
Book Review: Brown, A. (2019). *Understanding and teaching English spelling: a strategic guide*. New York, NY: Routledge. (ISBN 978-1-138-08267-0)

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This 316-page book presents a wealth of information English language teachers can use to understand and help them teach English spelling. It's not the kind of book most people would read from start to finish, although if you are particularly fascinated by the nuances and history of English spelling, you might choose to do so.

The book is divided into six sections: *Background, Technology, Punctuation, Features of Present-day English Spelling, Strategies for Teaching and Testing English Spelling, and The Future*. Each of these sections has a number of short chapters which teachers can read relatively quickly. Where further information would be required, there are plenty of cross-references.

Each chapter has practical exercises to keep the reader engaged. In most cases, these exercises help reinforce the information which has been presented, rather than provide "how-to" exercises, although Brown suggests they can be adapted for classroom use. For example, in the chapter introducing punctuation, there are some fun (unpunctuated) sentences for the listener to apply punctuation to, e.g. *Lets eat grandpa*. And in the chapter *Rules of English Spelling*, the exercises are designed to illustrate the author's point, which is that there are different types of rules, and there are huge numbers of exceptions to any rules which people have put together for English spelling.

Although the book title is *Understanding and Teaching English Spelling*, the book is heavy on the "understanding" part, and relatively light on the "teaching" part. One could argue that a teacher needs to understand the principles first, in

order to be able to then think independently and have insight into how to teach spelling. While this is certainly true, a lot of teachers do like to get right to the “how-to” parts.

Perhaps the most practical chapters are found in section five, *Strategies for Teaching and Testing English Spelling*. There are seven chapters, the first five of which cover morphological, etymological, phonological, analogical and visual strategies. A teacher who understands these well could look at any one word a learner was struggling with, and choose which of the strategies might help a learner most with that particular word. Unfortunately, for a beginner teacher, the number of exceptions in any one strategy could be discouraging. For example, at the end of the chapter on *Analogical Strategy*, Brown notes that “...while *grove* patterns like *stove*, the less regular *glove* patterns like *love* and the very irregular *prove* patterns like *move*” (p. 217).

The *Visual Strategy* chapter provides a final thought for “when nothing else works”. Either a word needs to be memorised as a sight word, or a mnemonic could be created. While some of the mnemonics given as examples are amusing (*Do In A Rush. Run Home, Or Expect Accident*), I find them a little complicated for non-native learners of English Spelling. Unless teaching advanced learners, it would take more effort to teach the meaning of the words in these mnemonics, than it would to just spend a few minutes with a flashcard, helping the learner to memorise the visual aspects of the word.

The final two chapters in this section are called *Teaching English Spelling* and *Testing English Spelling*. Brown notes in the first that “It is not the intention of this book to provide a number of classroom exercises aimed at teaching and practicing spelling. Many books on the subject already exist...” (p. 229), and he goes on to list nine specific books, as well as suggesting the reader search for “phonics” at an online bookstore. But he does go on to provide solid guidance for how to evaluate whatever resources the reader finds, like ensuring the spelling system (British or American) is consistent with the needs of your students, determining whether the materials are designed for native or non-native students, and what ages the material is designed for. He also suggests that the teaching of spelling should go hand-in-hand with the teaching of

vocabulary, rather than necessarily in isolation, all of which is solid advice for any classroom teacher.

All in all, this book is best viewed as an extremely thorough, academic resource to be consulted when a teacher needs to learn more about how English spelling works, and how to teach it. It's not a book which will provide tomorrow's lesson plan, but it is a book which will certainly provide plenty of "Aha!" moments.