

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ „ГОЦЕ ДЕЛЧЕВ“ - ШТИП  
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

UDC 81  
UDC 82  
UDC 008



ISSN: 2545-3998  
DOI: 10.46763/palim

# ПАЛИМПСЕСТ

МЕЃУНАРОДНО СПИСАНИЕ ЗА ЛИНГВИСТИЧКИ,  
КНИЖЕВНИ И КУЛТУРОЛОШКИ ИСТРАЖУВАЊА

# PALIMPSEST

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LINGUISTIC,  
LITERARY AND CULTURAL RESEARCH

PALMK, VOL 7, NO 13, STIP, 2022

ГОД. VII, БР. 13  
ШТИП, 2022

VOL. VII, NO 13  
STIP, 2022

# **ПАЛИМПСЕСТ**

**Меѓународно списание за лингвистички, книжевни  
и културолошки истражувања**

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**International Journal for Linguistic, Literary  
and Cultural Research**

**Год. 7, Бр. 13  
Штип, 2022**

**Vol. 7, No 13  
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DOI:**

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Меѓународно списание за лингвистички, книжевни  
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International Journal for Linguistic, Literary  
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The International Scientific Journal “Palimpsest” is issued twice a year in printed form and online at the following website of the web portal of Goce Delcev University in Stip: <http://js.ugd.edu.mk/index.php/PAL>

Papers can be submitted and published in the following languages: Macedonian, English, German, French, Russian, Turkish and Italian language.

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UDC 811.111'243'35:378.4(497.7)

UDC 811.111'276.6:60

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Original research paper

## **ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: A STUDY ON ENGLISH SPELLING PROFICIENCY OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS – LEARNERS OF ENGLISH FOR BIOTECHNOLOGY**

**Vesna Prodanovska-Poposka**

St. Kliment Ohridski University, Bitola

vesna.prodanovska@uklo.edu.mk

**Silvana Neshkovska**

St. Kliment Ohridski University, Bitola

silvanakolevska@yahoo.com

**Elena Kitanovska-Ristoska**

St. Kliment Ohridski University, Bitola

elena.kitanovska@uklo.edu.mk

**Abstract:** Spelling is more than just a process or activity of writing or naming the letters of a word, or a correct way of writing by combining words and minding rules of writing and reading in a foreign language. It encompasses acquiring profound phonological knowledge, morphological awareness, and sound knowledge of orthographic rules. Therefore, in order to be able to spell correctly learners need to have a proper control of the structure and sound system of a language and its spelling rules. The current study aims to present the current level of spelling proficiency among 54 B1-B2 level undergraduate students – learners of ESP – English for Biotechnology. The survey was conducted via an online anonymous questionnaire consisting of terms such as nouns, adverbs, adjectives and verbs that were previously analyzed and practiced in class. According to the obtained results from the survey the students' spelling competence has been categorized as not extremely poor, especially regarding the novel words. It was rather apparent that they failed in the spelling competence regarding the well-known words.

**Keywords:** *Spelling acquisition; orthography; ESP; English for Biotechnology.*

### **1. Introduction**

Spelling and orthography are more than just a process or activity of writing or naming the letters of a word (NSW Government website – Education, n.d.) or a correct way of writing by combining words and following rules of writing and reading in a foreign language. In language learning, orthography can have two

