



English spelling is chaotic: What facts lie behind this popular judgment?

Abstract

In this talk I will investigate the popular idea that English spelling is chaotic, and consider how to teach English spelling. I will also assess the relationship between segmentation, reading and spelling. Spelling difficulties are due to the gap between orthography and pronunciation; a word represents both sound and meaning, and good spelling may improve students' overall performance.

Introduction

In this talk, I will investigate the claim about the misconceptions concerning spelling irregularities. The English writing system is often considered chaotic and hard to learn. But linguistic studies suggest that learning to spell in an alphabetic writing system is very much a linguistic process. Memorization plays some role – for example in learning about the ‘s’ of ‘isles’. However, there is much more to spelling than rote memory. Treiman & Kessler (2008) have found, for example, that a word is often spelled "ea" when the mid-low front vowel /e/ phoneme is followed by /d/ (head, for example). However, when the final phoneme is /m/, the "ea" spelling is never used. Another example is that words tend to be spelled with two consonants when the vowel is monophthong, that is, when it is spelled with a single letter (shall, class, doll, bell, dress), and a shorter spelling when the vowel is spelled with more than one letter (i.e. jail, goose). In a perfect world, the best writing system for a language would be an alphabet that always spells a particular sound in only one way. Any person who knew this one-to-one mapping system of sound-letter correspondences could do a credible job of spelling out dictated words or pronouncing written texts.

English, however, with words like "rough", "though", "through" and "bough" has probably given the misconception that English spelling is chaotic. While Bernard Shaw once described English as a language that "can't be spelt", but this should be taken literally.

Nevertheless, modern research shows that phoneme-grapheme correspondences are not as inconsistent as widely believed. Compared to Finnish, English is considered to be irregular. However recent linguistic studies have shown that spelling consistency increases greatly if the position of the phoneme within a syllable is taken into consideration, and the identity of the phoneme in the environment.

Position of the phoneme

Environmental clues play a significant role in helping students recognize that certain vowel sounds are spelled in certain ways when students take into account the position of the phoneme within the syllable and the identity of the phoneme in the environment.

Accordingly, the environmental clues play a great role in helping students recognize and apply the above patterns in their approach to reading, spelling and writing. When applied, it turns out that phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences in English become less consistent.

Phonotactics

This imposes on educators to train primary school teachers on phonotactics, which may bridge the gap between pronunciation and orthographic writing system.

Discussing the basic elements of the syllable which are the onset, the rhyme and the coda and by understanding these patterns, the complexity of spelling will be reduced. Above all, the target of this research is teaching and learning. Therefore, this talk will be geared towards this aspect which will pave the way to assess the relationship between segmentation, reading and spelling. It is said that spelling difficulties are due to the gap between orthography and pronunciation; word however, represents both sound and meaning, and good spelling may improve students' overall performance.

Theories of teaching spelling

Theories of spelling teaching in English have been influenced by notions about the nature of the writing system and by prevailing theories of learning. Until the 1960s, the English writing system was considered to be complex and illogical as shown above. This led to the idea that spelling depends upon rote memorization. As language researchers began to point to previously unacknowledged regularities in the relations between spoken and printed English as elaborated by Chomsky & Halle, 1968; Venezky, 1970, and as psychologists began to see learners being active people., theories of spelling development changed. These theories became clear that children have the ability to actively search the structure in written language. Modern research on spelling development has focused on children's acquisition of four important types of linguistic knowledge: phonological, orthographic, semantic and morphological. This will lead me to discuss the importance of these factors on learning spelling.

Teaching spelling, without any consideration to pronunciation, is rather a difficult task. Does English language have consistent phoneme-grapheme correspondences? If yes, its spelling system is then considered to be regular (Kessler 2005). This is because Finnish has consistent one-to-one mapping of sounds to letters, which is widely considered to have a nearly optimal orthography, By the same standard, Dewey (1971, p. 4). Treiman et al 2010; Fromkin et al 2008) assert that English is generally considered to be 'chaotic and indefensible'. Since English orthography is irrational, the writer maintains that English teaching and learning to spell are the basic pedagogical problems of both modern and future education. Nevertheless, if this premise were true, such views often impede effective reading and writing.