

The Challenge of Spelling in English

The American spelling bee does not sting, though it makes many children cry, does not produce honey, though it holds other sweet rewards, and does not swarm, though millions of Americans crowd around it every year like worker bees around their queen bee. This bee is not an insect at all; it is a contest of orthography. The contest is simple: a word is spoken and the contestant has to spell it. The contest is hard: the word is from the English language.

Spelling bees (or competitions, matches, championships, and other terms for head-to-head contests between individual spellers) have been a part of American culture for hundreds of years. Audiences have gathered to watch spellers under the open air at state fairs, in one-room school houses, hotels, places of worship, and wherever Americans gather. Primarily the participants have been children studying spelling at school, especially elementary and middle school. In his book *American Bee*, James Maguire (2006, 54) writes: “The spelling bee, whether fierce or flirtatious, congress-

sional or genteel, is a genuine American folk tradition. The popularity of bees has waxed and waned, but the spelling contest has remained a feature of American life—perhaps to the regret of generations of schoolchildren—since the Puritans landed on Plymouth Rock.” Maguire offers examples of spelling lore from nearly every decade in American history, including a fictional poem about a spelling bee held in a gold mining camp that ends with only one competitor left alive to tell about it.

These days local newspapers sponsor spelling bees in every corner of the United States and beyond. If you live in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the *Intelligencer Journal* invites you to its spelling bee. If you win the spelling bee in Denver, the *Rocky Mountain News* will sponsor your subsequent competitions. In Miami, the *Miami Herald* newspaper hosts an annual spelling bee. The winners of these local contests then move on to the state competition, and state winners go to the national finals in Washington, DC, held every May. Around

250 kids have participated in the finals in recent years, and by one count, nearly 10,000 participate in the local spelling bees every year.

To take part in the Scripps National Spelling Bee, participants must be younger than 14, in eighth grade or lower, and have won a local spelling bee representing a school that is registered with Scripps. Spellers need not be U.S. citizens and need not be from public schools. In fact, the educational background of participants shows America's educational diversity. On its website (see Appendix 1), the Scripps National Spelling Bee lists the schools of the 2007 finalists: "192 were public-schooled, 38 were private-schooled, 36 were home-schooled, 18 were parochial-schooled, five were charter-schooled, and one was virtual-schooled." Roughly equal numbers of boys and girls made it to the finals.

The popularity of the spelling bee has never been greater in the United States than in recent years. In 2006, for the first time ever, the finals of the Scripps National Spelling Bee were broadcast live during primetime viewing hours on one of the three largest television networks in the United States. In 2007 nine million viewers watched the spelling finals on network television. The semifinals leading up to the finals are broadcast on ESPN, a television sports network—this in spite of the fact that the spelling bee includes no running, no jumping, and no hitting of baseballs. It is very unспорт-like.

The action of the event entails a short walk to a microphone by a speller, the uttering of a word by the official pronouncer, and the subsequent spelling or (more likely) misspelling of that word. The rules listed on the official website demand "an effort to face the judges and pronounce the word for the judges before spelling it and after spelling it. The speller while facing the judges makes an effort to utter each letter distinctly and with sufficient volume to be understood by the judges. The speller may ask the pronouncer to say the word again, define it, use it in a sentence, provide the part of speech, provide the language(s) of origin, and/or provide an alternate pronunciation or pronunciations. The speller may also ask root word questions..." In short, the action that captivates us is a boy or girl uttering a series of letters that hopefully is a word.

The most active part of the contest is often when the speller repeats the word in question to make sure she or he has heard it correctly. The maximum amount of time the speller can spend at the microphone is a minute and a half; during that time the contestant is mostly silent, using a personal method of recall to summon up what is almost always, at the final stages, an educated guess. Everyone seems to have his or her own spelling gesture. Many spellers write with their fingers on the backs of the numbered placards they wear for identification. Some close their eyes and squeeze their lips as though waiting for an unwanted kiss. One winner had the habit of turning her head to the left and blowing into her hands before pronouncing each letter. Why is all of this so gripping?

