

## English is too hard to read for children

### Level 3 • Advanced

#### 1 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

unspeakable

baffle

surplus

tricky

resistant

contemplate

hinders

literacy

reluctant

consistent

1. The verb to \_\_\_\_\_ means *to confuse completely*.
2. If you are \_\_\_\_\_ to something, you fight against it.
3. If you are \_\_\_\_\_ to do something, you are unwilling to do it.
4. If a system is \_\_\_\_\_, it is completely regular and always operates in the same way.
5. A \_\_\_\_\_ problem is one that is very difficult to solve.
6. If something is \_\_\_\_\_, it is extra and more than you need.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ is the ability to read and write.
8. If something \_\_\_\_\_ a process it makes it more difficult or slow.
9. If something is difficult to \_\_\_\_\_, it is difficult to imagine it happening or to accept it.
10. An \_\_\_\_\_ thing is so bad it cannot be described in words.

#### 2 What do you know?

Decide whether these statements are *True (T)* or *False (F)*. Then check your answers in the text.

1. English spelling is the worst of all the alphabetical languages.
2. The English words *eight* and *height* rhyme.
3. The Turks once changed their entire alphabet from Latin to Arabic.
4. English children have better results in literacy tests than children in the rest of Europe.
5. English spelling is particularly difficult for children with dyslexia.
6. Most people in Britain would welcome a simplification of English spelling.

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*Baffling spelling system is blamed as literacy falls short of level in other European nations*

**Anushka Asthana, education correspondent**  
**June 8, 2008**

- 1 The English spelling system is 'absolutely, unspeakably awful'. That is the conclusion of new research that has found that children face 800 words by the age of 11 that hinder their reading because of the way they are spelt.
- 2 *Monkey, asparagus, spinach, caterpillar, dwarf, banana, handkerchief, pliers, soldiers, stomach, petal and telescope* have all been included on the long list of words that baffle children because they contain letter combinations that are more commonly pronounced in a different way.
- 3 The words have all been identified as problematic for reading, as opposed to writing, because of their 'phonic unreliability', according to the study *The Most Costly English Spellings*. Masha Bell, the literacy researcher who carried out the work, argued that there were 200 words on the list that could be improved by simply dropping 'surplus letters' such as the *i* in *friend* or the *u* in *shoulder*.
- 4 "English is the worst of all the alphabetical languages," said Bell. "It is unique in that there are not just spelling problems but reading problems. They do not exist anywhere else."
- 5 Bell argued that the spelling system was a huge financial burden on schools and was to blame for poor literacy results compared with the rest of Europe. In Finland, where words are more likely to be pronounced as they look, children learn to read fluently within three months, she said. In the UK, academics have found that it takes three years for a child to acquire a basic level of competence. The tricky spellings make English particularly difficult for children with dyslexia and those from disadvantaged families, who are less likely to be read to regularly by their parents.
- 6 In the research, Bell highlights examples of words that have the same pronunciation but different letter combinations. Examples include *to* and *two*; *clean* and *gene*; *same* and *aim*; *day* and *grey*; *kite* and *light*; and *stole* and *coal*. Then there are those that look alike but sound different with the combinations of *ea*, *ee* and the letter *o* causing most trouble. Among the words falling into that category are *eight* and *height*, *break* and *dreamt*, and *move* and *post*. The letters *ough* can also be pronounced in a number of different ways.
- 7 Simplifying the system would transform literacy results, according to Bell, but she said people were resistant to change. "People feel that they have suffered so much at the hands of English spelling that they are reluctant to look at it," she said. Yet other countries have made changes. Last month the parliament in Portugal, where the spelling system is also thought to be complicated, voted to reform and simplify it, bringing it into line with Brazil.
- 8 "In 1928 the Turks changed their entire alphabet from Arabic to Latin," said John Wells, professor of phonetics at University College London and president of the Spelling Society. "It happened in the Soviet Union." In Germany there were changes made in the 1990s to make the writing system more consistent. English has also developed with words such as *olde* and *worlde* dropping the *e*.
- 9 Wells wants to see things change again and feels there are two possible approaches. The first would be to simplify the way in which words are spelt and then allow people to choose whether to use the new or old system, while the second approach would involve a complete change. "The Spelling Society favours the first," he said.
- 10 Chris Davis, spokesman for the National Primary Headteachers' Association, said the spelling system had a major impact on children's literacy progress: "It definitely slows English children down. In international comparisons, languages that are phonetically uniform always come top."

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But he said that teachers would be reluctant to see things change. "It would be such a major revolution that people would find it very difficult to contemplate," he said.

- 11 "There are already problems because of the different spelling system in America, but there would also be resistance about going down that route. I think it is an ownership thing, that it is our language." Davis argued that people felt that spelling was linked to the origin of words.

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### 3 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer according to the text.

- Teachers in England...
  - ... want English spelling to be simplified.
  - ... are reluctant to see things change.
  - ... think there are two possible approaches.
- Changing the spelling system would be...
  - ... something that has never happened before.
  - ... following the example of other European countries.
  - ... linked to the origin of words.
- Why do children learn to read more quickly in Finland than in England?
  - Because they are read to regularly by their parents.
  - Because Finnish is an easier language than English.
  - Because words are more likely to be pronounced as they look.
- Why are the English words *two* and *to* problematic?
  - Because they are written differently but pronounced in the same way.
  - Because they look similar but have different pronunciations.
  - Because they can be pronounced in a number of different ways.

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#### 4 Find the word

Look in the text and find the following words and expressions. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. A noun meaning *part of a flower*. (para 2)
2. A noun meaning *a tool used for holding or pulling things*. (para 2)
3. A three-word expression meaning *in contrast to*. (para 3)
4. A verb meaning *emphasizes*. (para 6)
5. A three-word expression meaning *to make something conform to*. (para 7)
6. An adjective meaning *whole*. (para 8)
7. A verb meaning *supports*. (para 9)
8. A four-word expression meaning *following a particular path*. (para 11)

#### 5 Opposites

Match these words with their opposites.

- |               |                |
|---------------|----------------|
| 1. help       | a. slow down   |
| 2. complicate | b. complicated |
| 3. speed up   | c. major       |
| 4. willing    | d. improve     |
| 5. minor      | e. hinder      |
| 6. worsen     | f. entire      |
| 7. simple     | g. simplify    |
| 8. partial    | h. reluctant   |

#### 6 Adjective + noun collocations

Match the adjectives with the nouns. There is more than one possibility so check your answers in the text.

- |                  |             |
|------------------|-------------|
| 1. possible      | a. impact   |
| 2. financial     | b. change   |
| 3. major         | c. research |
| 4. basic         | d. results  |
| 5. disadvantaged | e. level    |
| 6. complete      | f. approach |
| 7. new           | g. families |
| 8. poor          | h. burden   |

#### 6 Discussion

Do you think English spelling is difficult? Should it be simplified? Make arguments for and against this idea.

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### KEY

#### 1 Key words

1. baffle
2. resistant
3. reluctant
4. consistent
5. tricky
6. surplus
7. literacy
8. hinders
9. contemplate
10. unspeakable

#### 2 What do you know?

1. T
2. F
3. F
4. F
5. T
6. F

#### 3 Comprehension check

1. b
2. b
3. c
4. a

#### 4 Find the word

1. petal
2. pliers
3. as opposed to
4. highlights
5. bring into line
6. entire
7. favours
8. going down that route

#### 5 Opposites

1. e
2. g
3. a
4. h
5. c
6. d
7. b
8. f

#### 6 Adjective + noun collocations

1. f
2. h
3. a
4. e
5. g
6. b
7. c
8. d