

Spelling and Phonetic Inconsistencies in English: A Problem for Learners of English as a Foreign/Second Language

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Abstract:

Spelling is simply the putting together of a number of letters of the alphabet in order to form words. In a perfect alphabet, every letter would be a phonetic symbol representing one sound and one only, and each sound would have its appropriate symbol. But it is not the case in English. English spelling is defective. It is a poor reflection of English pronunciation as we have not enough symbols to represent all the sounds of English. The problems of these inconsistencies to foreign and second language learners can not be over-emphasized. This study will look at the historical reasons for this problem; areas of these inconsistencies and make some suggestions to ease the problem of spelling and pronunciation for second and foreign language learners.

Introduction:

With the spread of literacy and the invention of printing came the development of written English with its confusing and inconsistent spellings becoming more and more apparent. Ideally, the spelling system should closely reflect pronunciation and in many languages that indeed is the case. Each sound of English language is represented by more than one written letter or by sequences of letters; and any letter of English represents more than one sound, or it may not represent any sound at all. There is lack of consistencies. Commenting on these inconsistencies, Vallins (1954) states:

Professor Ernest Weekly in The English Language forcefully and uncompromisingly expresses the opinion that the spelling of English "is so far as its relation to the spoken word is concerned quite crazy..."

At the early stage of writing, say as early as eighteenth century, people did not concern themselves with rules or accepted practices. The general feeling then was as long as a writer's meaning was understood, spelling did not matter. Ephraim Chambers in his *Cyclopedia* (1743) wrote:

In the English, the orthography is more vague and unascertained, than in any other language we know of. Every author, and almost every printer, has his particular system. Nay, it is scarce so well with us as that: we not only differ from one another; but there is scarcely any that consists with himself. The same word shall frequently appear with two or three different faces in the same page, not to say line. (Metacalfe and Astle, MCMXCV)

Pink and Thomas (1974:5) attributed these inconsistencies to historical reasons which border on the commencement of printing in English in the fifteenth century. They state that the modern English spelling was fixed in the fifteenth century and so it represents the spelling of that century. According to them,

Before that time the scribes had observed no uniformity in the matter of spelling but when printing was invented and books began to multiply, it was found necessary to adhere to some definite system. Thus, the early printers

produced a system of spelling which has persisted with few changes, ever since.

Despite the fact that the spelling system of the fifteenth century persisted, English pronunciation on the other hand has undergone many far-reaching changes since Caxton's time which is one of the obvious reasons why there is no correspondence between the written word and the spoken word.

The next reason for the chaotic English spelling was attributed to the French scribes who as early as in the fifteenth century had introduced symbols from their language to represent English sounds. This explains the use of c for s in city, mice, etc; gu for g in guest, guess, etc; and ou or ow for diphthongal sound in house, cow, etc.

The third reason they gave was the attempt to make the spelling of word retain their etymology. The Norman-French words "dette and doute", for example, retained their spelling when they were first introduced. They were later written "debt" and "doubt" in order to show their connection with Latin "debitum" and "dubitum". The /b/ has never been pronounced.

Areas of Sound and Spelling Inconsistencies:

The problems in sound and spelling of English can be grouped under the following headings:

- The same letter does not always represent the same sound.
- The same sound is not always represented by the same letter.
- Some letters are not pronounced at all
- We pronounce sounds in some places where there is no letter
- There are variants of the plural and past tense morpheme:

(s/es) → /s, z, ɪz /; (ed) → /d, ɪd, t/

Attempts should be made to x-ray these problems with examples from both the consonants and vowel sounds of English.

