

Christine Digby

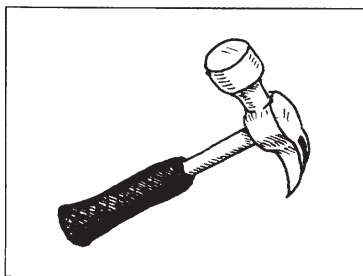
# Making sense of spelling and pronunciation

**F**or many learners of English, the sound/spelling system of the language appears anarchic, and the difficulties involved in spelling correctly and pronouncing accurately can make the task frustrating and demotivating. However, teachers and students should not give up in despair. There are some ways of helping learners find a certain order in the chaos.

Many teachers have found that by introducing students to the sounds of English and the phonetic symbols used to represent them, they can not only encourage the learners to keep much more useful records of new language, but also open doors to more effective error correction and self

access dictionary work. Learning the sounds in the I.P.A. can be fun and quite easily achieved, even at low levels. I have found on a 4hr/day programme I can introduce three or four sounds a day and cover all 44 fairly quickly.

As the most common of sounds, the schwa, /ə/, should feature prominently in any schedule. Helping students to identify the sound and produce it accurately will improve their listening skills and their pronunciation. Activities designed to help students recognize the stressed syllables can be used to focus on the different spelling of the schwa sound occurring so frequently in the unstressed syllables.



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/ə/

The sound /ə/ is very common in English and is spelt in many different ways. However, as a vowel sound on its own, it is *never* found in stressed syllables (eg: **better** /'betə/, **amuse** /ə'mju:z/, **Saturday** /'sætədeɪ/).

## PRACTICE

**1** Underline the syllables which contain the sound /ə/ in the words below. List the ways you found to spell /ə/.

afraid	data	tonight
sugar	father	mirror
statement	important	centre
employment	nation	dignity
human	status	helpfully
figure		

**2** Complete the words in these sentences by spelling the sound /ə/.

\_\_\_ hundr\_\_\_d ph\_\_\_togr\_\_\_ph\_\_\_s fr\_\_\_m Can\_\_\_d\_\_\_nd \_\_\_meric\_\_\_rrived in Britain t\_\_\_join th\_\_\_discuss\_\_\_n in Lond\_\_\_n \_\_\_bout th\_\_\_role \_\_\_f television \_\_\_nd newspaper\_\_\_s when r\_\_\_porting fr\_\_\_m war zones. There has so far been no \_\_\_greement with governm\_\_\_nts on \_\_\_bolishing vis\_\_\_c\_\_\_ntrol or on pr\_\_\_viding signific\_\_\_nt improvem\_\_\_nts in consul\_\_\_ \_\_\_ssist\_\_\_nce \_\_\_broad.

Many students commonly mispronounce words containing /ʌ/ as here too there are several different ways this sound is represented in the written form. The letter “o” for example in many common words is pronounced /ʌ/, causing prob-

lems for the learners. Poems can be used to reinforce the correct pronunciation. Students can also be encouraged to mark the sound /ʌ/ in other common words:

### Common words which include the sound /ʌ/

above	courage	month	oven	tongue
accompany	discover	mother	recover	tonne
among	done	none	rough	tough
another	enough	nothing	shovel	trouble
become	glove	once	some	welcome
brother	love	one	sometimes	won
come	Monday	other	son	young
couple				

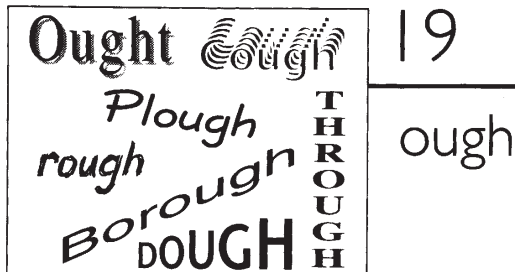
A possible practice activity involves groups preparing short news reports using as many words in the list as possible, and these can subsequently be recorded, thereby practising spelling and pronunciation.