meanings. One is the way a language is spelt and the other is the way the letters are written (British Council – Teaching English, n.d.). They both encompass acquiring profound phonological knowledge, morphological awareness, and sound knowledge of orthographic rules. Therefore, in order to be able to spell, the speaker needs to control properly the structure and sound of a language and its spelling system. As defined by Graham and Santagelo (as cited in Limpo et al., 2021) “spelling—or the retrieval, assembling, and selection of orthographic symbols—is a fundamental process underlying reading and writing”. English orthography is rich in irregularity and inconsistency belonging to the category of languages with opaque and deep orthographies along with French, Russian, Hungarian, Faroese, Mongolian script, Thai and Korean. On the other hand, shallow or transparent orthography refers to clearer correspondences between letters and sounds. Such examples include Hindi, Spanish, Finnish, Turkish, Latin and Italian. Eli Hinkel in her *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (Hinkel, 2017) provides a thorough explanation on the differences between shallow and deep orthography, pointing out that transparency refers to the fact “...that graphemes encode language in shallow and predictable one-to-one correlation. Macedonian orthography is shallow and transparent. Opacity means that graphemes encode language units in deep and unpredictable many-to-many correlations. English is opaque especially in its vowel bi-directional mapping from letter to sound” (Hinkel, 2017, p. 485). In view of teaching and learning a foreign language, for example English, one of the factors that appear to be crucial for adult learners in their attempt to acquire successful pronunciation and knowledge of novel words is whether the L1 belongs to the same group of orthography, i.e. whether it is a deep or shallow orthography language. According to Bürki (Bürki, 2019) “adult learners of a second language (L2) rarely attain native-like pronunciation. One factor that may lead to non-target-like productions is exposure to the orthographic form of words”. According to this, shallow orthographies are rather easy to acquire in terms of foreign language teaching and learning, however, deep orthographies result in readers who rely less on grapheme-to-phoneme representation and more on whole-word processing. Learners’ mother tongue as a model language is believed to have a key role in acquiring a foreign language in general, especially, among adult learners, as they are already well-literate and proficient and cannot ‘escape’ from implementing the same rules applied in learning reading and writing. According to certain theories “...the linguistic abilities measured in L1 should predict literacy outcomes in additional languages. In other words, if a learner has strong phonological, orthographic, semantic and/or syntactic skills in L1, one would expect to see similarly strong linguistic abilities in the target FL, whereas, if the learner has weak phonological, orthographic, semantic and/or syntactic skills in L1, these would be expressed as similarly weak skills in the target FL” (Russak & Kahn-Horwitz, 2009, p. 3). Thus, if a person is competent in spelling and orthography in their mother tongue, it is highly probable for them to reach proficiency in spelling and orthography in foreign language acquisition.

Or if their spelling competence in a foreign language is poor, it is very likely that their mother tongue competence is poor as well.

### **English for Specific Purposes – English for Biotechnology**

English has become a generally accepted common language of technology and trade since the 1960s, and as of the last century, the English language has gained the status of lingua-franca, and has become a primary means for communication within the international community (Jenkins, 2014). Therefore, English gradually became necessary for research and at the workplace. English for Biotechnology is under the umbrella of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and since there are not specific definitions on every type of vocational or professional English, an initial point in discussing this matter further would be to start by outlining the term ‘Biotechnology’ as depicted across dictionaries. Thus, the term *Biotechnology* refers to ‘the manipulation (as through genetic engineering) of living organisms or their components to produce useful usually commercial products (such as pest resistant crops, new bacterial strains, or novel pharmaceuticals)’ and ‘any of various applications of biological science used in such manipulation’ (Merriam-Webster, n.d., Definition 1 and Definition 2).

Hence English for Biotechnology at undergraduate level refers to previously or later-acquired sound knowledge of English for Specific Purposes with a focus on content and vocabulary that entails the above-mentioned segments, processes and notions. Urszula Kaminska’s textbook *English for Biotechnology* (Kaminska, 2016), aimed for B1/B2 level technical English course for biotechnology students, comprises five thematic parts: Biotechnology Basics, Molecular Biotechnology, Pharmaceutical Biotechnology, Biotechnology of Food, and Environmental Biotechnology. Since there is no preparatory course nor a mandatory pre-requisite for enrolling in the compulsory subjects *English for Biotechnology* at the public universities in North Macedonia, the first year students of the undergraduate study programs such as Food Quality and Safety, Technology of Animal Product and Zootechnics are left with their individual knowledge acquired at high school or a particular vocational secondary school, where certain areas of the ESP curricula were postulated in their English courses. Hence, understandably, switching from using and studying General English (this does not refer to all students) to English for Biotechnology does not appear to be a smooth process for some of the students. On the contrary, they find it rather puzzling, especially when it comes to reading comprehension of texts with technical terminology and specific vocabulary, practicing pronunciation, as well as spelling and orthography.