The unexpected excitement around kids spelling is in itself somehow fascinating. What other academic competition for middle-school kids can claim to have inspired a hit Broadway musical, an Academy Award nominated documentary, a "best of" series on DVD, and two major Hollywood films (one based on a bestselling novel), starring the likes of Richard Gere and Laurence Fishburne? All of this for a phenomena that is not new and that seems particularly out of touch with cutting edge trends, technological or other. There is no musical sound track. During the televised spelling bee, a bell is used to indicate the misspelling of a word, a simple little clapper bell rung with the index finger. There is no red digital clock counting off the seconds, no computer to pronounce lexical items. The most flashy part of the spelling bee is the yellow number placards the spellers wear. The most modern gadget is the dictionary.

Of course, the wonder felt at the spelling bee is not just for the contestants but for the English language itself. The words these kids spell are goliaths. They are multi-syllabic monsters of unknown meaning and origin—at least until the etymology is requested—and very few of the words in the spelling finals have ever been uttered by anyone watching. And there seems to be no end to the bizarre words the English language houses. You can almost hear the audience gasp as each new word is pronounced. Champion spellers dedicate their days to familiarizing themselves with the dictionary but still know they will

likely be asked to spell words they have never met before. To these they will apply all the rules and historical linguistics they know; still they will often have to make, at best, an educated guess. The drama that drives the spelling bee phenomenon is the drama of an individual standing alone against the English language. It is the ultimate opportunity for catharsis—for what user of English has not fallen? Who among us has not misspelled?

And who among us could spell the kinds of words that litter the steep slope of the final competition? In the list of the winning words since 1925 (on the Scripps website), there are those that seem friendly. Monosyllabic commoners such as *knack* (1932) and *luge* (1984) might arise naturally in a conversation on the street. The sixties and seventies, with words like *chihuahua*, *abalone*, and *croissant* are inviting, but of late the vocabulary seems to have taken a turn for the longer and more obscure. Try using in a sentence any of the winning words from this century: *demarche*, *succedaneum*, *prospicience*, *pococurante*, *autochthonous*, *appoggiatura*, *Ursprache*, and *serrefine*. For that matter, try finding these words in your home dictionary. If words had usage meters, these would surely register in the single digits.

The two recent films with spelling bees at their core—*Akeelah and the Bee* and *Bee Season*—confirm the perception that spelling in English is an almost superhuman act. In *Akeelah and the Bee*, a young girl enlists the support of her entire community to make it to the national competition. Her coach (played by Laurence Fishburne) gives her thousands of word flashcards, and throughout the days leading up to the finals, her neighbors, friends, and family quiz her while she jumps rope, shops, is at school or just walking down the street. Her success is likewise shared by all as they watch her compete on TV. The message is that it takes a village to spell. No one can do it alone. Another interesting aspect of the film is that spelling is treated as a balm, more than just an act of writing. Akeelah tells her spelling coach at one point that she uses spelling to get over her problems. She spells at night in bed when she is afraid.

In *Bee Season*, the young girl, much more isolated than Akeelah, wins spelling bees through no less than divine intervention. The film uses special effects to show how

words appear to the young heroine as flowers blooming around her or as letters flashing in the auditorium. At one point in the film, the excited father (played by Richard Gere), explains to his family how “words hold all the secrets of the universe.” Taking an apple from his kitchen table, he tells how the word *apple* (then *aepli*) was carried by the Vikings to England and how the pronunciation shifted from the Old English (*apfel*) to the Middle English (*appel*) to what we use today. “Its spelling contains all of that. It holds its history inside it,” he says.

These films are interesting not only in their focus on what could be considered a rather dull topic for a movie but also because of how they interpret the feat of spelling; whether community, spirituality, or genius, it takes more than the average human mind to spell in English, they suggest.

It is easy to be swept up in the obvious triumph of those who spell. They are champions. But isn't their field of honor a bit odd? What have spelling champions done? They have used the language correctly. Are we in such awe of good spelling that we cannot attribute it to the human mind alone?

