

Spelling Revisited: A Case Study of Spelling Mistakes Made by Two Groups of Saudi English Learners with Different Language Proficiencies

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ABSTRACT---*Researchers have been somewhat concerned with spelling as a research area in the last several decades. However, as a shift from a text-based to a visually dependent culture has been observed, students' unconscious push away from reading and writing has affected their ability to spell words correctly, which in turn has affected their reading and writing skills (Reed, 2012; Willingham, 2015). This study seeks to determine whether the spelling ability of a group of graduating learners of English differs from that of a group of foundation-year learners of English. The study uncovers and analyses the spelling mistakes made by both groups using a dictation test. The findings showed that the people in these two groups made almost the same number of mistakes despite their different levels of proficiency in the English language. Thus, despite their significantly greater exposure to English, the graduating learners had not succeeded in improving their spelling abilities.*

Keywords: *graduating learners, foundation-year learners, spelling mistakes*

I. INTRODUCTION

Spelling is the ability to combine alphabetic letters in a conventional order to generate a word in a given language. A learner of a second or foreign language is expected to spell words correctly because such a skill reflects their literacy and learning achievements. Simply, correct spelling is sufficient knowledge of the target language's spelling rules and all of its general arrangement patterns. Writing and reading are two skills that depend largely on explicit spelling rules, as mistakes in writing and reading are embarrassing and may be costly in exams. Several researchers have agreed that poor spelling automatically engenders poor reading and writing (Gentry & Graham, 2010; Adams, 2011; Reed, 2012). Gentry (2004) claims that spelling constitutes 'a dictionary in the brain' for readers and writers; a good reader simply does a matching exercise of what exists in the brain with what figures on a paper. However, a bad speller will often develop a complex or a phobia that makes him/her reluctant to read words or even write them.

One of the reasons behind the increase of poor spelling among youngsters is the widespread use of sophisticated visual communication, particularly with the invention of smart phones, desktop publications and, more recently, social media. Visual communication is probably the only system that does not require users to have any basic

education. In scientific branches, for example, many data that notably require dozens of pages for their explanations are being transmitted through graphics and images because visual messages are attractive, less time-consuming, easier to understand and less subjective than non-visual messages. Expectedly, this pictorial turn, as termed by Mitchel (1994), has been behind the unconscious push away from reading and writing.

However, this pictorial turn does not affirm that the written format has become less important in communicating information; rather, it affirms that visual messages have the power to inform and persuade, especially among young people. In addition, people have become more and more reliant on spellcheck applications, which has made them less concerned with making mistakes. The use of local dialects and cyber slang in short message service (SMS) has worsened the situation. Teens often find it easier to use the local dialect because it does not have a conventional written format and hence does not obey any spelling rules. Some school teachers even complain that the use of slang has crept into students' formal writings. In fact, text messaging has contributed a great deal to the decrease in writing skills and the dropping of literacy levels.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Spelling in the English language is challenging to any new learner, as there is no direct correspondence between phonemes and letters. Spelling in this language has often been described as irregular and misleading (Templeton & Morris, 2000). A non-correspondence between a phoneme and a grapheme often leads to a misspelling. For instance, the letters 'ch' in the words 'character' and 'cheese' are pronounced differently. Thus, unless he/she is knowledgeable of its spelling rules and conventions, a new learner of English can hardly predict the spelling of a word by listening to its pronunciation. This is not the case in many other languages, including French, Spanish, Flemish and Arabic.

As a learner of a new language draws on the metalinguistic knowledge of his mother tongue (Cummins, 2000), an Arab learner's previous knowledge of his/her language does not sufficiently help him/her to cope with a new language. The two languages' lack of similarities is

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exemplified in their forms and sounds. With specific respect to its form, the Arabic language is not an Indo-European language that uses Latin alphabets, and it is written and read from right to left, unlike English. Additionally, some punctuation features, such as capitalization, are non-existent in Arabic. Furthermore, the lack of English phonemes in Arabic, such as /v/, /p/, /θ/ and /au/, also constitutes a spelling challenge for an Arab learner of English.

