

Pronunciation and Spelling

Spelling isn't easy for students and that shouldn't come as much of a surprise. Ironically however, spelling is also quite difficult for native speakers of English and even for its teachers since only 50% of English is phonetic. This fact places a huge burden on the speller as the spoken word may or may not indicate how to spell the word in question. Last week's meeting focused on how to remedy this problem. So we took the 2 most salient points which plague spellers: they are the schwa and all other irregular spellings.

Given that the schwa is by definition any unstressed vowel, and since most polysyllabic words have one or more unstressed vowels, that means that we end up using many of them in English. In fact, nearly 35% of all spoken vowels in North American English are schwas -- well ahead of any other vowel sound. This schwa makes it very difficult to choose which vowel we should write as the schwa can represent any of the following written vowels: a, e, i, o, u and y.

Here are some examples which clarify how difficult it is to spell the schwa:

Manipul-tive, acad-my, provoc-tive, evalu-tive, trans-tive, def-n-tely

If we could think of an allied/related word to match these, then we could place stress on the schwa to find out how to spell them. After that, all we have to do is plug the stressed vowels' letters back into the original schwa to spell them accurately.

manipulAtion, acadEmic, provocAtion, evaluAtion, transItion, (both definItion and finIte help in this case)

The second problem with spelling which was mentioned above is the frequency in irregular spelling. Take the word "compatible". How do we know that it's "ible" and not "able". Stressing the schwa in an allied word won't help here. In this case, we must unfortunately succumb to memorizing it. However, there are ways to memorize spellings in a more efficient way than reading

and writing the words over and over again. What should be used in these cases is a mnemonic. A mnemonic is basically any memory aid that invokes emotions and images in order to aid the memory better. So what mnemonic is best? Anything that might elicit a more funny, crazy or even violent image.

For example:

I personally know that compatible is spelled with "ible" and not "able" because "i" reminds me of iMac and IBM computers. There have always been compatibility issues regarding these two brands so why not take advantage of that to remember its spelling? As for another example, we know that "dessert", the sweets that follow the end of your meal has two "s" because two "s" are more delicious than one! Or how about this mnemonic: "dessert" contains two "s"ugars -- not one. This second strategy can be applied to absolutely any word that gives you difficulties.

While there are still other methods we could use to treat our spelling problems, I find these two to be most helpful. A look into the etymologies of certain vocabulary could create a more complete strategy. Maybe we could save that for another meeting. Until then, good luck spelling! I sure hope I didn't make any spelling mistakes as that would be an exercise in irony.

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