

## Spelling myths and enchantments

<http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/seminars/spelling-myths-and-enchantments>



Johanna Stirling

1. Introduction/The different 'systems' in English
2. The influences on English as a language
3. The problem with spelling 'rules'
4. Visualisations to help students with spelling
5. The problem with testing / teaching 'lexically' / using technology

Everybody seems to have something terrible to say about English spelling. But how much of that talk is really true? And how much of it focuses on practical solutions for the English language classroom? Thankfully, Jo Stirling shines some positive light on the subject.

### Session summary and objectives

In this seminar Jo Stirling explores some common myths about British English spelling. For example:

- Is English spelling really chaotic, and if not, how can we understand the complexity of it?
- Should teachers teach rules, or is there a better way?
- How can spelling be practised without making people more confused than they were before they started?
- What's the relationship between teaching and testing spelling and are teachers always sure which of those they're doing?
- Does technology really adversely affect spelling?

Many of the prevalent myths about spelling actually create barriers to learning it. But rather than just exploding the myths, we have to build something to replace them, so spelling doesn't just get ignored in our classrooms.

Jo Stirling shares a range of multi-sensory activities that teachers and parents can use with learners. You may think only a miracle would improve the spelling of some of your students. Well, try these enchantments first!

### Who is this session for?

- Primary or secondary school English language teachers looking for ideas for teaching spelling.
- Pre-service or pre-qualified English language teachers addressing English spelling for the first time.
- Teacher trainers looking for stimulating resources for teaching vocabulary and spelling.

### About the speaker

Johanna Stirling is a teacher, a teacher trainer and materials writer. She has written teaching materials for Cambridge University Press and her most recent book, 'Teaching Spelling to English Language Learners' won a Special Commendation in the British Council Award for ELT Writing and was nominated for an ELTon Award for Innovation in Teacher Resources.

She also has her own blog: The Spelling Blog.

### Before you watch

1. What particular problems do your students have with spelling in English? Make a list.
2. What spelling tips and tricks do you use in class to help your students with English spelling? Review what you do before watching the seminar.

Real life practice

Task 1

Practice the LOOK SAY COVER WRITE CHECK strategy for learning spelling that Jo Stirling shares in the seminar. You can download the template for this activity.

Consider a list of up to ten words that learners typically find difficult to spell. You might, for example, find them in a passage in your coursebook.

Put the words on the board one by one. Work on each word in turn.

These are the steps for the students to follow:

- Students copy the word down in the first column of the table.
- They say the word out loud - both the word and the spelling of the word.
- At this point it is very important that the teacher checks that the students have copied down the word correctly. If it is wrong now, it will be more difficult to get it right later on.
- Ask the students to count the number of letters in the word and add this to the table – this helps them focus on word length.
- Then ask students to note what is odd or difficult about the spelling (e.g. is it an ‘ough’ word? Or is there a silent letter, as in ‘knife?’).
- Students copy the word down in the first column of the table.
- Afterwards, the teacher tells them to turn the page over – and again asks them about the spelling, word length, what is odd, etc. about the word.

The teacher repeats this process for the other 9 difficult words.

When you have a list of ten words or so, ask the students to write a story which includes all the words.

Note: later on, after a few days, it is good to go through this activity again to aid memorisation through review and repetition.

Task 2 - Reviewing and checking spelling

Writing to learn – this follows on from the activity above.

- Set a writing task for the students – for example ‘What did you do at the weekend?’ or something more creative, but not too long!
- Provide the typical or challenging vocabulary that you want the learners to focus on, or alternatively, allow the learners to choose their own word lists – it could be a revision list.
- Encourage the learners to use their course book and dictionaries now to find the words and the spelling.
- (Optional) Focus on the ‘learn’ steps outlined above in Task 1 to help the learners memorise the words.
- Then the students complete the writing task – but they cannot use dictionaries while they are free-writing.
- While free-writing, the students should use a highlighter pen to highlight any words for which they are unsure of the spelling.
- The teacher checks the writing, using the marking table below (provided by Jo Stirling).

Criteria	5	4	3	2	1
Highlights the misspelt words	Over 90% of misspelt words corrected	75 - 90% of misspelt words corrected	50 - 74% of misspelt words corrected	25 - 49% of misspelt words corrected	less than 25% of misspelt words corrected
Accurately corrects them in second draft	Over 90% of highlighted words corrected	75 - 90% of highlighted words corrected	50 - 74% of highlighted words corrected	25 - 49% of highlighted words corrected	less than 25% of highlighted words corrected
Vocabulary range	Used vocabulary considerably higher than writing level	Used vocabulary somewhat higher than writing level	Used vocabulary range appropriate to writing level	Used vocabulary somewhat lower than writing level	Used vocabulary considerably lower than writing level
Score					

- Note that learners get positive marks for anything they are unsure about. This is far more positive than being penalised for incorrect spelling.
- Ideally, give the students a chance to write the text again, this time getting the spelling right.

### Top tips

The top tips below are based on Jo Stirling's revised myths:

1. English spelling isn't chaotic, but it is complicated. So it is important to help students in a constructive way with spelling.
2. Students need to discover patterns with word spelling rather than be taught spelling rules.
3. Multiple choice activities are not necessarily a good way to learn spelling. When given two or more choices, learners often remember the wrong way to spell the word!
4. Testing isn't teaching – try to teach spelling rather than simply give spelling tests.
5. Contrary to common practice, homophones (i.e. words that sound the same but are spelled differently) are best not taught together as this can be confusing for learners - teach connected word groups instead.
6. Spell checkers serve a good purpose, but students still need to learn to spell.
7. Contrary to popular thought, technology needn't negatively affect learners' English spelling; instead use technology to aid improvement in spelling.

### Join the discussion!

Discuss these questions with your colleagues, if you can:

1. Do you think technology helps or hinders students when they are learning to spell in English?
2. What advice can you share with other teachers?