Another difference between Arabic and English is related to their consonant clusters. Arabic is known as CVCV, where a combination of two or more consonants is non-existent. Hence, the spelling of words such as 'bags' and 'keeps' may constitute a challenge to an Arab learner of English, as he/she is likely to separate the last two consonants in these words by a vowel: 'bages' and 'keepes'.

A specific variable that is questioned today is whether exposure to a target language suffices to improve learners' spelling skills over time: Does a learner gain better insight into spelling rules by attending classes and making use of language, or does explicit orthographic spelling make learners better spellers? Currently there is a controversy over whether spelling should be directly or formally instructed; however, in the past few years, with the deterioration of spelling skills, new voices have been raised in favour of the explicit teaching of spelling. According to Westwood (2014), spelling strategies and techniques can increase language learners' awareness, leading them to become good spellers.

With respect to Saudi context, most of previous studies have focused on the classification of learners' spelling mistakes according to Cook's typology (1999) which is based on 'substitution, omission, insertion, and transposition', or they have made contrastive a comparison between the English language and the learners' mother tongue in order to find out areas of linguistic interference. However, nearly no research has investigated the effect of exposure to English on the learners' spelling ability.

Al-Sobhi et al. (2017) attempted to identify the most common spelling mistakes committed by Arab learners of English. The four types of mistakes that correspond to Cook's (1999) classification system were identified, with substitution mistakes constituting the highest percentage of mistakes made. These mistakes are mainly attributable to Arab learners' lack of knowledge of English spelling rules; their dependence on their native language, commonly known as L1 interference; and the irregularity of the English spelling system.

In more particular terms and within the Saudi context, Zuhour and Fatima (2015) investigated the most frequent types of mistakes made by 40 female students in the Department of English and Translation at Tabuk University. While spelling problems were foregrounded, other problems that these students faced in learning the English language were prevalent, including substitution, omission, addition, disordering, segmentation and dealing with unrecognizable words.

Albalawi (2016) carried out research to explore the most common English spelling mistakes committed by Saudi students at Tabuk University. In light of the results, the researcher categorized the mistakes into omission, substitution and addition, claiming that these constitute the

highest percentage of Saudi learners' mistakes. The author attributed these mistakes to both the differences between Arabic and English in terms of their sound systems and the non-phonetic, anomalous aspects of the English language.

Similarly, Alhaisoni et al. (2015) conducted a study at Hail University that used 122 Saudi English students as subjects. The aim of the study was to investigate the English spelling mistakes made by these participants. Each participant was instructed to write a coherent and well-organized essay about one of four suggested topics. The four common types of mistakes discussed earlier (omission, substitution, insertion and transposition) were detected. In terms of their occurrence, omission mistakes, followed by substitution mistakes, were the most prevalent. These mistakes, according to the authors, were mainly due to the interference of the learners' mother tongue and the lack of correspondence between the phonemes and graphemes that characterize the English language and cause its spelling irregularities.

With the objective of exploring the spelling mistakes of English students in Saudi Arabia and providing remedial measures, Hameed (2016) undertook research at Qassim University. The most common mistakes made by the subjects in her study fell under Cook's typology. Even more interestingly, the author asserted that the spelling mistakes not only caused confusion for the language teachers but also reduced the learners' self-esteem. The learners themselves acknowledged their inability to retain accurate English sounds. They essentially attributed this difficulty to the silent letters in English words and the extreme differences between the English and Arabic pronunciation systems, as Arabic is written the same way it is pronounced while English is full of multisyllabic words and words with silent letters. Omission, as one of the most commonly committed mistakes made by the participants, is illustrated in the following examples: *blak (black), *jaket (jacket), *frind (friend) and *hous (house).

In an attempt to give a comprehensive account of the different types of spelling mistakes committed by Saudi learners of English, Al-Jarf (2010) collected spelling error corpora from students studying and potentially majoring in English at the university level, students in junior and senior high school levels, and college students who were leaning the English language for specific purposes (ESP). Al-Jarf identified two types of spelling problems: phonological and orthographic. The former refers to a lack of correspondence between a spoken sound and a written symbol. In other words, the misspelt word is not similar to the target word because 'the whole word, a consonant, a vowel, a syllable, a prefix, a suffix, a grapheme or a grapheme cluster is not heard at all, is misheard, or reversed with another' (p. 5). The latter, on the other hand, has to do with both confusing vowel or consonant graphemes that have the same sound and the deletion or doubling of consonants or vowels in the target words.