Isn't language supposed to be innate for humans, natural, acquired through the soft hug of our culture? Is English so hard that simply using it correctly is cause for national celebration? One could object to these questions in the context of the spelling bee by pointing out that the types of words encountered at the National Spelling Bee are Herculean in their difficulty, outliers of the language and not firm ground upon which to speculate about language. For example, how often does one encounter *appoggiatura* (from the Italian for an ornamental note)? Still, consider the words included in the first round of the National Spelling Bee, a multiple choice round used to narrow down the field of competitors prior to the oral competition. Boys and girls competing in this round have already proven themselves as excellent spellers by each placing very high at both a local and a state competition. The words from the 2007 multiple choice test included *bizarre*, *icicle*, *demur*, *colossus*, and *ciao*. These are not words that would startle a Scrabble board. Isn't it odd that success in spelling fairly common English words is considered an extraordinary feat? When you spell

a word, you are not creating language, you are repeating an agreed upon usage, following convention. Should any aspect of using language correctly be this hard?

Why is spelling so hard?

Blame the alphabet. You can never tell what sound a letter is going to make. Sometimes a letter doesn't make any sound at all, is silent—and then you'll find a letter (like the "x" in *box*) that makes more than one sound in one appearance. As Bryson (1990, 120) points out: "We have some forty sounds in English, but more than 200 ways of spelling them. We can render the sound 'sh' in up to fourteen ways (*shoe, sugar, passion, ambition, ocean, champagne*, etc.)... If you count proper nouns, the word in English with the most varied spellings is air with a remarkable thirty-eight: *Aire, Ayr, heir, e'er, ere*, and so on."

Essentially, the Latin alphabet with its phonological significations was used to signify Old English. Of course, the inventories of phonemes were not identical for the two languages. Stevick (1968, 276) writes: "The least satisfactory fit of the alphabet to English was a carryover from Latin—the limitation to five vocalic graphemes for a language that had many more than five vowels." That is why "y" is sometimes called into action as a vowel and why so often in English words it takes two letters to represent one vowel sound. As Stevick goes on to say, "The subsequent history of English spelling reflects at all points the inadequate set of vocalic symbols" (276).

Blame the dictionary. Before the dictionary, there was no way to establish correct spelling, and spelling varied widely. The dictionary became a snapshot of the language, and words, once they were collected and fixed, didn't change as rapidly. Sounds, though, were not captured and so continued to change even while words stayed put in the dictionary. The gentlemen who made dictionaries—notably Samuel Johnson with his *Dictionary of the English Language* published in 1755 and Noah Webster with his *American Dictionary of the English Language* published in 1828—were collectors more than prescriptive linguists. Though Webster was a powerful voice for reform, especially in making English more American, his dictionary successfully revised the spelling of only a handful of words.

Blame the Dutch typesetters, who were paid by the line and so stuck additional letters into words. Blame the printing press. According to Peters (1968, 274), "The discrepancies between the way we currently pronounce and spell words may be attributed, in large measure, to the fact that our spelling, mostly inherited from Late Middle English, has remained more or less fixed since c. 1650, unlike the pronunciation of those Late Middle English words." Peters uses as an example of this pronunciation slippage the word *knight* which, in the Middle English period was pronounced the way it looks.

Blame it on the history of the English, those British Isles invaded many times by many different languages and then invading other isles and continents with other languages with which to mix. Colonies were like a linguistic semipermeable membrane. Take a typical English sentence and you have a smorgasbord of international snacks. For example in that last sentence, *smorgasbord* is from the Old Norse words for *bread, butter* and *table*; the word *international* is from the Latin for *to be born, nasci*; and *snack* from the Middle English meaning pretty much what it means today in English.

To be an effective English speller, an understanding of all these linguistic origins is helpful. That's why, in spelling bees, the first question from a contestant faced with a difficult word is often about its derivation. For there are laws guiding the alphabetic representation of sounds, but the laws differ from language to language. Sometimes when words are brought into English, their original spellings are maintained, and sometimes they are given new, English spellings. Sometimes words that did not come from Latin were given Latinate aspects (just because we like Latin so much)—thus the "b" in *debt*, the "p" in *receipt*, the "s" in *island*, and the "c" in *indict*.