1. Same Letter Different Sounds:

The same letter does not always represent the same sound in English. Some letters can stand for as many as four different sounds. For instance,

- (A) The letter *c* has no sound equivalent as *c*. It is realized as
- i. /k/ as in cup, cat, cotton, bacon, etc.
 - ii. /s/ as in cellar, receive, accent, access.
- (B) The letter *g* is pronounced
- i. /g/ as in guess, guy, got, guide, gross, etc.
 - ii. /dʒ/ as in age, agenda, large, huge, etc.
- (C) The letter *s* is realized as
- i. /s/ as in sat, sing, socks, etc.
 - ii. /z/ as in bosom, busy, cousin, easy, feasible, hesitate etc.
 - iii. /ʃ/ as in mission, sure, sugar
 - iv. /ʒ/ as in vision, measure, leisure, usual
- (D) The letter *u* is realized as
- i. /u/ as in put, bull, sugar
 - ii. /aɪ/ as in buy, guy
 - iii. /ə/ as in succeed, succumb, suspect
 - iv. /ʌ/ as in bud, gull, luck, such, study, etc
 - v. /uə/ as in jury, rural, etc.
- (E) The letter *A* is pronounced
- i. /æ/ as in sat hand, match

- ii. /a: / as in ask, balm, part, laugh, clerk
- iii /ɒ/ as in was, want, wash, because
- iv /ɔ:/ as in tall, all, walk
- v /e/ as in any, many
- vi /ɪ/ as in village, private, baggage

2. Same Sound Different Letters

Another area of discrepancy between spelling and sound in English is a situation where the same sound is not always represented by the same letter. Such examples are:

- (A) The velar plosive /k/ has different spelling forms as
- k keen, speaker, peak, keg
 - c cut, cap, act, cattle
 - cc occasion, according, occur, occupy
 - ch chemist, stomach
 - ck pack, back, black
- (B) The velar Plosive /g/ is spelt
- g gate, give, bag, go, etc
 - gg juggle, begged
 - gh ghost, aghast
- (C) The Palato-Alveolar Affricate / dʒ/ is represented by the following letters:
- j jump, ajar, injury, rejoice
 - g germ, engine, village
 - dg budget, bridge, porridge
 - de grandeur
 - di soldier
 - dj adjoin, adjacent
- (D) The alveolar nasal /n/ has the following spelling realizations:
- n not, ant, run

- | | | |
|--|----|------------------------|
| | nn | funny, running |
| | gn | gnat, sign |
| | kn | know, knowledge, knife |
| | pn | pneumonia |
- (E) The Labio- dental fricative /f/ is also spelt
- | | | |
|--|------|------------------------|
| | f | fit, leaf, soft, after |
| | ff | offer, affair, stiff |
| | gh | laughter |
| | ough | cough, rough |
| | ph | Photo, trophy, graph |

This is not peculiar to consonant sounds. A vowel sound can be represented by varying sounds as in:

- (F) The sound /e/ is realized in the following spellings:

a	many, any
ai	said, again
e	end send, let, get
ea	dead, spread, health
eo	leopard, Leonard, Geoffrey
ie	friend
ue	guess, guest

- (G) The sound /u:/ occurs in these spellings:

ew	crew, blew, chew
o	do, who, womb, prove
oe	shoe, canoe
oo	moon, room, food
ou	group, route, you
u	blue, rude, June
ui	juice, fruit
wo	two

The diphthongs also have the same chaotic spelling realization. E.g.

/aɪ/ is spelt:

ai	aisle
ei	height, neither
eye	eye
i	lime, site, silence, tidy, ice
ie	die, cried, lie
uy	buy, guy
y	try, my, shy
ye	bye, dye
ry	rhyme

These examples are to mention but a few.

3. Silent Letters:

A lot of English words have silent letters which though written are not meant to be pronounced. Writing such words as one heard them uttered may produce erroneous spellings. They are:

Silent B as in: limb, thumb, comb, numb, womb, debt, subtle, doubt Plumb, dumb, crumb

Silent C as in: muscle, scene, science, abscess

Silent D as in: width, handsome, handkerchief, Wednesday, sandpaper

Silent G as in: gnash, gnaw, gnat, gnome, sign, hang, tongue, reign, thing, feign, diaphragm

Silent H as in: hour, honest, honour, heir, exhaust, exhibit, vehicle, shepherd ghost, rheumatism

Silent K as in: know, knit, knock, knight, knee, knife, kneel, knowledge knew, knapsack. knob

Silent L as in: could, would, should, calf, chalk. Palm, walk, yolk, half, behalf, psalm, talk