III. METHODOLOGY

Study Sample

Sixty students from the University of Jeddah's Khulais Faculty of Sciences and Arts and 30 students from an international school participated in the study. The participants were divided into three groups: 30 graduating students (GS) who had spent 98 hours exposed to English, 30 foundation-year students (FS) in their first year of enrolment at the faculty, and 30 students enrolled in an international school at which the medium of instruction in all subjects is English. These students were chosen as the control group (CG). All of the participants were randomly selected.

Data Collection Instrument

The study adopted a frequently used instrument for spelling: dictation. A word list was used, which included 40 words (see appendix) chosen from the words that the informants encountered in high school. These words were divided into eight groups of five words each with the following variables:

1. Words with [-s] endings,
2. Words with [-ing] endings,
3. Words with [-ed] endings,
4. Words with a silent [-e],
5. Words with suffixes [-ible, -able, -tion or -sion],
6. Words with [-gh, -sh, -ch or -ui] patterns,
7. Words with [-ck or -ous] patterns and
8. Words with silent letters.

Research Questions

The study represented an attempt to answer the following questions:

- a. Do GS and FS make the same spelling mistakes?
- b. Does exposure to English lead to a reduction in GS' spelling mistakes?

Hypotheses

We proposed the following one-tailed, or directional, hypotheses:

H1: GS and FS make the same spelling mistakes. (H1: $r > 0$.)

H2: The GS' linguistic proficiency in English does not help them overcome their spelling mistakes. (H2: $r < 0$.)

Variables

Independent variables.

The research depended on the following three independent variables:

- a. The GS, a group of students who have been exposed to English for about 98 hours. These students will be English graduates by summer 2019.
- b. The FS, a group of students in their first year of enrolment in the faculty.
- c. The CG, a group of students enrolled at an international school in which the medium of instruction is English.

Dependent variables.

The study investigated the following interval-dependent variable: the frequency of spelling mistakes made by the GS, the FS and the CG.

Statistics analysis

The informants' responses were analysed quantitatively by examining the frequency of the total spelling mistakes made by the three groups. Descriptive statistics were calculated to measure the central tendency and dispersion for three groups, and a one-way ANOVA procedure was used to assess the significance level of the observed results. In addition, a multiple comparison test was conducted to determine which groups were significantly different from one another. The overall alpha level for the statistical procedures was set at $p < .05$.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the frequency distribution of the informants' spelling mistakes. The findings presented here are based on quantitative data and are displayed using figures and graphs to better illustrate and comprehend the observed similarities and differences between the groups' performances.

First, descriptive statistics were calculated to (1) indicate and compare the groups' typical performances and (2) determine how the individuals' performances are distributed. Then, to fully understand the groups' differences through ANOVA, a multiple comparison test was conducted to determine the differences between particular pairs within the experimental and control groups.

Frequency of Mistakes

Total number of mistakes.

The total number of mistakes in the GS and FS groups were compared to answer the first research question (Do GS and FS make the same spelling mistakes?). The FS group's average frequency of occurrence (38.33 mistakes) was higher than that of both the GS group (33.5 mistakes) and the CG (0.26 mistakes) (see Table 1 below). With regard to how the obtained responses varied in relation to each group's average number of mistakes, a standard deviation test showed that the GS group (SD: 2.59) was more tightly grouped around the average performance than the FS group (SD: 5.33), while the CG (SD: 0.266) showed the most dispersion around the average performance and consequently displayed the same degree of homogeneity (see Figure 1 below).

