Pronunciation and spelling

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English spelling is not phonetic

George Bernard Shaw, in a possibly idle moment, created the nonsense word *ghoti*, saying it should be pronounced in the same way as the word *fish* /fɪʃ/. He explained this by demonstrating how the pronunciation of *gh* could be taken from words like *tough* /tʌf/; the *o* could be taken from women /wɪmɪn/, and the *ti* could be taken from words like *notion* /nəʊʃən/. What he was showing was that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between spelling and pronunciation in English. The 44 different sounds we use when speaking English are written down using only 26 letters. This means that although there obviously is some correspondence between sounds and letters, many letters can represent more than one sound. This is seen, for example, in the letter *a*, which can represent /æ/ as in *apple*, or /ɑː/ as in *ask*, amongst numerous other possibilities. With consonants too, the letter *c* can be pronounced as /k/ as in *can*, or /s/ as in *cinema*. To add to the complication, many sounds can be represented by more than one letter or combination of letters; for example, /ʊ/ appears in *put*, *book* and *could*.

In some languages there is a high level of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation; Japanese, Italian and Spanish are good examples of so-called 'phonetic' languages. Somebody learning Italian who is familiar with the sounds (or phonemes) represented by the individual letters, and by various combinations of letters, can, in theory, work out how a word they have only read should be pronounced.

Since the relationship between spelling and pronunciation is more complex in English, it is not always easy for learners of whatever L1 to see how a written English word should be pronounced, or how a word they

have only heard should be written. But it is not the case that learners will always have to make a complete guess in such circumstances, nor that they will have to learn the spelling and pronunciation of thousands of words without recourse to any general rules. This is because English spelling is not as irregular as it seems. Surveys of the system have shown that over 80% of English words are spelled according to regular patterns, and that there are fewer than 500 words (out of an estimated total of over half a million words) whose spelling can be considered completely irregular. The fact that some of these words also happen to be amongst the most common ones (e.g. *are, said, come, how, what, could*) gives a distorted impression of irregularity in the system. Proficient readers, as well as applying sounds to individual letters, can also successfully recognise and apply sounds associated with groups of letters. For example, the pronunciation of *could* might seem quite irregular, but it can appear quite regular, following exactly the same pattern as *should* and *would*.

By tying spelling closely in with pronunciation work, teachers can show rules and patterns to students which they can then apply when they come across new words, be they heard or read. Regular features of English spelling and pronunciation can be shown to apply to individual letters of the alphabet and also across many different words.

Regular features of English pronunciation and spelling

Bringing the following general features of English to the notice of students may help them on many occasions. Being aware of the patterns and restrictions that exist in the system can make English less of an alphabet soup, and more of an organised yet flexible menu of possibilities.

Single letter and sound associations

In English there are 21 consonant letters, making 24 sounds, and 5 vowel letters, making 20 sounds. In the light of this, it is clear that vowels will be the most likely cause of pronunciation or spelling difficulties for learners of English. Many consonant letters have one main sound associated with them, such as *b, d, f, h, j*. Admittedly these letters can be silent in certain words, but this tends to only happen when they are immediately preceded or followed by another consonant in the same syllable; compare, for example, the silence of *n* in *autumn* and its pronunciation in *autumnal*. Letters that are related to a number of different sounds tend to have primary associations, and other less common ones. For example, *s* has the primary sound value of /s/ as in *gets*, but will have the secondary pronunciation of /z/ as in *has*. Similar observations can be made in relation to vowels. (For a more detailed analysis of these issues, see Appendix C on page 147.)

Letter combinations and sounds

Some pairs of letters are associated with a particular sound, as in the link between *ph* and the sound /f/, as in *photo, photograph* and *phone*. Such letter-pairs are known as **digraphs**. In certain cases, a digraph can have two or three different sound associations, depending on the words in question: *ch* for example, can be pronounced as /tʃ/ (*chip, change, hunch*), /k/ (*character,*

technique) or /ʃ/ (*machine*). Note that there are rules in operation here; it is generally not possible, for example, for *ch* to have the sound /ʃ/ when it appears at the beginning or end of a word except in borrowed words like *charlatan, chignon* and *charabanc*.

