

Spelling myths

Johanna Stirling

In this text, celebrating the newly forged strategic partnership between Macmillan Education and NILE (Norwich Institute for Language Education), Johanna Stirling, NILE Online Academic Manager, takes on an area of English pedagogy that may seem rather basic, yet is highly mysterious to many a student: English spelling. She offers some useful tips on what (not) to do when trying to support learners in this domain.

Do any of your students have serious problems with spelling in English? I bet the answer is yes! Have you read a wealth of books and been to plenty of stimulating workshops about teaching spelling? I bet the answer is no! If I'm right, read on.

Researching spelling and how it's taught, especially to English language learners, has made me question several common assumptions about the language and the way it's taught. So here we'll explore, or explode, seven of these myths.

Myth 1: "English spelling is chaotic"

Some students arrive in class thinking that learning English spelling is an impossible task. Why? It's often because they've been told that there is no system to English spelling – you just have to learn to spell each word. What a Herculean task!



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English spelling is not chaotic though, it's just complex. About 80% of English words are thought to be regularly spelled, if you take 'regular' to mean following a rather complicated set of rules. The problem isn't that there's *no* system, but that there are *too many* systems. We can't deny that at the heart of English spelling there is a phonological system – alphabetic letters relate to sounds. We spell **big b-i-g** because of simple sound-to-letter correspondence. But only about 50% of words seem to be phonetically spelled. If you look at the words so far in this article, you'll probably find that fewer than half of them are. This is because the most common words are less likely to be spelled this way. Why?

Alongside the phonological system of English spelling, there is also an etymological system, which in fact seems to take precedence over the phonological. For example, why do we spell **myth** with a **y** and not an **i**? The **y** comes from Greek and we have kept that rather than converting the spelling to fit our phonological system. Similarly, words like **although** have kept their Anglo-Saxon spelling although pronunciation changed long ago. These old Anglo-Saxon words are often the most common.

There is also a morphological system which, thankfully, has a high degree of regularity. We add prefixes to whole words and we have a learnable system of adding suffixes to words. Finally, there's a graphemic system which dictates several 'rules', many of which are not related to sound at all. For example, native English words don't end with the letter **v**, which is why **give** ends with **e** although the preceding vowel is short.

Myth 2: "Teachers should teach the rules"

I have a few problems with this statement. Firstly, I'm wary of the word 'rule'. A rule sounds like something that you *must* do. But in English spelling, there are just too many *ifs* and *buts*. It's much more useful to talk of 'patterns'. Rules prescribe what **must** be done whereas patterns come from descriptions of what *is* done. We probably *could* say that "native English words don't end in **v**" is a rule, but I've never seen anyone teach it. Whereas the most commonly taught rule in English schools is "**i** before **e** except after **c**" – which is such a poor rule that it is only true in less than 50% of words! So instead of giving rules, samples of language

can be analysed by learners as they try to discern patterns in the spelling. This is much more memorable, and potentially engaging, than just being told by the teacher.

Myth 3: "Multiple-choice activities are helpful"

Multiple choice activities are not bad per se, but consider this type of exercise (the word is invented):

Which is the correct spelling?

- A. crissificate
- B. chrissificate
- C. crisificate
- D. chrisificate

Perhaps the student thinks: "Oh, I know this one, it's A. But, wait a minute, perhaps there's only one **s**, so maybe it's C. I don't think there's an **h** in it but, now I come to think of it there might be...". They can go from confident to very unsure in less than sixty seconds. Before I started researching spelling and 'helpful' activities, I had no problem spelling the word **separate**. Then I saw so many of these multiple-choice activities asking me if it was **separate** or a different spelling (I'm not going to write it because the same might happen to you!), that now I can never remember which one is right. The seed of doubt was planted, it grew and soon smothered what I previously knew.

