

# Purpose of this book

## 1. To provide differentiated spelling instruction

This book was written for teachers working with students who have been at school for six years or more. In most classrooms there will be a small group of students who find it easy to spell correctly—they just seem to look at a word and they know how to read and spell it correctly. At the other extreme there is a small group of students who find it very difficult to learn to spell and read. Some can recall high-frequency words correctly but cannot tackle writing words they do not have in their print memory. Many of their spelling attempts are impossible to decipher. Others in this group cannot even spell high-frequency words correctly, although they may be able to read them and have probably seen them in print hundreds of times. These students are likely to have phonological awareness difficulties as well as a very limited knowledge of the spelling system that influences written words.

There is another quite large group of students who spell with varying degrees of accuracy. Some of these students may spell only 5 percent of their words incorrectly and others might spell up to 30 percent incorrectly. Typically, these students are able to spell phonetically. Their words sound right but look wrong. They usually love text messaging because words just need to sound right to carry meaning!

Teaching students how written words work will benefit all three groups of spellers. The students who already spell well will learn why they spell words the way they do. They can then use this information when they come to writing words they have not seen in print before. The large group of phonetically accurate spellers need knowledge about the spelling system that underpins English, so that they can apply it to correcting the words they write. The students who struggle the most, need phonemic awareness instruction as well as an understanding of how words work.

Teachers are often surprised when intelligent, articulate students (many of whom read well above their chronological age) are inaccurate spellers. This phenomenon always puzzled me until I read research that studied the individual differences that exist in students' reading and spelling styles. Baron and Strawson (1976) introduced the terms *Chinese* and *Phoenician* readers to describe the differences that exist in the strategies students use to read words. *Chinese* readers are described as those who rely on word-associations to read words; they rely on recalling the visual images of known words to read unfamiliar words. *Phoenician* readers are described as those who rely more on spelling-sound rules to read unfamiliar words. They rely more on knowing the connections between sounds and spelling patterns to sound out words, rather than on recognising whole word images. A study by Treiman (1984) demonstrated similar preferences in the approaches students used for spelling unfamiliar words.

Baron and Strawson found evidence for a *Chinese–Phoenician* continuum reflecting the learning preferences students adopt to read and spell words. At the *Chinese* end of this continuum we would see students who rely heavily on remembering what words *look like* to help them read and spell unfamiliar words. *Chinese* processors may well have an advantage over *Phoenician* processors when they are learning to read and spell English if they can readily store the visual images of words, because this may help them

remember words with irregular spellings. Being able to access the visual images of words is an advantage in a complex language like English that has many different spelling patterns to represent more than 40 sounds. However, simply relying on *what words look like* is not enough. As well as remembering what whole words look like, *Chinese* processors must also learn to understand the alphabetic principle and the spelling system that underpins written English so that they can read and write words they have never seen in print before. Some people will work this out by themselves but others will need explicit instruction.

The *Phoenician* processor relies more on understanding how sounds are written in words. Those at the *Phoenician* end of the continuum tend to think of words the way they sound, rather than the way they look. They often spell words phonetically accurately, but orthographically incorrectly. Without explicit knowledge of the English spelling system, many *Phoenicians* continue to spell inaccurately. Their limited orthographic knowledge may also negatively impact on their ability to decode words efficiently and accurately.

Because written English is based on writing down the sounds in words using alphabet letters in varying combinations, people learning to read and write English need skills with sound analysis (phonemic awareness skills) and skills with storing what words look like and what sounds look like (accurate visual memory skills). Because of the different ways students work with words, teaching strategies must be flexible to ensure that all students' learning needs are catered for. *Spelling Under Scrutiny* offers a range of instructional ideas to meet students' different learning needs, whatever their processing style.

## **2. To provide teachers with information about the English spelling system**

In order to teach students to use the English spelling system, teachers must have an in-depth knowledge of it themselves (Treiman, 1998). There is concern in many English speaking countries that teachers are inadequately prepared for teaching reading and spelling. The American Federation of Teachers (1999) says, "Few teachers... are sufficiently well prepared to carry out such instruction—not through any fault of their own—but because their preparation programs, instructional materials, and teaching environments have not asked them to understand language with any depth or specificity" (pp.18, 19).

*Spelling Under Scrutiny* is designed to provide students and teachers in upper-primary, secondary and adult literacy classes with knowledge of the spelling system that underpins written English. Teachers can use this book to increase their own knowledge while they identify the gaps in their students' knowledge and target instruction to meet specific learning needs.

A professional development DVD accompanies this book. This discusses how children learn to read and spell, why some have difficulties, and explains the philosophy behind the teaching approach used in *Spelling Under Scrutiny*.