

## **BOOK REVIEW**

---

---

### **Duangkamon Klungthong**

English as an International Language Program  
Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330, Thailand  
Email: duangkamon.k@litu.tu.ac.th

**Book Title:** Understanding and Teaching English Spelling: A Strategic Guide

**Author:** Adam Brown

**Year of Publication:** 2019

**Pages:** 316 pages

**Publisher:** Routledge

**ISBN** 978-1-138-08267-0

Adam Brown skillfully managed a broad and rich scope of the nature of English spelling into a finely digestible book for both pre-service and in-service English language teachers. Graduate students in linguistics and TESOL, language teachers, and teachers of literacy skills will also find it helpful. The book has 6 sections with a total of 30 concise chapters. The chapters' objectives, summary, and exercises with keys are provided.

Section 1, *Background*, contains Chapters 1-5. Chapter 1, *Introduction*, signifies the main purposes of spelling. Chapter 2, *Types of Spelling System*, explains three main kinds of spelling systems i.e. logographic, syllabic, and alphabetic. Chapter 3, *Spelling, Writing, and Reading*, compares language processing strategies between regular orthographies and opaque ones, and a Dual-route Hypothesis of Reading (de Saussure, 1922) distinguishes how people read unknown words versus familiar words. Chapter 4,

*History of English*, divides the history into four broad periods: Old English (usually dated 450-1100), Middle English (1100-1500), Early Modern English, and Modern English (1500-1800). This chapter emphasizes the time of occurrence of two major events, the printing press and the Great Vowel Shift (GVS), that are deemed responsible for the irregular present-day English spelling. Chapter 5, *History of English Spelling*, explains the influences of other languages on English spelling such as Latin, Old Norse, and French.

Section 2, *Technology*, includes Chapters 6-8. The first two chapters are relatively basic since they describe the background of the QWERTY keyboard, the advantage of computers in typing, typing tips to make documents look professional, the reasons behind spell-checker failure to detect wrong spellings, and the language used when texting. However, Chapter 8, *Rules of English Spelling*, overturns a generally-accepted rule “i before e except after c” with evidence of various exceptions and describes two reliable spelling rules: “bulking up of content words” and “marking surnames.”

In Section 3, the main parts of a 3,000-year story of punctuation are briefly explained in Chapter 9, *Punctuation*. Trends of punctuation fashion reflect its impermanent nature. Diverse writers’ opinions on its importance suggest that pronunciation follows “two-thirds by rule and one-third by personal taste” (Brown, 2019, p. 88). Chapter 10, *Spaces and Hyphens*, shows how words are counted differently based on three types of words: orthographic word, word-form, and lexeme/lemma. Examples of compounds whether they are written as solid (single word), hyphenated, or spaced in several British and American dictionaries are displayed. Chapter 11, *Capital Letters*, includes the History in the ancient Roman times, rules for English capitals, and the spelling stages from initials to the syllabic acronym.

Section 4, comprising Chapters 12-21, explains the Features of Present-day English Spelling. It starts with three categories of silent letters: empty, auxiliary, and inert but also with exceptions. Chapter 13 describes Doubled Consonant Letters,

which is possibly considered as the most difficult aspect of English spelling. The term “magic e” is explained together with the Great Vowel Shift and the doubling of consonant letters. Chapter 14, *Spelling of Unstressed Vowels*, gives several spelling rules of schwa-vowel suffix pairs such as -ance vs. -ence. Chapter 15, *Variation*, concerns major differences between British and American spellings followed by those in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. Chapter 16, *Loanwords*, displays the influence of many languages on English from the year 450 until the present. Readers can notice the non-English spellings; for instance, macaroni, chemist, and bungalow. Chapter 17, *Names of Letters*, portrays the differences between letter names and letter sounds causing misspelling by young children. The explanation of the acquisition of English letter names and sounds by children could be worth exploring to help English teachers plan their spelling lessons.