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for the total spelling mistakes made by the GS, FS and CG

Group	No.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Foundation	30	38.3333	2.59088	.47303	37.3659	39.3008	30.00	40.00
Graduating	30	33.5000	5.33531	.97409	31.5078	35.4922	21.00	40.00
International	30	.2667	.52083	.09509	.0722	.4611	.00	2.00
Total	90	24.0333	17.35191	1.82905	20.3990	27.6676	.00	40.00

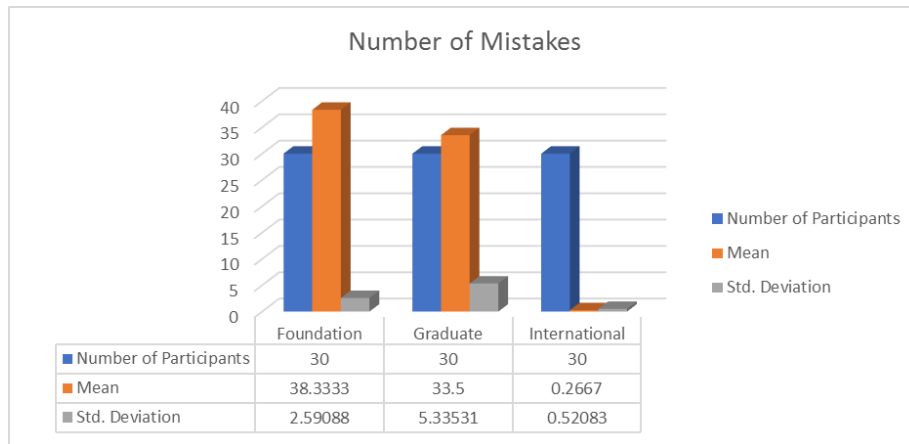


Figure 1. The number of mistakes made by the GS, FS and CG.

To analyse the differences among the three groups' means, an ANOVA procedure was conducted. This test yielded significant results (see Table 2 below). A statistically significant difference in mean productivity was seen between the three groups. To determine which groups were significantly different from each other, a multiple comparison test was conducted, which also yielded significant results (see Table 3 below). The comparisons between each pair of groups were statistically significant.

Table 2 ANOVA test for the spelling mistake differences between the GS, FS and CG

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between groups	25768.867	2	12884.433	1090.379	.000
Within groups	1028.033	87	11.816		
Total	26796.900	89			

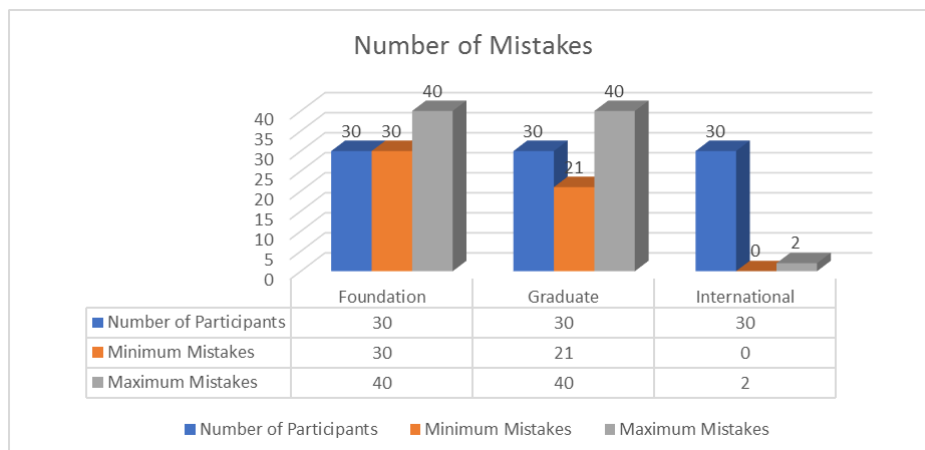


Figure 2. The maximum and minimum number of mistakes made by the GS, FS and CG.



Table 3 Multiple comparison test results for the differences between each pair
Multiple Comparisons Number of Mistakes Tukey HSD

(I) Title	(J) Title	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Foundation	Graduating	4.83333*	.88756	.000	2.7170	6.9497
	International	38.06667*	.88756	.000	35.9503	40.1830
Graduating	Foundation	-4.83333*	.88756	.000	-6.9497	-2.7170
	International	33.23333*	.88756	.000	31.1170	35.3497
International	Foundation	-38.06667*	.88756	.000	-40.1830	-35.9503
	Graduating	-33.23333*	.88756	.000	-35.3497	-31.1170

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

V. DISCUSSION

According to the study results, there is a discrepancy between the GS' level of education, which is supposedly high, and their ability to spell words correctly, as they scored low in the dictation test. As shown above, the GS' performance in the dictation test was quite similar to that of their counterparts, namely the FS, whose knowledge of English is considerably limited. On the other hand, the control groups' performance was found to be at a high level, supposedly meeting their expectations for learning and achievement. All the Saudi learners made the same types of mistakes, irrespective of their years of exposure to the English language. This led to the validation of both hypotheses, namely that both the FS and GS made the same spelling mistakes and that the time of exposure has no significant positive effects on the spelling competencies of Saudi learners of English.