With vowel digraphs, it is possible to identify primary and secondary values for particular pairings. For example, in the majority of words containing *ea*, the pair will be pronounced as /iː/ (as in *eat, heat* and *cheap*) which is therefore the primary value, while secondary values include the less frequent /eɪ/ (*great* and *break*) and /e/ (*dead, weather* and *breakfast*). (For more details on letter pairs and their sounds, see Appendix C and particularly Tables 4, 5 and 7.)

English letters behave according to their environment

Many English letters fit comfortably into certain environments, behaving in certain predictable ways when they are there. For example, many vowel letters, when sandwiched between consonant letters (as in *cap, cut* and *con*), will have the short vowel sound most commonly associated with that letter: /æ/, /ʌ/ and /ɒ/. The addition of a final letter *e*, will usually lead to a change to either a longer sound or a diphthong: *cape* /eɪ/, *cute* /uː/ and *cone* /əʊ/, making the written vowel 'say its name'. This also happens when other letters are added, as in *cuter* and *cones*. The *cute* example also shows us that with *u*, the addition of a final *e* often means that a /j/ is inserted before the vowel sound to make /kjuːt/; the same effect is seen in *tube* /tjuːb/ and *mute* /mjuːt/. The addition of a letter *r* immediately after the vowel letter will often lead to a longer sound: *carp* /kɑːp/, *curt* /kɜːt/ and *corn* /kɔːn/. (For more details, see Appendix C, Tables 6 and 8.)

Environmental restrictions

Sometimes the environments that single letters or paired letters can exist in are restricted. For example, *wh* usually appears at the beginning of words (as in *where* and *what*), sometimes appears in the middle of compound words (*nowhere* and *somewhere*), but doesn't appear at the end. Similarly, *ng* and *nk* appear at the end of words like *sing* and *sink*, in the middle of grammatical variations of those words (*singing, singer* and *sinking*), but don't appear at the beginning of words, except in names like *Nkomo* /ŋˈkɒmɒ/ and *Ng* /eŋ/.

Common patterns

In addition to the above, there are a number of common sound/spelling patterns which can be presented to students as safe and reliable. Here are some useful ones:

- When talking about the incidence of /ə/, it can be noted that /ə/ occurs only in unstressed syllables, and also in a high number of them. Spellings which students find difficult to pronounce can in fact be made much easier by concentration on this sound. It can be very useful to draw students' attention to its use in prefixes and suffixes, as these are usually unstressed: *technical, production, explanatory, bigger* etc.

- Common suffixes are usually consistent in their pronunciations, for example: *-tion* is pronounced /ʃən/ as in *explanation, pronunciation, promotion*; *-cial* is /ʃəl/ as in *special, official, prejudicial*; *-cious* is /ʃəs/ as in *precious, vicious, suspicious.*
- Certain vowels are usually elided in particular words: *secretary* /'sekrətriː/, *vegetable* /'vədʒtəbəl/.
- Certain spellings are usually assimilated in connected speech: *Would you, Could you,* using /dʒ/). This information can be helpful for lower level students, to help distinguish such words in listening comprehension activities.

'Root' words and derived words

It is frequently easy to spot related words in English, due to the fact that the spelling of the root word usually stays the same in the derived word. Often, the pronunciation stays the same too. For example, the root word *speak* /spiːk/ is unchanged in spelling and pronunciation in *speaks, speaker, speaking, loudspeaker* and so on.

Some words that have a common root, on the other hand, have drastically differing pronunciation; for example, the noun *sign* /saɪn/ has its own particular pronunciation, yet related words like *signal* and *signalman* follow the more phonetic /sɪg-/ pattern. However, simple patterns can still be shown; when *sign* is used as a verb, the related words *signature* and *signatory* follow the same pattern as *signal* and *signalman.*

At times, the stress in a word moves from one syllable to another when a different form of the word is used, and this can lead to a change in the pronunciation of a particular syllable. We can see this phenomenon in the words *invite* /ɪn'vaɪt/ and *invitation* /ɪnvɪ'teɪʃən/, for example. However, it is clear that the words are related, and work can be done in class to show students how stressed syllables will tend to preserve their vowel sound, while unstressed ones will often change to a weak form.

