ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines various reform proposals in the orthography of English with a specific reference to its pedagogical implications. The basic assumption is that, English orthography is illogical, inconsistent, erratic and therefore confusing and it has always been an obstacle in the process of teaching and learning of English all over the world. The need for the present study arose because the orthography of English is seen as a burden to students and their teachers, a block on the path to literacy, a source of persistent nuisance to writers, typists and printers and an obstacle to foreign learners of English. It seems implausible that a system so much discussed and criticized can be optimal. The system is full of anomalies and it would make life easier for many people if these were removed. There is a dire need felt the world over to bring about substantial change in English spellings in the evolving context of globalization. This study also analyses the pedagogical implications of the existing orthography and a reformed orthography. It attempts to examine various reforms in spellings in the orthography of English in Britain, the United States of America and India and the feasibility of implementing those reforms in the English language. A comparative analysis has also been made of the works of the reformers on the basis of the changes suggested by them.

Orthography refers to the set of conventions, which are employed when writing a language. A writing system is made out of a set of graphemes i.e., a letter or a set of letters which represent a phoneme, the smallest contrastive linguistic unit in a language. A morpheme is a minimal, meaningful, syntactical unit which form words and spelling or orthography is the writing of graphemes in proper order to form morphemes. English is an alphabetic language inspite of the fact that it can hardly be said to have a one-to-one correspondence between phoneme and grapheme. The fact is that there exists in English a number of graphemic options for a given phoneme and a number of phonemic options for many of the graphemes. There is a need for spelling reform to eliminate these irregularities that admittedly exist in the English orthography despite its phonological, phonotactical and morphological basis. The question is whether any attempts
have been made to amend the English orthography and whether a better system can be devised. This dissertation is an attempt to study the various spelling proposals which have been suggested by eminent reformers all over the world and examine the feasibility of an amendment in the orthography especially from the pedagogical point of view, keeping in mind the problems faced by learners in the Indian sub-continent. The structure of the thesis which has been organised into six chapters follows from this:

Chapter 1 which is introductory in nature, in addition to aims, objectives, data and methodology, deals with the objectives of the spelling reformers, the causes for the failure of the proposed spelling reforms and justification for changes to be made in the current orthography. The pedagogical implications of a reform in the orthography of English are quite significant and hence, this very important and relevant issue has also been discussed in this chapter. Several changes have taken place in Indian English at various linguistic levels. Most of them have been accepted so why should there not be changes at the orthographical level too? Of late the English learning and teaching situation in India has been changing so fast that we need to look at it periodically, take stock of the situation and re-orient ourselves in consonance with the changing times. A sense of flexibility is needed in the approach to the learning and teaching of English and this sensitiveness to the changing situation is lacking in India. We continue to stick to age-old traditions and cherish rules of the English language laid down centuries ago. Though Indian English has been accepted as one of the varieties of English not much is being done in India to reform the English orthography especially when there are various cultural constraints that an Indian learner of English faces when he is confronted with a confusing, inconsistent and illogical orthography. There is a dire need for amendments in the orthography especially in the Indian context and the need for such a spelling reform has also been discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 2 describes how English came to be in the state it is today. In order to know how language is structured and how it functions, it is important to know the history of English and the patterns and processes of linguistic change. A study of the history of English reveals some interesting facts about the origin of
the sounds and spelling of words. The English language has always been in a state of constant flux, and a study of the etymology of a word enables one to understand why some words have been spelled in a particular way. This chapter studies the historical factors and various influences on the English orthography and thus places the study in the historical context of the changes that have occurred in language especially in the orthography over a period of years. The discussion in this chapter justifies the need for amendments in the orthography of English. A comparison of the English spellings as it existed in the Old, Middle and Modern English periods has been made and the spelling conventions which existed in those periods and the foreign influences which gave English its peculiar orthography have also been discussed.

Chapter 3 consists of a survey of the spelling reformers in Britain and an analysis and a comparative study of some of the more significant reform proposals by several spelling reformers and the causes for the failure of these spelling reforms. For a period of more than hundreds of years, spelling reformers in Britain have been suggesting spelling reforms. The proposed spelling reforms by the first spelling reformer a monk named Orm who suggested reforms in spellings in the year 1200, John Hart, William Bullokar, Richard Mulcaster, Alexander Gill, John Wilkins, Isaac Pitman and George Bernard Shaw to name a few have been analyzed in this chapter. The Simplified Spelling Society in Britain established in 1908 took an active interest in the suggestions of the spelling reformers and also published their own spelling proposals. It was observed that all the reforms suggested by various reformers confined themselves to the Roman alphabet but there were two systems, which departed from it quite flagrantly and aroused a lot of interest, debate and controversy. They were the Initial Teaching Alphabet by James Pitman and the Shavian Alphabet by George Bernard Shaw.

James Pitman the grandson of Sir Isaac Pitman the Victorian spelling reformer devised and implemented the new orthographical script called the Initial Teaching Alphabet. In this alphabet consisting of 44 characters, 21 new non-Roman symbols have been provided for those phonic values, which cannot be
unambiguously put down by traditional Roman characters. All the characters together covered all the distinct sounds of English to eliminate the difficulty of the lack of correspondence between sound and spelling in the existing orthography. George Bernard Shaw was a strong advocate of English spelling reform. The Shaw alphabet consisted of 48 letters, four of which, those for the digraph th, and the letters v, n and t also serve to denote the four most frequently used words: the, of, and to. An estimated 10% of space was saved by this device alone, these four words having a very high frequency of occurrence.