Authentic poems and songs, of course, have enormous potential to motivate many students, and can be used to help them acquire a greater awareness of the spelling of words which

rhyme. A wellknown technique is to blank out the final words from each line, jumble them up and set the students the task of pairing them according to the sounds before inserting them back into the poem or lyrics. The piece can then be played to enable students to check their choices and provide models for repetition. Other verses can be composed by the students working on groups of rhyming words elicited from the students or suggested by the teacher.

Good use can also be made of poems designed specifically to focus on one particular item, such

as the notorious “ough” and the various ways this is pronounced.



The combination **ough** has many different pronunciations:

- /ɒf/ (eg: cough)
- /ʌf/ (eg: enough tough rough)
- /u:/ (eg: through)
- /aʊ/ (eg: bough plough)
- /ə/ (eg: thorough borough)
- /ɔ:/ (eg: brought bought thought ough)
- /əʊ/ (eg: although dough)

## PRACTICE

Complete the poem using the words above and the rhymes to help you.

### A Cruise

The wind got up, the sea got \_\_\_\_\_  
 And very soon we'd had \_\_\_\_\_  
 Some caught colds and started to \_\_\_\_\_  
 We just wanted to get off.  
 The captain said we must be \_\_\_\_\_  
 Sailors are of stronger stuff.  
 But then at last the sun came \_\_\_\_\_  
 And then we felt as good as new.  
 Just two more days to get to port  
 We packed the presents that we'd \_\_\_\_\_  
 We sighted land, a horse and a \_\_\_\_\_  
 Nearly home, we were happy now.



Rhymes can also help students remember how to pronounce homographs.

**Example**

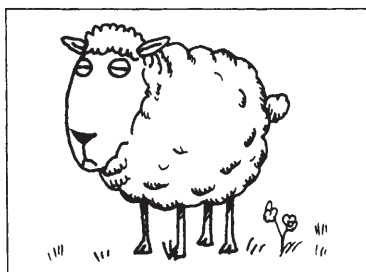
- 1 Row the \_\_\_\_\_ across the river. a. now /aʊ/ b. boat /əʊ/  
 2 We mustn't have a row \_\_\_\_\_ in front of the children – they don't like us arguing.

**Answer:** 1 b. 2 a.

- 3 When you \_\_\_\_\_ your watch, you'll need to wind it up. a. find /aɪ/ b. thinned /ɪ/  
 4 The strong wind \_\_\_\_\_ his hair.  
 5 You must take \_\_\_\_\_ not to tear that dress. a. near /ɪə/ b. care /eə/  
 6 When she cried, a tear fell \_\_\_\_\_ his hand.  
 7 \_\_\_\_\_ many times must I bow to the king? a. go /əʊ/ b. how /aʊ/  
 8 \_\_\_\_\_ and put on a bow tie – it's a very formal occasion.  
 9 I \_\_\_\_\_ to read the newspapers in my job. a. need /i:/ b. bed /e/  
 10 Yesterday I read all the papers in \_\_\_\_\_  
 11 Close the door before he \_\_\_\_\_ a. goes /z/ b. most /s/  
 12 \_\_\_\_\_ shops are very close.  
 13 It's no use, there isn't enough \_\_\_\_\_ a. shoes /z/ b. mousse /s/  
 14 Use my \_\_\_\_\_  
 15 He lives on the money his father \_\_\_\_\_ him. a. drives /aɪ/ b. gives /ɪ/  
 16 The way he \_\_\_\_\_, he needs nine lives!  
 17 The \_\_\_\_\_ live in the same barn as the sows. a. mows /əʊ/ b. cows /aʊ/  
 18 The farmer \_\_\_\_\_ the field and then sows the seed in it.