Silent M as in:	mnemonics
Silent N as in:	Hymn, solemn, condemn, column, autumn,
	Wednesday /wenzdI/
Silent P as in:	psalm, psychology, pneumonia, psychic, pseudo, corps, cupboard, Sampson, empty,
	receipt, coup, pseudonym
Silent T as in:	listen, often, castle, butcher, wrestle, deport, rapport, Wretch, ballet, Christmas
Silent U as in:	guess, quest, guard, guide, rouge, colleague, guitar, guinea, vague, guild
Silent W as in:	wretched , wrestling, wrinkle, wrong, who,
	whore, wrath, wrist, wrap, sword, wrapper,
	whom

4. Inserting Sound where there is no Sound:

Another sound/spelling problem in English is the intrusion of sound where there is no spelling to indicate that sound. The words could be spelt but the pronunciation is a problem to learners of English. Examples are:

/j/ is pronounced before *u* in the following words:

Use	/ju:z/
Cute	/kju:t/
Beauty	/bju:ti/
Eulogy	/ju:lədʒi/
Cube	/kju:b/
Europe	/juərəp/

/w/ is inserted before the letter *o* in *one, once*.

/k/ is an extra sound inserted before *s* in:

Accept	/əksept/
Access	/ækses/
Accident	/æksident/
Axle	/æksl/
Axis	/æksis/
Axe	/æks/

5. Variants of the Plural and Past Tense Morpheme:

The next area of variant that is a problem to non-native speakers of English is variation in the pronunciation of the plural and past tense morpheme. Everyone knows that the regular ways of forming plurals is by the addition of *-s/es* to the base word. To form the regular past we also add *-ed* to the base. When these are added to words, we still have variations in pronunciations of the words formed. Thus we have words like:

/s/	/z/	/ɪz/
Cats /kæts/	dogs /dɒgz/	houses /haʊzɪz/
Books /buks/	cows /kaʊz/	rushes /rʌʃɪz/
laughs /la:fs/	girls /gɜ:lz/	Dishes /dɪʃɪz/
maps /mæps/	leaves /li:vz/	Benches /bentʃɪz/

The first column has their plural realized as /s/; the second /z/ and the third /ɪz/. The same problem is with the formation of the past. Words with the following sounds are realized, though formed by the addition of the same letters *-ed*:

Stoned /stəʊnd/	washed /wɒʃt/	started /stɑ:tɪd/
Played /pleɪd/	faced /feɪst/	handed /hændɪd/
Begged /begd/	looked /lʊkt/	painted /peɪntɪd/
Bribed /braɪbd/	laughed /la:ft/	divided /dɪvaɪdɪd/
Dared /deəd/	rushed /rʌʃt/	bolted /bɔ:ltɪd/

While the first column is realized as /d/, the second and third are realized as /t/ and /ɪd/ respectively. These variations in sounds can bring about erroneous spellings.

Solutions to Spelling/Pronunciation Problems

Our duty as language teachers is to teach the language and not about the language. A language is what the native speakers say not what some people think they ought to say. If the language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant. Your triumph in the learning of English to say is always the triumph of education. Pronunciation lessons should be taught from the early stage of education. The failure to represent pronunciation accurately and consistently is, to a large extent, responsible for perennial spelling difficulties among learners of English as a target language.

In spite of evident inconsistencies between the pronunciation and spelling of many English words, there are some discernible patterns. According to Naveh (In Metcalfe and Astle, MCMXCV) "...bad as English spelling may be, it still retains most of the principles of alphabetic writing. It takes only a year or two of study to learn to spell English...." At least the following are consistent:

A. For the plural formation, /s/ occurs after a voiceless sound except the hissing sounds- /s, ʃ, tʃ/ as in

i. cats /kæts/	books /buks/	caps /kæps/
sits /sɪts/	goats /gəʊts/	sacks /sæks/
myths /mɪθs/	stops /stɒps/	thinks /θɪŋks/

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ii. /z/ occurs after voiced sounds, that is, all vowels and voiced consonants except hissing sounds as in :

dogs /dɒgz/ bags /bægz/ leaves /li:vz/
girls /gɜ:lz/ boys /bɔ:z/ sings /sɪŋz/
mills /mɪlz/ cans /kænz/ pegs /pegz/

iii. /ɪz/ occurs after the hissing sounds (sibilants) /s, z, ʒ, dʒ, tʃ/ as in:

houses /haʊzɪz/ beaches /bi:tʃɪz/ badges /bædʒɪz/
churches /tʃɜ:tʃɪz/ dishes /dɪʃɪz/ ridges /rɪdʒɪz/
messages /mesɪdʒɪz/ buses /bʌsɪz/ benches /bentʃɪz/