The reasons that underlie the GS' difficulties with spelling words are numerous. For example, GS suffer from a fundamental weakness in spelling whose roots lie in the inefficiency of these students' high school education. Thus, when GS move to universities, they can often already be classified as bad spellers. Moreover, the words chosen for the dictation test in this study were selected from the lexicon list GS are expected to acquire, which proves that spelling as a teaching task is overlooked in high school. Such a spelling weakness may also be reflected in these students' writing and reading skills, which also stand as tangible proof of the neglect of these skills.

Alhaisoni et al. (2015) stated that Saudi learners do not take the spelling component of their learning seriously, especially since the technological boom and the spell-checking systems it brought with it. Most notably, students' insufficient knowledge of English spelling guidelines is due to the scarcity of spelling activities in textbooks as well the relatively short length of time language teachers devote to teaching spelling. With this in mind, the GS' failure in the dictation test points to the need for the explicit, separate teaching of spelling as a task in high school. Spelling teachability should be focused on more than it currently is even at universities. To this end, the idea that spelling tasks are old-fashioned practices is a fallacy. The advocates of such an idea have no sound arguments for why the spread of

misspellings among youngsters has been occurring. The same issue was raised by Said (2018), who asserted that learners are not instructed to focus on practical language competencies because they are oriented to learning grammar; thus, spelling and dictation are ignored. Said went even further to claim that the teaching of spelling should not be delayed until the university or even the secondary school level. It is necessary for students to begin learning about the English spelling system at the primary level, as this will lead them to becoming good spellers at later stages.

According to the results of this study, the GS' exposure to the English language at their university has appeared to be fruitless, as it did not help them improve their spelling knowledge. Surprisingly, despite the huge number of hours (98) in which the GS had been in touch with English, their knowledge of spelling seemed not to have changed. Clearly, no correlation exists between their educational level and their spelling performance. The GS seemed to develop a sort of fossilized spelling inability that resulted in a lack of confidence in or phobia of producing all genres of writing in English. The same findings were articulated by Al-Busaidi and Al-Saqqaf (2015), who reported that Arab learners, even those who had been learning the English language for years, found it difficult to correctly spell monosyllabic words. Al-Busaidi and Al-Saqqaf (2015) also argued that the spelling of English vowels in particular is much more problematic than consonants for Arab learners, owing this difficulty to the 'perceptible mismatch between phonemes and graphemes' (p. 181).

The irregularities of the English spelling system stand as the core reason for the students in this study's inability to spell English words correctly. This fact lends strong support to the results of Al-Jarf (2010). However, fewer spelling mistakes were identified when it came to words with [-s], [-ing] and [-ed] endings. Learners found these words easy to spell, as they corresponded to standard English rules. This implies that Saudi learners depend heavily on memorization as a strategy when learning how to spell. Unfortunately, however, this strategy is not always successful, as only a few English spelling rules exist. Evidently, the dictation test-takers in this study misspelt simple past forms as well as

'ing' forms when the last letter of the root word should have been doubled (e.g., *permitted for 'permitted' and *begining for 'beginning'). This makes it worse, especially if the form does not conform to the general rules. As a result, this causes confusion among learners; they are not rewarded even though they followed the rules. The same idea was articulated by Said (2018), who argued that the English spelling system is depicted as confusing and inconsistent because it does not reflect standard pronunciation rules, unlike many other languages. For instance, the same letter does not always reflect the same sound. Also, some letters are written but not pronounced, and vice versa.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