### **Methodology**

The current study aims to present the current level of spelling and orthographic proficiency of undergraduate students – learners of ESP – English for Biotechnology. The respondents were given a questionnaire to be filled online adapted in Google Forms owing to the fact that the lessons and practical

classes were done in hybrid manner due to the Covid-19 recommendations. The respondents were 54 Macedonian students from the Faculty of Biotechnical Sciences, at St. Kliment Ohridski University – Bitola, Macedonia, aged 18-22. Given that English as a foreign language is a mandatory subject in elementary and secondary education in Macedonia, the general proficiency level of students when they enroll at university ranges between B1 and B2. Due to the fact that the students' mother tongue is considered as a language with shallow or transparent orthography and the English is quite the opposite i.e. deep and opaque, it is expected that the results would indicate rather poor spelling competence level, especially regarding the novel words. The respondents who participated in the survey attended and passed ESP – English for Biotechnology as a compulsory course in the first semester of their studies. The survey was conducted at the beginning of the second semester and the participants were asked to complete the survey honestly and in a timely manner. Eventually, the students' answers in the questionnaires were thoroughly analyzed, and the results of the survey are presented and discussed in detail below.

### **Instrument**

The study explored the proficiency level of students regarding words, i.e. terms that the respondents were exposed to in their first semester of study within their ESP course, particularly aiming to investigate the general spelling competence i.e. whether they have acquired well the new terminology and whether they remember previously acquired terms. The questionnaire was designed similarly to a random spelling test for commercial use, and it included 20 questions providing definition of given terms for which the respondent needed to choose one from the four spelling options given in the questionnaire. The investigated terminology included nouns, adverbs, adjectives and verbs. The novel words were introduced to the students for the very first time in the English for Biotechnology class and the already known words were re-introduced as well. Specifically, five out of 20 terms are not newly-learned words, thus three of them are believed to be previously acquired (accommodate, maintain and yoghurt) and two of them, besides being acquired before, are commonly-known and frequently used on a daily basis (calendar and moisture).

### **Results and Discussion**

In order to provide a detailed analysis of the results, the authors provide visual demonstration of the respondents' results. As mentioned before, the questionnaire was given to 54 students who provided answers to all 20 questions in the questionnaire.

Frequently missed questions

Question	Correct responses
1. "To provide with something desired, needed or suited." -- M-W.com	20 / 54
2. "to a large degree" The quality of their products has improved _____ over the last five years.	16 / 54
8. "the fact or process of becoming worse"	24 / 54
9. "food produced by bacterial fermentation of milk"	25 / 54
19. "very great in amount or level, or extremely good"	26 / 54
20. "a long line or hollow that is formed or cut into the surface of something"	18 / 54

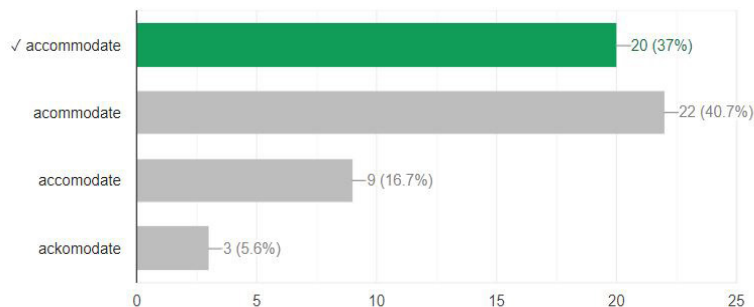
**Figure 1.** Frequently missed questions

Figure 1 presents the full list of questions with a less than 50% correct response rate. The correct options of the questions 1, 2, 8, 9, 19 and 20 are as follows: 1-accommodate; 2-substantially; 8-deterioration; 9-yoghurt; 19-tremendous; and 20-furrow. The highest score of incorrect responses refers to ‘tremendous’ with 26 respondents out of 54 choosing a wrong spelling option and the lowest score of incorrect responses goes to ‘substantially’ with 16 respondents out of 54 choosing a wrong spelling option.