B. The –ed added to form the past is also realized as /d, t, ɪd/ under the following conditions:

i. /t/ or /d/ at the end of a word plus –ed is realized as /ɪd/ as in:

started /sta:tɪd/ added /ædɪd/ decided /desaɪdɪd/
landed /lændɪd/ painted /peɪntɪd/ provided /prəvaɪdɪd/
waited /weɪtɪd/ planted /plæntɪd/ bolted /bɔ:ltɪd/

ii. The voiceless sounds /p, k, f, s, ʃ, tʃ/ plus –ed is realized as /t/:

dreamt/dremt/ knocked /nɒkt/ clapped /klæpt/
roped /rəʊpt/ walked /wɔ:kt/ coughed /kɒf/
talked /tɔ:kt/ smashed /smæʃt/ fixed /fɪkst/
missed/mɪst/ asked /æskt/ faced /feɪst/

iii. All other voiced sounds except /d/ plus –ed is realized as /d/

Stoned /stəʊnd/ solved /sɒlvd/ hurried /hʌrɪd/
Played /pleɪd/ cuddled /kʌldd/ praised preɪzd/
Sued /sju:d/ begged /begd/ bribed /braɪbd/

Bowed /baud/ tagged / tægð/ lived /livd/

Other discernible patterns of teaching spelling are:

C. Dropping or Keeping silent *e* before added syllables

1. A verb that ends in silent *e* drops the *e* before adding the following suffixes: *-ing*, *-able*, *-ary*, *-ition*, *-ous*, *-ation* (suffixes beginning with vowels):

advertise	advertising	hope	hoping
arrive	arrival	smile	smiling
issue	issuing	dance	dancing
blue	bluish	confuse	confusing
care	caring	true	truism

The exceptions to this rule are:

dye	dyeing
be	being
mile	mileage
see	seeing
agree	agreeing

2. For all the regular verbs that end in *e*, we add *d* to form the past:

Admire	admired	define	defined
hope	hoped	smile	smiled
dance	danced	confuse	confused
believe	believed	imagine	imagined
love	loved	blame	blamed.

3. Words ending in silent *e* drop the *e* before the suffix *-y* and *th* e.g.

ease	easy	ice	icy
edge	edgy	noise	noisy
wide	width	nine	ninth
five	fifth		

Exceptions:

- i. When adjective suffixes beginning with *a*, *o*, *u* are added to words ending in *ce* or *ge*, the *e* is kept in order to prevent a change in pronunciation.

cage	cagey	dice	dicey
price	pricey	notice	noticeable
marriage	marriageable	change	changeable
advantage	advantageous	service	serviceable
knowledge	knowledgeable		

- ii. When the suffix begins with a consonant, the *-e* is retained:

care	careless/careful	base	basement
sincere	sincerely	move	movement
edge	edgewise	engage	engagement
hate	hateful	force	forceful
entire	entirely	advertise	advertisement

Exceptions:

wise	wisdom	true	truly
judge	judgment	argue	argument
subtle	subtly		

4. An adjective that ends in *e* takes *r* and *st* for the comparative and superlative:

wide	wider	widest
late	later	latest
large	large	largest

5. But if an adjective ends in *e*, we retain the *e* to form an adverb ending in *ly*
- | | |
|----------|------------|
| polite | politely |
| extreme | extremely |
| absolute | absolutely |
6. If an adjective ends in */e*, the *e* is dropped before the addition of *ly*
- | | |
|------------|------------|
| simple | simply |
| terrible | terribly |
| reasonable | reasonably |

D. Spelling Rules for 'ie' and 'ei' Words

Use *i* before *e* except after *c* or when sounded like *a*

'i' before e (ie)

Brief	relieve	field
relieve	chief	pierce
retrieve	shield	piece
grief	belief	relief