Each word in English seems to have its own compass, some pointing to phonology, some to morphology, some to history, and some pointing one direction in one syllable and another in the next. Someone who can spell in English either understands the polar north of entire fleets of words or, more likely, has memorized the individual words they need to know. Either way, spellers of English, though they may not realize it, are constantly

navigating the challenging waters of intercultural communication. And it is a sea full of wrecks.

Why not fix spelling?

Spelling reform is a sound idea that has occurred to every school kid who ever had to spell English and has been championed by some of the brightest, most powerful people in American history. Ambitious simplifiers of the orthography include the ever sensible Benjamin Franklin, dictionary writer Noah Webster, President Theodore Roosevelt, steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, and essential American writer Mark Twain.

They all failed.

Menken (1992) calls Noah Webster the father of the simplified spelling movement but notes that those most influenced by him urged the immediate adoption of the revised spellings *ar, catalog, definit, gard, giv, hav, infinit, liv, tho, thru, and wisht*. That was in 1876. This was from the group who had control of the dictionary. (One out of eleven isn't bad.)

In 1906 Andrew Carnegie, one of the wealthiest men in the United States, funded the Simplified Spelling Board, and President Theodore Roosevelt, following the board's recommendations, ordered the adoption of 300 new spellings by certain government agencies. They resisted.

Menken (1992) gives much credit to the spelling bee for the resistance to spelling reform in America, saying the tradition generates an "interest in and respect for spelling prowess" (493). It is certainly true that a revised spelling system would be the death of the bee. Watching people spell a reasonable language would be as uninteresting as watching kids count objects. The spelling bee relies upon linguistic complexity.

Reasons to reform American spelling have ranged from conserving ink and paper, to making it easier to promote English as a world language, to eliminating illiteracy in America, to, well, reason. Strong proponents of spelling reform see the lack of transparency in English spelling as the root of many of society's evils. Wood (1971) writes passionately about the damage caused by our non-transparent system. "Our orthography ... puts an intolerable and too often traumatic burden on beginning

learners. Even among those of our children and adults who do not become nonreaders, the traumas of an irrational alphabet often continue as hidden or unconscious antipathies for, and roadblocks to, effective reading habits, and even more effective roadblocks to writing" (vii). Wood goes on to suggest that our orthography has a hand in national delinquency, violence, and even demagoguery.

While blaming the difficulty of spelling in English for the incarceration rate in the United States might be far-fetched, it is certainly true that learning to read is much more challenging when you can't just learn the sounds of an alphabet and apply them to all the words you encounter. Those learning to read English, whether it be their first language or a new language, must learn to do more than sound out the letters of words.

The simplified spelling movement in America, while not exactly thriving, is still around. The Spelling Society maintains a website (www.spellingsociety.org) with pamphlets, news releases, and examples of their proposed spelling. One of the most photogenic of the Spelling Society's activities is their yearly picket of the National Spelling Bee Finals in Washington, DC. A few orthographically outraged individuals march in front of the building where young spellers compete and wave protest signs with slogans such as "spelling shuud bee lojical," "enuf is enuf," and "spell different difrent." Predictably, the impact of this campaign seems to be minimal.

Fowler (1944) dismisses reformers thusly: "English had better be treated in the English way, & its spelling not be revolutionized but amended in detail, here a little & there a little as absurdities become intolerable, till a result is attained that shall neither overburden schoolboys nor stultify intelligence nor outrage the scholar" (554). I can't help but raise my hand and suggest that we are a little behind in amending our absurdities. To use English is to be very tolerant of them.

Of course, another possible mode of reform would be to leave the alphabet alone and focus on the interpretation of the dictionary. While all the famous American spelling reformers sought to simplify the spelling system, couldn't we leave the alphabet as is but stop enforcing it? Couldn't we just go back to the way things were in the great days of freedom

in English when Chaucer and then Shakespeare ruled? I'm talking about the legalization of misspelling. Tolerance of diversity. But that would lead to chaos, right? If we did not all agree upon standard spelling conventions, how would people read? If I started spelling just any which way, how would we communicate?

