between British and American spelling but neither am I surprised that so few of them could give any examples. Looking back at my own time at secondary school, I probably was not aware of any of the differences. I am not sure that the teachers talk about this in class. However, I think that they should, so that students know the differences and are in a position to choose for themselves in what way they want to spell specific words. The spelling differences between British and American English might not be of the greatest importance, but it is always good to have a basic knowledge of these two English dialects.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the study concerned – the students’ actual spelling skills. Some of the results in section 4.3 were not very encouraging. I thought most 15-year-olds in Sweden nowadays would know how to spell words like *always*, *because*, *with*, *family* and *library*, but I guess my expectations were too high. Most students got a higher result on question 13 than on question 12, most likely because they had a 50% chance to get the answer right by guessing, while they had to translate and write the words all by themselves in questions 12 and 14.

I did not get much out of the last exercise except some misspelled words, but that was the purpose. I was prepared for not getting much material to analyse, but I still wanted to discover misspellings that I had not forced upon the students, as I did in exercises 12 and 13.

On the whole, I am satisfied with the investigation and I believe everything worked very well, although I could have done certain things differently, such as giving the students the opportunity to rank options instead of only letting them underline as many as they wanted, and I should also have thought of more alternatives for question 3. These are matters that might have changed the outcome of the study to some extent, but not very much.

**6. Conclusion**

To sum up my findings, the results of my investigation show that 97% of the students regarded TV as one of their regular contacts with English. Most students were positive towards learning English and only three said that they did not like it at all. According to most respondents, both Swedish and English spelling is easy, although as a group they considered
English spelling to be slightly harder than Swedish. 57% of the students found it quite important to spell correctly and no one found it unimportant to have good spelling skills. However, they believed that their teacher considered it to be still more important than they did. A large number of the participants in my study looked up those words that they did not know the correct spelling of in dictionaries, both at home and in school, and 82% of them were aware of differences between British and American spelling, though not many could give actual examples. The fondness for learning English was to some extent connected to skills. Commonly misspelled words included because, address, believe, always, with and control.
References


Appendix

My name is Ida Fagerberg and I’m a student of English at Karlstad University. At the moment, I’m doing a study on English spelling and want to investigate the situation when it comes to English spelling among Swedish ninth-graders. With this questionnaire, I hope to be able to see some of your strong and weak sides when it comes to English spelling and also what you think about it. This questionnaire is completely **anonymous** and it will **not** affect your grades in any way. Thank you for participating. I really appreciate your help!

1. Are you a:

   girl____   boy____

2. Are your parents native Swedes?

   yes____   no____

   If no, which is their native language?

   ___________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________

3. In what way do you come in contact with English on a regular basis? Please underline as many words as you like.

   school   family   friends   books   magazines   chats   TV

   mail   e-mail   movies   English manuals   radio

   Other:

   ___________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________

4. Do you like learning English? Please underline one alternative.

   No, not at all   No, not that much   Yes, a little   Yes, very much
5. Swedish spelling is (please underline one alternative):

very easy    easy    hard    very hard

6. English spelling is (please underline one alternative):

very easy    easy    hard    very hard

7. Is it important to you to spell words correctly? Please underline one alternative.

yes, very important    yes, quite important
no, not very important    no, not important at all

Please give reasons for your answer:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

8. Is it important to your teacher that you spell words correctly? Please underline.

Yes, very important    Yes, quite important    No, not that important
No, not important at all    I don’t know

9. What do you do when you don’t know how to spell a word when you are at home? Please underline all possibilities.

ask parents    ask brothers or sisters    look it up in a dictionary    make a guess

Other:______________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

10. What do you do when you don’t know how to spell a word when you are in school? Please underline all possibilities.

ask a friend    ask the teacher    look it up in a dictionary    make a guess
11. Did you know that there are some differences between British and American spelling?

Yes____  No____

If yes, can you give examples?

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

12. Please translate the following words into English:

alltid ________________________________    beskriva __________________________

med _________________________________    diskutera __________________________

strand ________________________________    vän ________________________________

köpa _________________________________    familj ______________________________

favorit _______________________________    kläder _____________________________

bibliotek______________________________   färg ________________________________

ärlig _________________________________  försvinna ____________________________

organisera ____________________________  kontroll ____________________________

dagbok _______________________________  oskyldig ____________________________

13. Which spelling do you think is correct? Please underline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>address</th>
<th>adress</th>
<th>afraid</th>
<th>afraid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hopeful</td>
<td>hopefull</td>
<td>catagory</td>
<td>category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does’nt</td>
<td>doesn’t</td>
<td>believe</td>
<td>believe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of course  

careless  

decide  

necessary  

excercise  

realize  

diffrent  

softwar  

article  

befor  

Wednsday  

forrest  

which  

already  

different  

software  

articel  

before  

Wednesday  

forest  

wich  

allready  

difficult  

invisicble  

14. In short, please tell me about your plans for the summer:

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Thank you!

/Ida