1. "To provide with something desired, needed or suited." -- M-W.com

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20 / 54 correct responses



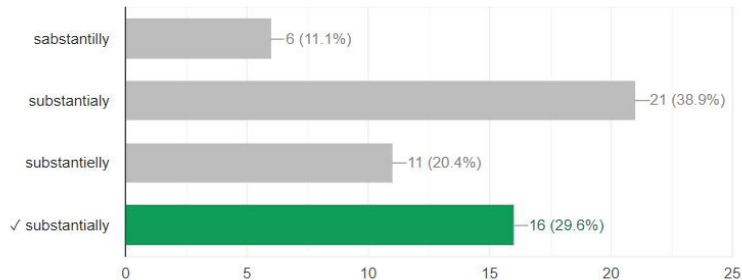
**Figure 2.** Question No.1 with less than 50% correct response rate

Figure 2 offers a detailed presentation of correct and incorrect answers in percentages with respect to Question No.1. According to the figure the correct answer was provided by 37% or 20 respondents. 40.7% or 20 of them opted for “aCommodate”, 16.7% or nine of them chose “accoModate” and 5.6% or just three of them opted for “acKomodate”.



2. "to a large degree" The quality of their products has improved \_\_\_\_\_ over the last five years. [Copy](#)

16 / 54 correct responses



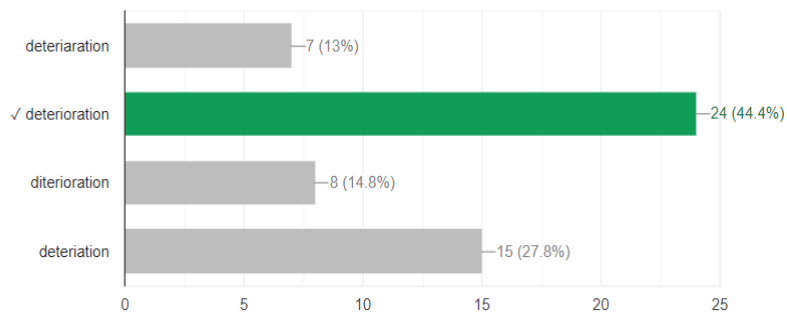
**Figure 3.** Question No. 2 with less than 50% correct response rate

Figure 3 presents a detail presentation of correct and incorrect answers in percentages regarding Question No. 2. According to the figure, the correct answer was provided by 29.6% or 16 respondents; 38.9% or 21 of them opted for “substantialy”; 20.4% or 11 of them chose “substantielly”, and 11.1% or six of them chose “sAbstantilly”.

8. "the fact or process of becoming worse"

[Copy](#)

24 / 54 correct responses



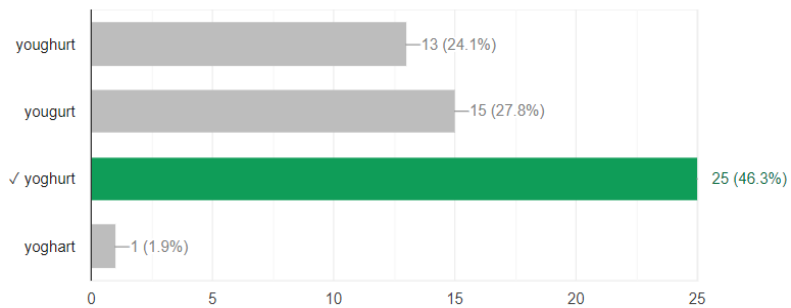
**Figure 4.** Question No. 8 with less than 50 % correct response rate

Figure 4 presents a detail presentation of correct and incorrect answers in percentages regarding Question No. 8. According to the figure, the correct answer was provided by 44.4% or 24 respondents; 27.8% or 15 of them opted for “deterIAtion”; 14.8% or eight of them chose “dIterioration”, and 13% or seven of them opted for “deterIARation”.