At the end of his chapter on simplified spelling, Menken (1992, 493) writes: "Everyone can understand a policeman when he turns in the report of a larsensy or an applicant for a job when he alleges that he is a licensed chuffer, shoffer or even shofar. 'Correct' spelling, indeed, is one of the arts that are far more esteemed by schoolma'ams than by practical men, neck-deep in the heat and agony of the world."

Is spelling necessary?

Let's try a little experiment. What happens if we damage the words in a sentence? Can you still read them? See if you can read this sentence where I will change one aspect of every other word. That was a sentence with eight spelling mistakes, most of them more severe than your average spelling mistake, which can be counted on to strive for phonetic consistency. Now what if we damage every single word in a sentence? In this sentence I'll remove the final letter of every word so you can understand it. Did you get that? Did it take you significantly longer to read than this sentence, which is pretty much the same length? What if we replace all the vowels with one vowel, say "e"? Can you read something that has no vowels? If vowels can be interchanged without any serious reading ramifications, one wonders what the big deal about spelling is. What happens if we take out the vowels altogether? Without the vowels we still can read written texts because there are so many other factors involved in reading." It takes a lot of damage to the mechanics of writing to disable the communicative aspect of the written language. The three examples given here go beyond misspelling, which generally occurs only occasionally in a sentence and usually involves one incorrect letter. Reading is not significantly impaired when it encounters misspelling.

Of course, this is a highly unscientific experiment. One could rightly object that our

little trial contains too many factors to identify any truth about the impact of spelling. The context and limited lexical set—*read* and *write* and *vowel* are used many times—eased the lack of correct orthographic input. But context is a necessary factor in reading. Also, context is the only thing that makes *wood* a misspelling when the modal auxiliary is called for. Knowing the "neighborhood" of words is an essential component in effective reading. You could also argue that I warned the reader about what change to mentally compensate for. And this casual reading experiment is sampling the reactions of fluent readers who have made it through thousands of words of a sophisticated article in a magazine for teachers of English. We have shown nothing of the effect of poor spelling on beginning readers or L2 learners. However, if you could make out the mangled sentences in the above paragraph, then correct spelling is not essential to reading—it is just one of many keys.

The Orthographic Depth Hypothesis proposes that in transparent or "shallow" orthographies such as Turkish or Serbo-Croatian, where letters can be relied upon to make consistent sounds, "phonological information is assembled primarily through letter-by-letter, symbol-to-sound, translation" (Koda 2005, 36). But in languages like English with "deep," non-transparent orthographies, "phonological information has been obtained after a word has been identified, based on the stored knowledge of that word" (Koda 2005, 36). Thus in English we see words more than we sound out words. That's one explanation why misspelling isn't a big impediment to reading. We don't need the word to be perfect; we just need to be able to recognize it.

But I am oversimplifying a complex activity to highlight one fact: correct spelling is not necessary for reading, and conversely, reading does not lead to "good" spelling. How is it possible that one could read all of *Moby Dick* but still not be able to spell *whale*? Because we do not spend a lot of time with each individual letter in the word *whale* in order to read it. Depending on the context, (if it comes after the word *white*, say) we may not have to see the word at all but only its length. Successful reading involves the use of many skills.

Ehri (as cited in Koda 2005) identifies five primary ways we read English: assembling

letters into blends, pronouncing spelling patterns, identifying sight words from memory, analogizing to words already known by sight, and using context. She finds that children as well as adults must learn to use all five of these skills in order to be proficient readers. Good readers, she claims, are adept in all five, and use them in different proportions depending on the type of reading task. In other words, good reading involves not just a mix of skills but the correct mix of the skills for the particular task at hand. Each individual reader uses these skills to a differing degree and each reading task—whether it be reading the morning paper over breakfast, reading email at work, or reading *Make Way for Ducklings* aloud to children at bedtime—requires a different combination of reading strategies. In the United States today, early reading education in all its variety can be said to respect many of the five ways of reading. While “phonics” are king currently, the teaching of sight words and top down strategies are also prevalent.