Chapter 4 has traced the origin and development of American English orthography. This chapter studies the works of American spelling reformers chief among them, Noah Webster and Benjamin Franklin the renowned writer and publisher. A study of the spelling reforms in America reveals that reforms in the English language have been a continuous process in America at all the linguistic levels including orthography. Most of the major spelling changes that have taken place recently in the English orthography can be attributed to some of the American spelling reformers. American English has never been static, it has been constantly changing and is still under a constant change of flux. The orthography of American English differs from the orthography of British English. For example, American English follows the system of dropping the doubled consonant in words like programme, levelled, the grapheme u in colour, honour and replacing the letters re by er in words like metre, theatre etc. It has been observed that the writings of many people show signs of deviant spellings, and exhibit the influence of American English. The American Spelling Board, which was established in New York in 1906 and supported by President Roosevelt and several senators, played quite a significant role in the amendment of the orthography. It endorsed the views of all the spelling reformers and approved of their suggestions and published quarterlies containing various spelling proposals.

Chapter 5 discusses the spelling proposals in the orthography of English, by two internationally recognized Indian reformers, Govind Deodhekar and G.V. Phadke. Most of the reformist movements in English orthography have their
origin in Britain and America. However, interest in spelling reforms was generated among Indians when Dr. Daniel Jones visited India in 1912 and gave a series of lectures on spelling reforms in Bombay, Calcutta and Lahore. Deodhekar had been a member of the Simplified Spelling Society of England for over fifteen years. He has suggested various spelling reforms and has incorporated them into a book entitled 'THE LOJIKON' – a system of simplified English spelling by the lojikal use of konsonants. Deodhekar has suggested that the LOJIKON system of simplified spellings by the lojikal use of konsonants be used and it should replace the existing spelling system, as this would simplify the learning of English for those learners for whom English is a second/foreign language. His contribution to spelling reform has been supported by the Simplified Spelling Society, London. G.V. Phadke has also worked at reforming the English spellings for the past fifty years and now at 85 years of age still continues to work on reforming the orthography. He has suggested several changes in English orthography in his book Revised English Spelling system: A new proposal, which was published in November 2002. An analysis of Phadke’s reforms indicates that he has tried to make the existing orthography more phonetic. He believes that the existing arrangement of the English alphabet is deficient, as there is no consonance between the letters, the sounds and their names unlike in most of the Indian languages which have more phonic symbols and this is a major source of error for the Indian learners of English.

This chapter examines the works of both the Indian reformers, analyses their suggestions, makes a comparative study of their reform proposals and looks at them from a fresh perspective, from the point of view of the learners of English in the Indian sub-continent. The study reveals that significantly both Deodhekar and Phadke were interested in developing an orthography, which would suit the needs of the non-native users of English.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis with results of the comparative studies, a few reflections on the pedagogical implications of spelling reforms and some speculations on possible developments. It highlights the need for reforms in the orthography especially in the Indian context. The study ventures to claim that
suggestions for reforms have been put forward by many experts in the language and yet not much has been done to accept the suggestions or amend the orthography. The survey of various writings concerned with attempts at such reforms and with the linguistic problems connected with it has revealed significant facts about the research conducted in this field. The study has justified the need for a reform in the English orthography.

The results of this study have been scientifically and objectively examined and conclusions have been drawn from the linguistic and pedagogical point of view. The study taking into account the pedagogical implications of the existing orthography suggests that it is very necessary to replace the present inconsistent, confusing and wasteful spelling of English by a rational, phonemic-based orthography. Foreign learners would be greatly benefitted by any reforms in spellings since one of the reasons cited by many as one of the causes of the problems in learning English, is its peculiar, illogical and inconsistent orthography.

It was quite clear that all the spelling reformers have felt that there was a necessity for reform in spellings and the researcher agrees with their views. The benefits are obvious as children would learn to read and write more quickly and more easily and more of them would reach an acceptable level of competence. Foreign learners of English who far outnumber native learners would find the spellings a reliable guide to pronunciation and vice versa. Spelling problems would disappear to a great extent and there would be a modest reduction in the average number of letters per word, leading to savings in paper, ink and computer storage space and in the time actually spent in reading or writing. English is used as a second/foreign language in many parts of the world and to facilitate the learning of non-native learners a simpler but a universally approved orthography is the need of the hour. Indian English has been recognised all over the world, as one of the varieties of non-native English. When there are so many changes in the syntax, phonology and lexicon of Indian English, then why shouldn’t there be a change in its orthography?
In the burgeoning field of information technology with the advent of the computer, English spellings are undergoing several changes. A beginning has already been made and it is quite apparent that people are receptive to changes in the orthography in a positive manner and measures must be taken to see that the chaotic character of English spellings does not come in the way of communication and progress. Spelling reform has to be considered from an impersonal and indeed, international point of view and the earlier it is done the better it would be for the world which is ready for simplified spellings. There have been some books written about reformist movements in spellings. But this study extends the scope by examining two Indian reformers and analyzing their work in the light of the fact that English is a very important means of communication between people of different geographical regions especially in the Indian sub-continent. Thus it could be legitimately claimed that the present study, in addition to being one of the few research works done in the orthography of English and spelling reforms, has widened the horizons of the teaching and learning of English by contributing in its own way to the study of the English orthography in English linguistics. Taking into account the contribution of eminent spelling reformers, this study with its focus on pedagogical implications of spelling reforms looks into the feasibility of reforming the English orthography and replacing it by a universally accepted orthography. The study further hopes that the points of pedagogical significance could be carried out in the field of ELLT, which would justify the claims of the present study.