9. "food produced by bacterial fermentation of milk"

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25 / 54 correct responses



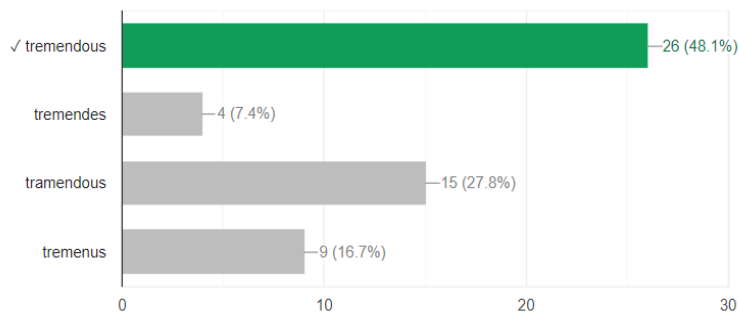
**Figure 5.** Question No. 9 with less than 50 % correct response rate

Figure 5 presents a detail presentation of correct and incorrect answers in percentages regarding Question No. 9. According to the figure, the correct answer was provided by 46.3% or 25 respondents; 27.8% or 15 of them opted for “yoUgurt”; 24.1% or 13 of them chose “yoUghurt”, and 1.9% or just one respondent chose “yoghArt”.

19. "very great in amount or level, or extremely good"

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26 / 54 correct responses



**Figure 6.** Question No. 19 with less than 50% correct response rate

Figure 6 presents a detail presentation of correct and incorrect answers in percentages with respect to Question No. 19. According to the figure, the correct answer was provided by 48.1% or 26 respondents; 27.8% or 15 of them opted for “trAmendous”; 16.7% or nine chose “tremenUs”, and 7.4% or four of them opted for “tremendEs”.

20. "a long line or hollow that is formed or cut into the surface of something"



18 / 54 correct responses

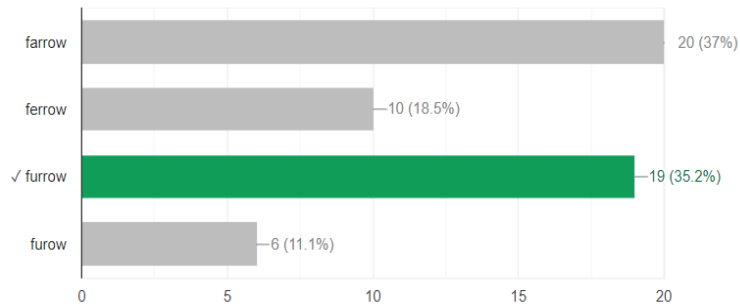


Figure 7. Question No. 20 with less than 50% correct response rate

Figure 7 presents a detail presentation of correct and incorrect answers in percentages regarding Question No. 20. According to the figure, the correct answer was provided by 35.2% or 19 respondents; 37% or 20 of them opted for “fArrow”; 18.5% or 10 of them chose “fErrow”, and 11.1% or six of them opted for “furrow”.

The figures 1 to 7 presented the poorest results of the respondents. However, if we take into consideration the rest of the questions and the total number of correct answers, the general results indicate that although the students’ level of spelling is not the greatest, but it is not that inferior as well. The questions with more than 50% correct response are presented in the figures 8 and 9 below.

6. "A register of days according to a system usually covering one year and referring the days of each month to the days of the week." -- M-W.com