An understanding of the regular features described above across a range of words can help students to predict the spelling of words they have only heard. The trained reader can also make very good guesses about the pronunciation of words which she has never encountered before, using her knowledge of how words typically behave. For example, the nonsense words *lum, lume* and *lurm* are completely predictable in their likely pronunciations.

Problems and approaches in the teaching of pronunciation and spelling

As we have said, the lack of a simple correspondence between the spelling system and the pronunciation system in English tends to cause problems for learners in that it can lead them to initially or repeatedly misspell words and mispronounce them.

The difficulties can be particularly acute for learners whose L1 has a more phonetic script system, like Japanese and Spanish and to a lesser degree French. Such learners may, for example, tend to try and give a sound value to every letter in an English word, leading to pronunciations like /wælked/ for *walked*. As a consequence they have to get to grips with a different way of thinking about the relationship between written and spoken language,

such as the fact that /ə/ can be represented by a variety of spellings, or that *ough* has eight possible pronunciations (see page 7).

For all learners whose own language has an alphabetic script similar to that of English, a further problem can arise. Occasionally, a letter that is associated with a particular sound in L1 may be linked to a different sound in L2. In Spanish, for example, the letters *g* and *j* can represent a sound similar to the *ch* at the end of *Bach*. Spanish speakers may use this sound for an English *g* or *j*. In German, as another example, the written letter *w* is pronounced as /v/ (leading to pronunciations like /vaɪn/ for *wine*), and the letter *v* is pronounced as /f/ (leading to *very* being pronounced /feriː/).

Although spelling does appear to be a significant cause of pronunciation errors, not all of these are caused by the complexity of English spelling or by learners incorporating generalisations from the spelling/sound relationships of their L1 into their speech in L2. Spanish, for example, does not allow the sequence of *s* + another consonant at the start of a word without a preceding vowel; so, words like *stop* and *spell* may be pronounced as *estop* and *espell*. The problem here is entirely to do with the varying sound rules of the L1 and L2, and nothing to do with spelling. (For more details on such sound-driven problems caused by differences between the L1 and L2, see Appendix B.)

What can teachers do to minimise the influence of the spelling/ pronunciation patterns and habits of L1 on their students' pronunciation of English? One approach is where teachers work on the pronunciation of a word or longer utterance orally, before showing students the written form. Giving students the written form before they have practised it orally can lead to incorrect pronunciation being carried over into subsequent oral practice.

Working on pronunciation before giving students a written record is fine within the controlled environment of the classroom, and in many instances both desirable and advantageous. However, giving students a written record in itself is not enough to help them remember the pronunciation unless the relatively complex links between English spelling and pronunciation have been made clear. Making these links will help students in their independent study away from the classroom. Teachers should therefore get into the regular habit of using phonemic symbols in combination with a written record of the language being practised, and make a point of drawing students' attention to the most important spelling/sound relationships.

Regular dictionary work is also to be encouraged, and students should be enabled to use a good dictionary which uses phonemic symbols. Teachers can do work in class to help students become more familiar with the dictionary, and to gain confidence in working out pronunciations from phonemic script.

In a multilingual class, there will be a variety of different types of mistakes, reflecting the pronunciation and spelling difficulties of the various L1s represented. In such classes, teachers need to develop an awareness of the difficulties specific to the individual L1s represented in the class, without making classroom activities too L1-specific. Activities can focus on spelling and pronunciation difficulties which arise from work on particular

language structures, and which are relevant to the majority of students in that particular class. The aim should be to alert students to generalities that they can then apply in their own reading and writing. In monolingual classes, teachers can be more selective, choosing examples of mistakes which are typical for students for that particular L1, as well as addressing the more general challenges which the English spelling system presents.

Sample lessons   The following sample lessons show some teaching ideas in action.

