

## Introduction

For many years, a widespread practice for teaching spelling has been to give students lists of words to learn (Allal, 1997; Brann and Hattie, 1995; Fresch, 2003). This approach is based on the belief that if students commit the images of words to memory, they will be able to work out the relationships that exist between sounds, spelling patterns and meaning, and will transfer this knowledge to reading and spelling unfamiliar words. There is also a widely held assumption that students will learn to spell through learning to read. Some students do seem to acquire spelling knowledge through their exposure to print and through accessing a visual memory of words, but many do not. Many students in upper primary and secondary classrooms, and indeed many adults, are unable to spell accurately.

Learning to spell involves a lot more than remembering what words look like. Acquiring spelling knowledge means learning about the spelling system that underpins written English. It involves finding out how words work. This is not the same as memorising the images of words. There are some people who easily remember what words look like and it doesn't seem to matter how they are taught to spell—they can recall the correct spellings of words. However, most people will become more accurate spellers if they have knowledge of the spelling system, and strategies to draw on to inform their spelling attempts.

Despite the fact that memorising lists of words has been shown to be ineffective for large numbers of students and despite the fact that many teachers know this method does not work, it is still a widespread practice in schools (Fresch, 2003). If we teach students to understand the spelling system that underpins written English they will have a great deal of information to call on to work out the spelling, pronunciation and meaning of words. They need to understand the relationships that exist between sounds, letters and spelling patterns; the rules and conventions that affect the way words are written; and the meanings and spellings of root words, prefixes and suffixes. With this depth of knowledge to draw on, students will be able to make informed decisions when spelling words they do not have in their print memory and they will be able to use this knowledge to work out the meanings of unfamiliar words when they are reading.

With the advent of emails and text messaging, which do not require correct spelling, it might seem that the need for accurate spelling is passing. However there are many instances when correct spelling is necessary, and people whose spelling skills are limited are at a disadvantage. Poor spelling has been shown to have a negative impact on students' writing skills. A survey of 1254 eight and nine year old students in inner-city British schools (Moseley, 1993) found that poor spellers used a lot of high-frequency words, avoided using hard-to-spell words and repeated words they knew how to spell when they were writing. Although 39 percent of these students scored in the average to above-average range in vocabulary tests, their spelling errors were often taken to indicate low intelligence. This flow-on effect of poor spelling skills to the quality of written language and to a student's academic self-concept is worrying. Most assessments and examinations require students to write down what they know and think. Students who have a negative self-concept about their writing skills are less likely to achieve to

their potential, which has long-term implications for their academic success and choices in life. The role that poor spelling plays in limiting written language expression and the consequences that result from it, cannot be overlooked.

Because English is a complex written language it may seem impossible to teach students to understand it in a logical way. However, although it is not an easy language to learn to spell, it is surprisingly logical. Templeton and Morris (2006) state, “For over a hundred years, most linguists have agreed that the English spelling system reflects a greater degree of regularity than commonly assumed” (p.1). This sentiment is also shared by Kessler and Treiman (2003) who say, “The knowledge that English is more principled and consistent than commonly believed should help in teaching spelling to normally developing children as well as to those who find spelling problematic” (p.288). It is possible to teach students to understand the common conventions that influence the spellings of a large number of English words which will provide them with a logical foundation for tackling the spellings of unfamiliar words.

I have spent the last 15 years finding out how people learn to spell and trying to understand why it is so difficult for many people. My experiences working with students from school entry to adults, has confirmed my belief that teaching students to understand how words work improves not only their spelling and writing skills, but also their reading accuracy and fluency. The teaching topics in this book have come from the analysis of thousands of spelling errors over the years. What I have found is that the nature of spelling errors is relatively consistent—most errors occur because students lack knowledge about the topics in this book. Learning about these spelling conventions will provide students with the knowledge they need to correctly spell most words they wish to write.