So if spelling is not an essential factor in successful reading, why is it needed at all beyond the spelling bee? Is it one of those odd skills, like juggling, that makes one popular at parties but has few practical applications? Woe (and whoa) to those who think so. While not necessary for communication, spelling is very important.

Just ask Dan Quayle. Many people still remember a mistake he made at an elementary school spelling bee he was presiding over when he was the U.S. vice president. One of the words in the competition was *potato*. The boy given that word spelled it correctly, but the vice president corrected him, insisting there was a final “e” on the word—“potatoe.” The boy who spelled *potato* better than the vice president became something of a national celebrity, was a guest on many talk shows, and even led the Pledge of Allegiance at the 1992 Democratic Convention. That Dan Quayle lost the 1992 election cannot be blamed on his spelling ability, but the national attention his spelling mistake attracted demonstrates how often spelling is used as a measure of intelligence.

If a job applicant’s resume contains even one spelling error, it will seriously impede his or her chances of getting the job, even if spelling is not required for that job. Spelling

is treated as a cosmetic aspect in these situations; misspelling is the equivalent of wearing a tee-shirt to a business school interview or chewing gum while answering questions. Not spelling well is impolite more than it is incorrect. It is often interpreted as demonstrating a lack of effort, and sloppiness. It is also treated as a barometer of one’s education, or even intelligence.

In the academic community, where more liberal descriptive linguistic views might be expected to hold sway, spelling is given a good deal of importance. The U.S. Department of Education’s annual Nation’s Report Card (nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard) includes spelling as an indicator in writing achievement levels. The definition of basic achievement at grade 4, for example, states that students performing at the basic level should be able to: “1. demonstrate appropriate response to the task in form, content, and language; 2. use some supporting details; 3. demonstrate organization appropriate to the task; and 4. demonstrate sufficient command of spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization to communicate to the reader.”

So basic writing success is defined as appropriate, detailed, and organized, and the fourth category is a mix of items often referred to as mechanics. Many questions could be asked of this definition; for example, are all the items in the fourth category of equal weight? Is command of grammar more important to communication than capitalization? But for our purposes, it is interesting to note that spelling is included at all in the definition and in connection to communication.

For the next level of success, the proficient level, the abilities widen and deepen with spelling still a component of success: “few errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization that interfere with communication.” At the advanced level, the criteria move away from interference to the expectation that student writers will “enhance meaning through control of spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization.” The assumption at all three levels is that spelling is not only important to successful writing, it is important in communication. But how is meaning ever enhanced by spelling? Even though it is pretty clear that spelling has very little impact on communication, it is still widely regarded

an important indicator of success in academic assessment rubrics.

On graded essays at any level of education in the United States, how many spelling errors are marked? If the answer is somewhere around 25 percent of all teacher comments, it may not just be a sign of incompetent spellers, it may be because spelling is the easiest thing to find that is wrong. Finding spelling errors is so easy a computer can do it for us, and do it well. Spelling is also easy to quantify. I had a high school English teacher who proudly announced that she would give us an “F” if she found more than three spelling mistakes in any of our essays. Yet she did not give a similar strike for any other error, not of syntax or even logic. I suspect she found it beyond her abilities to mark anything but spelling.

Spelling, easy to notice, easy to count, is also one of the easiest aspects of language to identify. Is spelling important in successful written communication? No. But, of course, language communicates much more than just the intended message. Language usage often indicates, for one thing, one’s place in society. Correct English orthography is a sort of accent of the educated.

According to Stubbs (1980, 69): “There is a powerful convention that words in English should have one fixed spelling. But it is simply a convention, which has developed over the last two hundred years, but did not hold before that...Unless the errors are particularly gross, there are rarely any problems of communication... Spelling is clearly important, because people attach so much importance to it.”