Lesson 1: Spelling of suffixes and the pronunciation of /ə/ (Intermediate to Advanced)

Lesson type: Integrated
Materials: List of words/list of suffixes

The class is working on vocabulary extension, through adding suffixes to words. The teacher starts by dividing the class into pairs or small groups. Then she writes the following lists (or similar) on the board, or gives them out on a handout to each group. (The best way to compile a list is to make the lesson a follow-on from previous work, like a reading comprehension text which has included some of the suffixes to be studied.)

List 1: wonder, suspect, manage, detect, write, interpret, home, success, instruct, protect, harm, pronounce, demonstrate, discuss, admire, survive, beauty, correct, communicate, politics, buy, thought, infect...

List 2: -er, -or, -ian, -ful, -ation, -tion, -icion, -ent, -less, -ion

Students work together in pairs or small groups to try to add suffixes from list 2 to the words on list 1 as appropriate. Some they may find relatively easy, and others will be more challenging; some involve a change in spelling (e.g. *pronounce–pronunciation*). The groups or pairs then compare answers, and the teacher checks the answers with the whole class, making sure that students have the opportunity to copy or note down the right answers. The teacher then asks the students to mark primary stresses on the words; she elicits a couple of examples from the class first, to make sure that everyone has the right idea, for example:

    □   □
  wonderful   detection

After the students have again had the time to discuss their answers, and after the teacher has checked these, she asks the students to mark all incidences of /ə/; it is useful to elicit a few examples, and perhaps drill the sound chorally a few times to make sure all the students understand the nature of the exercise. The teacher instructs the students to try saying the words to each other if they are not sure. Having compared their answers with other groups again, the teacher elicits the answers from the class, and marks (or invites the students to come to the board and mark) the incidences of /ə/. The teacher finally draws the students' attention to the fact that most (but not all) of the incidences of /ə/ fall on the suffixes, and that

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all of the suffixes contain one example of the sound. The lexical work in this type of activity can also be successfully tied in with work on word stress, as /ə/ will always be part of an unstressed syllable.

Lesson 2: Different spellings of vowel sounds (Pre-Intermediate)

Lesson type: Practice
Materials: Task sheet with two lists of words

The teacher can use activities like the one which follows to focus on particular sounds which have been causing students difficulties, either productively or receptively.

The activity itself is a simple matching exercise, where students match words which they think probably have the same vowel sound. The sounds given here in this example are /iː/, /e/, /ʊ/, /ɔː/, /ɑː/ and /ɜː/. Students are each given a task sheet with the following words on:

head	laugh
seize	girl
put	rent
sore	heat
heart	cook
heard	law

The teacher asks the students to work individually to match the words with the same sound; students then compare their answers, and the teacher conducts feedback. The words can, at any stage, be read out or played from a tape, depending on the approach the teacher feels is best suited to the class. The sounds can then be worked on in a variety of ways: the teacher can drill the words, drill the sounds, and take the opportunity, if students are not familiar with the relevant phonemic symbols, to introduce them at this stage. As a way of extending the activity, students can be asked to add more words with the same sounds, or to add more words with the same spellings. The activity could also be a dictionary-based one, with students finding the words in a good dictionary to help them match up the sounds.

Lesson 3: Wrong spelling test: Spelling/sound relationships (All levels)

Lesson type: Practice
Materials: List of words, some spelled correctly, others not. List is compiled from students' homework.

The teacher tells students that they are going to have a spelling test, based on words from their recent written work. She organises the students into pairs, and gives each pair a list of words. Some of the words are spelled correctly, and some are not. The students' task is to find the incorrect ones and to provide the correct version. The activity can be done competitively if you wish: pairs race to see who can finish first. When one pair has finished, the teacher checks to see if they have corrected appropriately. If they have

not, then the race continues. An example list of words could be: *pichure, receipt, wonderfull, ensure, enoug, preferred, protecked, learnt, pronounciation, confuse.*

The words might also be included in a reading text, which students have to correct. It is important that the task is checked at class level, and tied in with pronunciation. Depending on the students' abilities, the teacher can also ask them to attempt an explanation for the wrong spellings, to say where the potential confusions are, and/or to use phonemic script to show how the word is pronounced.

Lesson 4: Dictionary work: Spelling/sound relationships (All levels)

Lesson type: Practice
Materials: Dictionaries. List of words, all including the sound being focused on

This example uses different possible pronunciations for the letter *o*, but the activity can, of course, be tailored to cover whatever practice the class needs.