43 / 54 correct responses

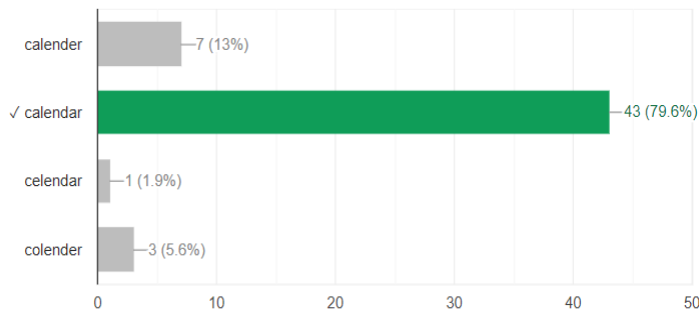
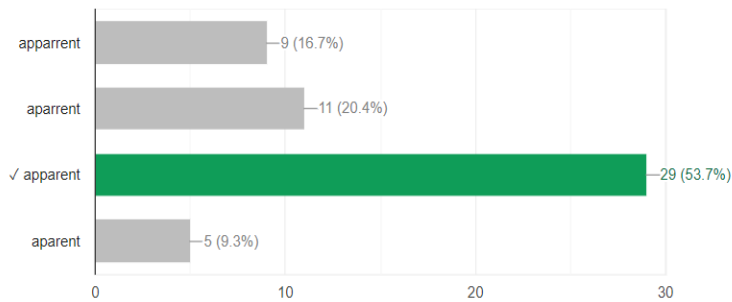


Figure 8. The question with the highest percentage of correct answers

4. "Open to view: visible. The changes were readily \_\_\_\_\_."-- M-W.com

Copy

29 / 54 correct responses



**Figure 9.** The question with the lowest percentage of correct answers

The results regarding the questions with more than 50% correct response rate are given in Table 1 below, both numerically and in percentages.

Question No.	Percentage and No. of respondents with correct answer out of 54
Question No. 3 “moisture”	68.5% or 37 respondents out of 54
Question No.4 “apparent”	53% or 29 respondents
Question No. 5 “permeability”	59.3% or 32 respondents
Question No. 6 “calendar”	79.6% or 43 respondents
Question No. 7 “ nutrition”	74.1% or 40 respondents
Question No. 10 “dairy”	55.6% or 30 respondents
Question No. 11 “ailment”	59.3% or 32 respondents
Question No. 12 “sustainable”	57.4% or 31 respondents
Question No. 13 “ancestor”	59.3% or 32 respondents
Question No. 14 “precarious”	53.7% or 29 respondents
Question No. 15 “deplete”	53.7% or 29 respondents
Question No. 16 “famine”	57.4% or 31 respondents
Question No. 17 “maintain”	59.3% or 32 respondents
Question No. 18 “homestead”	68.5% or 37 respondents.

Clearly, the number of questions for which the respondents chose the correct spelling option outnumbers the questions where their answers revealed low spelling proficiency level. However, it is quite significant to point out that the respondents have basically provided fewer correct results for terms that they were expected to be competent at such as “accommodate”, “yoghurt”, “calendar” and “maintain”, that are also frequently used and students are well-exposed to through mobile phones, computers, daily lifestyle etc., and surprisingly competent to “permeability”, “homestead” and “famine” i.e. words completely new and fully unknown to them.

### Conclusion

The present research was aimed to provide a closer look at the spelling proficiency of a group of 54 participants—learners of English for specific purposes – English for Biotechnology with a B1- B2 proficiency in English, students at a public university in Macedonia. The results show that even though the respondents' mother tongue belongs to the category of languages with shallow or transparent orthographies and their foreign language, English, is considered as a language with opaque and deep orthography, the outcome of the survey cannot be categorized as extremely poor spelling competence. Even though the influence of the mother tongue plays a significant role in acquiring foreign language vocabulary, spelling and orthography, yet the students appeared to be handling the challenges well, particularly the acquisition of novel words in written form. It is quite noticeable that regarding the terminology given in the questionnaire which did not contain only newly-learned words but rather some commonly-known, which have supposedly been learned and remembered due to their daily usage (Calendar, Moisture, Accommodate etc.), appeared to be not well acquired. It is inevitable to point out that surprisingly high score was presented in words such as "ailment", "deplete" and "homestead" which are actually terms that are heard for the very first time during the English for Biotechnology course in the first semester. The unexpected mid to well-ranging spelling and orthographic proficiency is most probably a result of the respondents' developed phonological and morphological awareness, and perhaps skillfulness in reading and listening concerning the successfully acquired novel words, despite the irregularities and inconsistencies of the English language spelling and orthographic system in comparison to Macedonian which is a complete opposite in terms of spelling and orthography.

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NO 13