Myth 4: "Testing is teaching"

No, teaching is teaching and testing is testing. There's a place for both but the teacher and students should always know which they're doing. I see the difference as this:

- teaching allows or helps students to gain new knowledge or understanding
- testing checks their previous knowledge or understanding.

We can teach spelling without testing it, although testing may show us where our learners need help. But there's no point in testing it without teaching it. And if you test it too much you risk getting so-called 'Friday spellers', those who have learnt their list of words for Friday's test, then clear those words out to make room for the new lot of spellings the following week. So by Monday they're forgotten.

Another problem is inadvertent testing. When you give students an exercise, a dictation

perhaps, are you sure you're teaching or are you really just testing what they already know? To check which it is, you can ask yourself, "Can they work the answers out? Will they come away with new learning? Are they likely to have a feeling of success, or at least not a sense of failure?"

Myth 5: "Homophones should be taught together"

One of the major problems that people highlight when talking about English spelling is all those words that sound the same but have different spelling, such as **way** and **weigh**; **there** and **their**; **to**, **too** and **two**, etc. It is a problem but we can often make it worse by juxtaposing these homophones. Here's another multiple-choice activity:

- I can't hear / here you.
- There / they're / their going on holiday tomorrow.

It's planting that seed of doubt again! However, if we teach words by meaning, there's no real reason for them to be confused, at least not so often. Why should they get confused if we teach that:

- **here**, **where** and **there** are all related to place and all contain the letters **h-e-r-e**
- **hear** is spelled like **ear**,
- **their** finishes in **r**, just like **our** and **your**?

Making lexical, or semantic, links rather than phonic ones can often make such spellings much more learnable.

Myth 6: "We have spell checkers, so we don't need to learn to spell"

Ah, if only that was true! But we don't always write with the benefit of a spell-checker. Pens still exist – just. But more to the point, spell-checkers are far from infallible. They only mark words that don't exist so if you've written the wrong homophone or a misspelling that just happens to be a real word, you won't be warned. *Do ewe sea watt eye mien?*

Another problem is that some students don't use spell checkers well. They see the red wiggly line (or maybe not), right click on the word and take the first option offered. Hence a business student of mine who wanted to write in a report, 'The main thing to consider is ...' produced 'The main thighbone to consider is...!' So some training in good use of spell-checkers may be valuable.



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Myth 7: “Technology is ruining spelling”

This one is perhaps the opposite of number 6. There are certainly some valid concerns about the (over) use of technology but blame the users, not the tool. Tech also provides us with some great learning opportunities. One reason is that it is a hard taskmaster – it demands 100% accuracy. Can you imagine your students’ reaction if you told them that whenever they didn’t get anything 100% right they would get 0 instead. That’s what computers often do. One tiny mistake in an email address, and it won’t reach the intended recipient. A hyphen instead of an underscore and you won’t get the website you need. There are some great web tools too for improving spelling. For example, *Spelling City* really helps students learn words, not just testing. Again when you look at spelling programs, ask yourself: is it teaching or just testing?

Seven Myths Exploded

So contrary to the myths above, in this article I have suggested that:

- English spelling isn’t chaotic, but it is complicated. So there is no simple answer to teaching it – we need a varied, multisensory approach;

- students benefit more from discovering patterns than learning inaccurate rules;
- multiple choice activities can be confusing so think twice before showing learners misspellings as they may stick in their memories;
- testing isn’t teaching. It’s always worth taking a mental check: do I want to teach or test? Is this activity teaching or testing?
- we should be cautious of teaching homophones together; a better strategy is to look for ways to link spelling to meaning;
- we have spell-checkers, but we still need to learn to spell ... and possibly how to use a spell-checker well, too;
- technology can help with spelling, but again we have to check that programs really achieve our aims.

For more detailed and specific ideas about how to put these suggestions into practice, head over to The Spelling Blog at <http://thespellingblog.blogspot.com>, see my book *Teaching Spelling to English Language Learners* or write to online@nile-elt.com to find out when my new online course on Teaching Spelling will be available.