The teacher gives the students a selection of words which include the letter *o*. For example: *song, donkey, love, comfortable, nothing, done, hot, monkey, Monday, gone, son, across, annoy, brother, won.*

Students are asked to work in pairs, and with the help of a dictionary to categorise the words according to how the letter *o* is pronounced in each one. The pairs try to see how many different pronunciations they can find. The activity can be made competitive, with pairs racing to complete the categorisation. To make the task easier for students who are not so confident with pronunciation work, phonemic symbols showing the different possible pronunciations of *o* can be given to them. Activities like this will increase students' confidence in their predictions of the relationships between spelling and sounds, and also help them to increase their understanding and knowledge of the spelling and pronunciation systems. Guided work in using dictionaries to find pronunciations will also help students take a more independent role in their awareness of pronunciation in private study away from the classroom.

Dictionary work can also be done with reading texts as a way of extending a comprehension task. Students can be asked, for example, to find all the words containing /iː/ in the text, or any other sound which needs attention. Students will often be able to predict many of these, but can use the dictionaries to look up the ones they are not sure about.

Lesson 5: 'Trevor's day': Present simple tense, final *s* as /s/ or /z/ (Elementary)

Lesson type: Integrated
Materials: A set of drawings or photos of the events in Trevor's day (optional)

The primary aim of the lesson is to introduce the 3rd person verb forms for a set of verbs, but the pronunciation of the verb endings is also relevant. The

teacher uses drawings or photos to elicit and drill facts about the daily habits of a real or imaginary person. For example:

Trevor lives in Burnley.	He eats his breakfast.
He gets up at 6 o'clock each morning.	He reads his newspaper.
He has a shower.	He cycles to work.

Having drilled the sentences chorally and individually, the teacher gives students an activity to practise recognising and using them. For example, students can be given a series of pictures representing Trevor's typical day, which they have to put in the correct order. Or, to make the exercise more communicative, they can be given information (or visual prompts) about the daily habits of another person; students work in pairs to exchange information, building up a picture of the subject's typical day.

The teacher then writes on the board two or three of the verbs which have appeared in each sentence, says them out loud, and asks the students if they notice any pronunciation difference at the end. He elicits the fact that some have an /s/ sound, while some have /z/. (The rule is that /s/ will be said after an unvoiced consonant sound, and /z/ after a voiced consonant or vowel/diphthong.) Once the point has been made, the teacher asks students to categorise the other verbs on the list; students can be given a task sheet with the verb forms and a column each for /s/ and /z/, or the columns can be put on the board, and students can be invited to the board to do the categorisation.

The level of detail used in the explanation depends on previous work done with the class. It is perfectly possible at elementary level to introduce and use terms like 'voiced' and 'voiceless', to help students discover more about the pronunciation of English. If the students are comfortable with these terms (or alternative descriptions, like 'use your voice', and 'don't use your voice'), then the rule can be explained. Teachers might simply want to use the opportunity to bring up the idea that some 3rd person singular present simple verb forms are pronounced with /s/ and some with /z/. Whatever the level of detail used, the lesson helps students to practise the pronunciation of the endings, as well as helping them to remember to add a final letter *s* when writing.

The teacher can follow up the pronunciation focus by asking students to work in pairs in order to tell each other about their own typical day. Students can then form new pairs, using the 3rd person forms to tell their new partner about the student they have just been working with. The speaking exercises can then be followed up with a written exercise, where students write about a person they know, a famous person or celebrity, or an imaginary person, again with the idea of practising the 3rd person forms.

Conclusions   In this chapter we have noted that English is not a 'phonetic'
language but, despite the seeming complexity of the English spelling
system, there is still a high degree of regularity. We have seen that the
patterns of spelling can provide a useful opportunity for helping
students to improve their pronunciation and spelling at the same
time.

We have seen that:
• pronunciation and spelling are very much interconnected, and that
  habits and generalisations from L1 may be brought over into L2.

And we have concluded that:
• working on spelling and pronunciation together helps students'
  independent study outside the classroom.