Chapter 18, *Spelling Pronunciation*, means pronunciations that deviate from the standard pronunciation because of the spelling of words. Many spellings of borrowed words contain silent letters; consequently, they tend to confuse foreign language learners who start learning with the written form; for example, heir, Leicester ( place) , and Mainwaring ( surname) . However, Pronunciation Spelling in Chapter 19 is the spellings that differ from the standard spelling due to their pronunciations e.g. gotcha and kinda. Misspellings could be used to trace phonological representation in the speaker’ s brains such as expansive ( expensive) used by Singaporeans. Chapter 20 explains the concepts of homophone, homograph, homonym, and polysemy. It mentions that homophones seem to cause the most trouble for learners so it proposes the strategies to remember them. Finally, Chapter 21 summarizes the consequences of poor sound-spelling correspondence of English spelling including poor literacy rates, longer texts resulting from silent letters, more teaching time on spelling, and learners being ill-equipped to learn new vocabulary.

Strategies for Teaching and Testing English Spelling are in Section 5 from Chapters 22-26. There are five strategies including

morphological, etymological, phonological, analogical, and visual strategies. As for the morphological strategy, “spelling reflecting morphology” , or words that have constant morphemes, is discussed against “spelling not reflecting morphology” because of its pronunciation. The author then concludes that English spelling is more phonological than morphemic and provides exercises on how to use morphology to help with spelling. Etymological strategy refers to the use of historical origins of the words to help higher-level learners spell loanwords and affixes. The author gives examples of etymological elements from Anglo-Saxon, Latin, French, and Greek. The phonological strategy is based on the alphabetic principle that letters represent sounds, and “phonics” is the method of teaching spelling. The contents include accurate pronunciation, number of syllables, the separation between onset vs. rhyme, and peak vs. coda. Analogical strategy relates the spelling patterns of unfamiliar words to the familiar ones. Last, visual strategy should be employed when the other strategies are inapplicable. Furthermore, sight words and the whole word approach support the visual strategy because it is suitable for high-frequency words. Chapter 27, *Teaching English Spelling*, demonstrates the sequence for teaching the features of English spelling to native-speaking children and suggests it be applied to non-native learners. Moreover, it gives ideas for adapting and creating vocabulary spelling exercises and word games. Chapters 28, *Testing English Spelling*, indicates that spelling tests can be used as proficiency, diagnostic, placement, and achievement tests. The characteristics of English spelling tests including validity, reliability, practicality, and fairness are discussed.

Lastly, Section 6, *The Future*, comprising Chapters 29-32, starts with spelling reform in an attempt to solve the problem of English poor alphabetical correspondence between sounds and spellings. The pros and cons of the spelling reform and their three types, i.e. supplanting, augmenting, and standardizing, are outlined. Chapter 30 compares English and Malay spellings to show that English spelling is highly irregular, lacks management by a language policy academy, and causes low literacy rates. Thus,

teachers should understand the attitudes of learners whose native language has a regular spelling system. The author summarizes by calling for spelling reform to reduce spelling irregularities by major English-using countries given that the technology-led society and young people nowadays are prepared to adjust.

In conclusion, I consider the book a gem for English teachers seeking a deep appreciation of English spelling, and the author has accomplished his goal of helping them, plus several reader groups, to understand the nature of English spelling. The book's wide range of topics motivates readers to study related content such as teaching vocabulary e.g. Coxhead (2014) and pronunciation e.g. Ladefoged and Johnson (2015).

### **The Book Reviewer**

Duangkamon Klungthong is currently a PhD candidate of the English as an International Language Program, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. She also works as an English lecturer for the Language Institute, Thammasat University Lampang Center.

### **References**

- Brown, A. (2019). *Understanding and teaching English spelling: A strategic guide*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Coxhead, A. (Ed.). (2014). *New ways in teaching vocabulary*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL International Association.
- de Saussure, F. (1922). *Cours de linguistique générale (Course in general linguistics)*. (Compiled by Bally & Sèchehaye from notebooks of Saussure's students 1907-11; translated and annotated by R. Harris, 1983. London, UK: Duckworth).
- Ladefoged, P. & Johnson, K. (2015). *A course in phonetics* (7th ed.). Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning.