

Sound and spelling

Features

Asking for trouble

When a language decides to have only 26 letters but 44 different sounds, you know you've got problems. Learners must wonder at the craziness of a word like *thought* – where do you begin? Especially if in your language (eg Japanese or Italian, known as *phonetic* languages) the tendency is to pronounce a word as it's written.

Finding logic

When helping students with sound and spelling in English, perhaps it's best to begin with the positives. After all, many of the consonants have only one sound, such as the /d/ and /g/ in *dog*. Another useful guideline is that where you have a stressed syllable, you'll also find an unstressed syllable. This means that the vowels are likely to be reduced, often to a schwa /ə/.

Digraphs

You can also raise students' awareness of *digraphs*, common combinations of letters which produce certain sounds, such as *ph*, which has the sound /f/. Here is a simple way to explore digraphs:

Choose words which include the same spelling but with different sounds. The example here focuses on the digraph *ch* and its most common pronunciation of /tʃ/ and /k/. Write the words randomly on the board, like this:

| /tʃ/ | /k/ |
|--------|-----------|
| church | character |
| chart | chart |
| chips | technique |
| hunch | chaos |
| chat | Christmas |
| | choir |

Students categorise the words by the sound of *ch*. The answer looks like this:

| /tʃ/ | /k/ |
|--------|-----------|
| church | character |
| chart | technique |
| chips | chaos |
| hunch | Christmas |
| chat | choir |

Terminology

Tools and techniques

The learner

Debate

As a follow-up activity, ask the students to look in a dictionary and find the answers to these questions:

- 1 Which is the most common sound for words beginning with *ch*?
- 2 What is the other possible sound for words beginning with *ch*?

Answers: A general overview of dictionary entries for these words shows that /tʃ/ is the most common sound and that the sound /ʃ/ as in *charlatan* also exists but is probably the least common.

A major minority

Gerald Kelly's excellent introductory book *How to Teach Pronunciation* points out that 'over 80% of English words are spelled according to regular patterns, and there are fewer than 500 words whose spelling can be considered completely irregular'. So can your students relax? After all, we're talking about the odd word here and there causing problems, aren't we? Unfortunately, as Kelly goes on to say, these 500 include some of the most common everyday words.

Sound spelling mazes

A sound spelling maze is an easy way to address some of these problematic sound-spelling correspondences. The maze can be incorporated into your lessons as a warmer, part of the main lesson or to fill the last five minutes. As usual with pronunciation teaching, activities using a maze are best applied 'little but often'.

Examples of two sound spelling mazes appear on page 27 and you can photocopy and use them straight away. Basically, students have to connect the two words in the shaded boxes by drawing a line that passes through other words that have the same sound. They can only go up, down, left or right and

not diagonally. The solutions to the two mazes shown are:

/u:/ *through, flew, blue, group, loose, route, suit, flute, bruise, rude, food, do, sue, threw*

/ɔ:/ *nought, snore, law, door, lawn, poor, mourn, corn, thought, raw, sort, court*

The blank version of the maze is for you to devise your own – or perhaps you could get more advanced students to create one to test their partners. When choosing words to tempt students onto the wrong square, use words with the same spelling but different sounds (eg *flew* and *sew*) or words with similar or confusing sounds (eg *gate* and *get*).

Teacher talking time

Are these statements true or false? What do your colleagues think?

'The digraphs *ng* and *nk* only appear at the ends of words.'

'The letters *wh* only appear at the beginning or middle of a word.'

'The suffixes *-tion*, *-cial* and *-cious* are consistent in their pronunciation.'

See below for the answers.

Kelly, G *How to Teach Pronunciation*
Longman 2000



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Answers to Teacher talking time statements:
All the statements are true, though the digraphs *ng* and *nk* can appear in the middle of the word if *ing* or *er* is added as in *singer* and *singing*. (The statements are based on Gerald Kelly's *How to Teach Pronunciation*.)



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Sound spelling mazes

| | | | | |
|-----------------|---------------|-------------------|-------|------------------|
| /u:/ through | plough | loose | route | suit |
| flew | blue | group | rough | flute |
| sew | thought | sh <u>ou</u> lder | rude | bruise |
| own | sue | do | food | bisc <u>u</u> it |
| enough | /u:/ threw | flood | blood | build |

| | | | | |
|---------------|---------|--------|----------------|-------|
| bore | bone | snore | /ɔ:/ nought | nor |
| coy | boat | law | loin | bow |
| /ɔ:/ court | coin | door | lawn | lot |
| sort | raw | though | poor | floor |
| south | thought | corn | mourn | flour |

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