Conclusion

What do spelling bees and the American culture of spelling tell us as teachers of English? For one thing, they remind us that learning a language and using it are not at all easy. Your average spelling bee contestant is a 12-year-old who spends more than two hours a day studying one aspect of the language. All but one in this self-selecting crowd of thousands will make a mistake.

Language is hard. Language is hard because it is immense, the result of human history; it is smoothed over once in a while, perhaps, but it is still quite bumpy. It is complex because it is a part of human society with rules that

go beyond grammar to manners. Spelling reminds us that to learn English is to study history and anthropology. All our students are studying sociolinguistics. Pity them.

English is a language without a governing body, but it is often taught, both as an L1 and an L2, as though it were governed by a small group of people who passed their laws directly to teachers. We teach English this way because we as teachers want to be authorities ourselves, and it is impossibly, embarrassingly difficult to be an authority on something that is too big to see all at once and too dynamic to ever pin down. We also sometimes teach English as though language had been tamed because we make erroneous assumptions about language. We assume, for example, that dictionaries can be trusted. But even with all the dictionaries in print, there is still significant disagreement about many English spellings. Hyphenation, for example, is in a high state of flux. Not one of the words that Strunk (1918) identified in his *Elements of Style* as being hyphenated—*to-day*, *to-night*, *to-morrow*—is hyphenated today.

While you are passing down the law of spelling in class, your students might be using their cell phones to text (or SMS) one another using “words” such as “ttyl” “w8” and “thx.” Computers are another bit of technology that is changing the way we spell. If your students use spell checkers, teach them how to use them well, and help them identify the pitfalls of spell checking, such as homophones. (See Appendix 2.)

Is teaching English spelling rules an act of denial about their usefulness? The most popular rule of English teachers is “i before e except after c.” That seems pretty good—a rule with one exception. The student speller is ready to venture forth into the language, pencil in hand. But wait, that student should also know that when there is a sound like “ay” as in *neighbor* or *weigh*, the rule does not apply. Oh, wait, students should also know that there are some exceptions such as *foreign*, *height*, and *weird*. If students need a mnemonic device for these exceptions, they might try “Foreign and weird are the height of irregularity when trying to apply the ‘i before e’ spelling rule.” Now let them go spell, but before they do, there is something they should know; remember that rule, i before e except after c? Well,

some words are exceptions to that “after c” exception—*science*, for example, and other words with that *cien* spelling, like *ancient*. Now your students can start spelling with i and e, and let’s hope they don’t meet the third person plural possessive pronoun.

At some point, when the number of rules begins to approach the number of words, the fact that language is rule-governed is no longer comforting. Be honest with your students. Tell them that a few rules are not going to be the key to learning to spell. Instead, just as with reading, to learn English spelling, students will need a variety of strategies. They will have to memorize a lot and should focus on words most common to their specific needs and most commonly misspelled by users of English everywhere. Also, let students know when spelling is important and when it is not. (If they are preparing to study at an American university, then it is extremely important.)

In assessing written language, give students the opportunity to focus on non-surface issues, such as organization and content, by ignoring misspellings. That’s right, let them go sometimes. In final drafts, you can identify and count the number of spelling mistakes, but again, you might focus your attention on matters that computers find more difficult to identify. Try an experiment in your assessment technique: rather than marking the spelling mistakes first, try marking them after you have made all content-related commentary. You might find you are looking deeper into the writing, past the cosmetic, to the level where thought lives. Another approach that many writing teachers use is to give separate content and mechanics assessments.

Fowler (1944) is most practical when it comes to spelling. He suggests that a list of spelling words be made “by each person who finds himself in need of it, out of his own experience & to suit his own requirements” (554). He goes on to give a list that might be his own, adding that some words like *disappoint* and *unparalleled* are doubly or triply as dangerous as others since they offer many opportunities for error and so are especially deserving of a space on such a list. I’m surprised that more users of English don’t produce their own lists. It seems to me such lists should be accessories as common as handkerchiefs or cell phones. We could laminate our spelling lists and carry them in our pockets,

producing them on occasion. I myself carry a pocket spelling dictionary with me everywhere I go, and I know which of my friends and family I can rely on for sound spelling advice. As in *Akeelah and the Bee*, spelling can often be a community endeavor.