'e' before 'i' (ei)

deceive	receive
receipt	conceive
ceiling	deceit

Exceptions:

leisure	neither
either	seize

height	foreign
caffeine	weird

E. Doubling of Consonants

i. When a word ends with vowel plus consonant, the consonant is often doubled before the suffixes *-ing/-ed/-er/-est*, *-ish* (all suffixes beginning with a vowel).

clan	clanning	clannish	
plan	planning	planned,	planner
run	running		
thin	thinner		
din	dinning	dinned,	dinner
skin	skinny		
man	manning	manned	
begin	beginning		
rub	rubbed,	rubbing	
cram	cramming	crammed	
swim	swimmer		
flag	flagging	flagged	
brag	bragging	bragged	
drag	dragging	dragged	
big	bigger	biggest	
fog	foggy		
fat	fatten	fatter	fattest

ii. If a word has more than one syllable, we double the consonant at the end only if the final syllable is stressed:

preFER	-	preferring	preferred
reGRET	-	regretting	regretted
perMIT	-	permitting	permitted
beGIN	-	beginning	
adMIT	-	admitting	admitted
eQUIP	-	equipping	equipped
subMIT	-	submitting	submitted

oCCUR	-	occurring	occurred
reSIT	-	resitting	
beSET	-	besetting	
reFER	-	referred	referring

iii. When the final syllable is not stressed, we do not double the consonant:

VISit	visiting,	visited
MARvel	marvelous	
DeVELOp	developing,	developed
BeNEFit	benefiting,	benefitable
HAPpen	happening,	happened
PROfit	profitable,	profited, profiting

iv. We do not double the consonant in words that end with two consonants or words which have two vowels before the consonants:

start	-	starting,	started
help	-	helping,	helped
long	-	longer	longest
swing	-	swinging	
return	-	returned	returning
harp	-	harping	
hand	-	handing	handy
boil	-	boiling	boiled
dream	-	dreaming	

v. We also do not double y or w at the end of a word:

stay	staying	stayed
grow	growing	grewed
new	newer	newest

F. When final 'y' is changed to 'i'

The final *y* in a word changes to *i* before a vowel except in a suffix beginning with *i*

vary	variable	heavy	heavily
apply	applied	hurry	hurried
italy	italia	fancy	fanciful
happy	happiness	defy	defiant

y also changes to *i* before a consonant

mystery	mysterious
marry	marriage
easy	easier

G. Adding -es rather than -s

i. Add *-es* to nouns and verbs ending in sibilant sound *-s, z, ch, sh, x*

glass	glasses	bench	benches
box	boxes	branch	branches
class	classes	bus	buses
buzz	buzzes	teach	teaches
dish	dishes		
mix	mixes		

ii. Add *-es* to nouns and verbs ending in *y* preceded by a consonant; the *y* changes to *i*:

baby	babies
carry	carries
fly	flies

But if the *y* is preceded by a vowel, retain the *y* and *s*

day	days	enjoy	enjoys
monkey	monkeys	donkey	donkeys
key	keys	valley	valleys
railway	railways	guy	guys

iii. Some nouns ending in *o* take *-es*.

echo	echoes
tomato	tomatoes
tornado	tornadoes

When preceded by a consonant, have different ways of forming their plural:

(a) Some add *s*:

albino	albinos	alto	altos
ego	egos	inferno	infernos
buffalo	buffaloes		

(b) Some add *es*:

embargo	embargoes
potato	potatoes
calico	calicoes

(c) Some have two plurals:

cargo	cargoes, cargo
proviso	provisos, provisoes
tuxedo	tuxedos, tuxedoes
innuendo	innuendos, innuendoes

Conclusion:

Attempt in this study is not to completely eradicate a foreign accent but the goal of the teacher will be to bring an improvement in their pronunciation especially as regards critical errors responsible for incomprehensibility. Let the students know aspects of their pronunciation and spelling difficulties that result in other people being unable to understand them. Also give them the opportunity to practice aspects of the English sound system which are crucial for their own improvement. With this discernible patterns discussed, good use of both pronouncing and ordinary dictionaries and other forms of vocabulary development, the relationship between English spellings and pronunciation can, after all, not be said to be "quite crazy".

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