The mnemonic familiar to many British people (“i” before “e”) except after “c” tackles only

part of the problem facing students wondering how to spell words containing the sound /i:/.

|  
/i:/

The sound /i:/ can be spelt in many ways. The easiest to remember are:

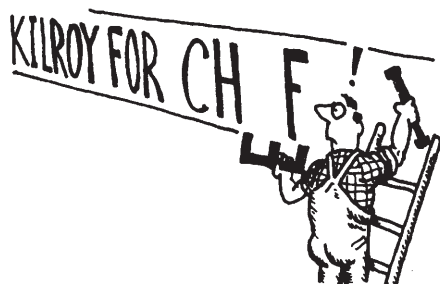
- ee** (eg: sheep succeed)
- ea** (eg: cream cheap)

But there are also other ways to spell /i:/:

- e + consonant + e** (eg: scene complete)
- i + consonant + e** (eg: chlorine elite)
- ie** (eg: thief niece handkerchief)
- ei** (eg: ceiling conceit receipt)

Trying to remember whether to use **ie** or **ei** to spell /i:/ gives everyone problems, but there is a simple rule:

**i** before **e**  
except after **c**



*But be careful!*

There are exceptions to this rule (eg: fancied protein)

There are a number of patterns of spelling and pronunciation which can be described simply and learnt quickly. The pronunciation of the regular past simple “ed” ending frequently causes problems. By helping students to identify the three sounds /t/, /d/, /:d/, and guiding them towards the discovery of the underlying rules,

teachers can effectively improve the learners’ awareness and production. If, instead of long, unmemorable lists of letters, students can be shown how to recognize voiced and unvoiced sounds by placing their hands on their ears or throat to feel the vibrations, the memory load is greatly reduced.

Other simple rules can be highlighted, such as the pronunciation of final “y”:



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Final y

In one-syllable words where y follows a consonant, it is pronounced:

/aɪ/ (eg: why fly)

In multi-syllable words where y follows f, it is also pronounced:

/aɪ/ (eg: modify simplify)

and in the following common words:

deny reply rely apply supply July multiply

In other multi-syllable words, y following a consonant is normally pronounced:

/i:/ (eg: many equality)

After a vowel y is pronounced according to the sound it follows:

/eɪ/ (eg: pay display)

/ɔɪ/ (eg: boy annoy)

/i:/ (eg: key money)

/aɪ/ (eg: buy)

## PRACTICE

I Complete the poem using the words in the box.

fly my cry shy by try why

Babies \_\_\_\_\_

Children ask \_\_\_\_\_

Kids are \_\_\_\_\_

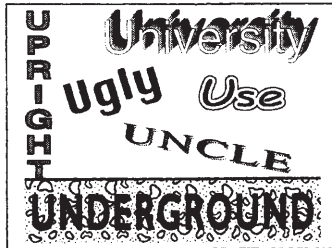
Parents \_\_\_\_\_

And in \_\_\_\_\_ life

The years \_\_\_\_\_

Likewise, the spelling of the plural and third singular of words ending in consonant + “y” versus vowel + “y” can easily be assimilated.

Sometimes the meaning of root of the word can help students, as in the pronunciation of words beginning with “u”:



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Initial u

When u starts a word, it is usually pronounced:

/ʌ/ (eg: uncle umbrella until unable unimportant)

When the root of the word is *uni*, meaning single, complete or one, u is pronounced:

/ju:/ (eg: universe United Kingdom unit university)

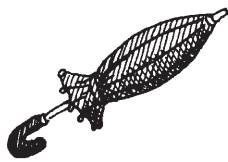
It is also pronounced /ju:/ when the root of the word is *use*:

/ju:/ (eg: usual useful utilise)

**PRACTICE**

1 Label the pictures below using the words in the box.

unicycle uniform umbrella upstairs unicorn unhappy



a. \_\_\_\_\_



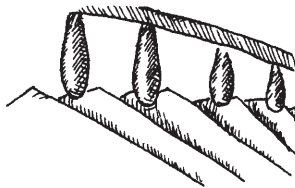
b. \_\_\_\_\_



c. \_\_\_\_\_



d. \_\_\_\_\_



e. \_\_\_\_\_



f. \_\_\_\_\_

2 Which three are pronounced /ʌ/?

3 Which three are pronounced /ju:/?

Teachers quickly develop a range of tricks and activities to deal with the problems students face, and with some research and imagination, learners can be helped to overcome some of the obstacles the English language puts in the way of more accurate spelling and pronunciation.

**Note:**  
All extracts from: *Making Sense of Spelling and Pronunciation*, Christine Digby and John Myers, Prentice Hall International English Language Teaching, 1993.