I like Winnie-the-Pooh’s social approach to spelling in *The House on Pooh Corner*. When he wants to give his friend, Eeyore, a birthday present, he asks wise Owl to write the message, explaining “Because my spelling is Wobbly. It’s good spelling but it wobbles, and the letters get in the wrong places. Would you write ‘a happy birthday’ on it for me?” Owl cautiously asks Pooh if he can read and then writes: “HIPY PAPY BTHUTHDTH THUTHDA BTHUTHDY” while Pooh looks on “admiringly.”

References

- Bryson, B. 1990. *The mother tongue: English and how it got that way*. New York: Perennial.
- Fowler, H. W. 1944. *A dictionary of modern English usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Koda, K. 2005. *Insights into second language reading: A cross linguistic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maguire, J. 2006. *American bee: The national spelling bee and the culture of word nerds*. Rodale
- Mencken, H. L. 1992. *The American language*. 4th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Milne, A. A. 1957. *The world of Pooh*. E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc.
- Peters, R. 1968. *A linguistic history of English*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Stevick, R. 1968. *English and its history: The evolution of a language*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.
- Stubbs, M. 1981. *Language and literacy: The socio-linguistics of reading and writing*. London: Routledge and Kegan.
- Strunk, W. 1918. *Elements of style*. Ithaca, NY: Private Printing.
- Wood, B. 1971. Introd. to *English spelling, roadblock to reading*, by G. Dewey. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

ERAN WILLIAMS lives in Pretoria, South Africa, where he serves as the Regional English Language Officer for southern Africa.

Appendix 1 **Interesting Websites on Spelling Bees and Spelling**

The Challenge of Spelling in English • Eran Williams

www.spellingbee.com/

The Scripps National Spelling Bee official website includes information for participants, finalist profiles, and a study zone containing four free study resources including a 794-page consolidated word list in PDF format. This word list is the seminal resource for all those studying for the national spelling bee. Another useful feature of the website is a complete 36-week study program, Carolyn's Corner, with spelling rules and even inspirational stories.

www.myspellit.com/

This study site jointly created by Scripps and Merriam-Webster contains lists of frequently misspelled words and homonyms that include audio files so that users can hear the word as well as see its definition and origins. The site offers spelling study words categorized by language of origin with interesting activities for each language. In addition, the site offers a free downloadable booklet, *Spell it! Tricks and Tips for Spelling Bee Success*, which teachers have permission to reproduce for classroom use.

www.spellingbeethemusical.com/

This site of the musical "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" offers a game that simulates the spelling bee. You can even ask for the definition and for the word to be used in a sentence. Fortunately, unlike a real spelling bee, you can attempt to spell the same word many times.

www.spellingcity.com

A great free resource for teachers and students (especially young ones), this site allows you to enter lists of spelling words and generate tests and games from them. If you register, you can store word lists and keep track of progress. The program "pronounces" words entered and uses them in sentences. The spelling games offered include a version of hangman and a word search; games can be printed or played online.

Continued on page 21

Appendix 2 Some Commonly Confused Homonyms

The Challenge of Spelling in English • Eran Williams

1. are – our
2. bare – bear
3. by – buy – bye
4. cents – sense
5. course – coarse
6. council – counsel
7. except – accept
8. fourth – forth
9. herd – heard
10. hole – whole
11. horse – hoarse
12. isle – aisle
13. know – no
14. led – lead (n)
15. naval – navel
16. principal – principle
17. recede – reseed
18. rote – wrote
19. sew – so – sow
20. sight – site – cite
21. straight - strait
22. stationary – stationery
23. their – there – they're
24. threw – through
25. to – too – two
26. wail – whale
27. ware – wear – where
28. write – right – rite
29. weather – whether
30. which – witch
31. would – wood
32. your – you're