It is a well-known fact that English is a foreign language with no official status in most Arabic countries, and KSA is no exception. Saudi learners' exposure to English is limited to classrooms that are characterized as teacher-centred and have many form-focused instructions. Therefore, it is recommended that learners be exposed to English as much as possible, as this allows them to have more opportunities to practice their spelling. Similarly, teachers should explicitly motivate their students to work on their spelling skills in order for such skills to be improved. Teachers could, for example, provide their students with titles of books on spelling that could be consulted for preparing word lists for practice. One important issue that could be raised, with this in mind, is teachers' awareness of the large differences between the English and Arabic writing systems. This awareness would help these teachers choose the most appropriate tasks to enhance their students' English spelling skills. It is important for teachers to sensitize their students to the importance of good spelling in language development, thus dedicating more time to teaching the fundamentals of spelling while focusing particularly on exceptions. Lastly, teachers are required to explain to their students the radical differences between Arabic and English and to find strategies to help prevent Saudi learners from resorting to their native language, Arabic, while learning English.

VII. LIMITATIONS

Even though they add to the existing literature on spelling, the findings of the current work are confounded by a number of issues, namely the relatively small number of participants (90 students) and the short amount of time that was dedicated to conducting the study, as these factors prevent the results from being generalizable. Hence, more research that involves larger numbers of participants is necessary to identify the difficulties faced by Saudi learners of English that hamper the long-term development of their spelling abilities.

The present study depended solely on a dictation test as its data collection instrument. Other instruments could have been used that would have been able to collect more information regarding Saudi learners' spelling abilities and offer a more comprehensive account of the spelling challenges they face. Such instruments could include investigating the students' perceptions of themselves as spellers, the different reasons that underlie their performance in this skill and the different strategies they

may employ to learn how to spell. Exploring the learners' perceptions of spelling would have provided direction to help them enhance their writing skills, as articulated by Fresch (2008).

VIII. CONCLUSION

Undoubtly, spelling is a basic literacy skill that language learners must master in order to be considered proficient and to ultimately succeed in all types of communication. However, as evidenced by the current available literature, this component often gets ignored because more attention is paid to larger skills, such as reading and listening. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers and teachers shed more light on spelling, as a lack of spelling skills definitely affects learners' 'intelligibility in speaking and writing' as conveyed by Al-Busaidi and Al-Saqqaf (2015).

Furthermore, as mistakes are considered an elementary indicator of students' improvement in language learning, in order to determine the multiple challenges that plague Arab learners in general and Saudi learners in particular. In effect, in-depth research is needed to effectively identify both the different types of spelling mistakes and the reasons behind them.

To sum up, while mistakes are unavoidable in the language learning process, they provide valuable discernment of students' progress and possible language development. Furthermore, as mistakes are an elementary indicatoer of students' improvement in language learning, explicit teaching of spelling in all levels of education is highly recommended especially with the advent of current damaging factors like auto spelling check, and social media means such as Facebook, messenger, and twitter. However, spelling mistakes are not the only issues faced by Saudi and other English learners. These learners also face grammar, syntax, pronunciation and other challenges in learning the language. This leads to the emergence of other types of mistakes, such as overgeneralization and avoidance. Accordingly, more light should be shed on all types of mistakes learners may commit, as this would give teachers a clearer picture of their students' knowledge of English and thus allow them to plan remedial work.



IX. APPENDIX 1

Spelling Test

[1] Grammatical Rules	[2] 's' Ending	[3] Babies [4] processes [5] tomatoes [6] boys [7] wives
	[8] 'ing' Ending	[9] Dying [10] getting [11] growing [12] beginning [13] encouraging
	[14] 'ed' Ending	[15] Carried [16] planned [17] rowed [18] permitted [19] unified
[20] Silent 'e', 'ture' Words		[21] Substitute [22] confidence [23] obstacle [24] capture [25] literature
[26] Suffixes	[27] -ible& -able [28] -tion, sion	[29] Reasonable [30] accessible [31] intuition [32] aggression [33] delusion
[34] Letter Patterns	[35] 'gh', 'sh', 'ch', 'ui' Words	[36] Dough [37] enough [38] cash [39] branch [40] suit
[41] '-ck', 'ous' Words		[42] Stack [43] snack [44] attack [45] religious [46] continuous
[47] Words Contain Silent Letters		[48] through [49] thought [50] thorough [51] knife [52] know

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