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Exploring English and Multilingual Orthography Creatively



make literacy meaningful

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Introduction

These didactic materials are linked to the Essay on “English Orthography and the Phonics Screening Check (<http://euliteracy.eu/english-orthography-phonics-screening-check/>)”, intended to provide practical examples and ideas for exploration in the classroom. Certain amounts of text may be repeated for the sake of coherence.

The term orthography refers to the way in which script represents the spoken language of a country. However, this representation is not always straightforward, since many sounds (phonemes) have got multiple spellings, and, conversely, many letters have multiple pronunciations, depending on their position and function in the word. In fact, many poems, jokes and online “challenges” revolve around these discrepancies. In 1855, in a letter exchange between Charles Ollier (publisher and author), and Leigh Hunt (a poet), Ollier states that his son has found a new way to spell “fish”, taking the “f” sound from “enough”, the “i” sound from “women”, and the “sh” sound from “nation”. According to this, a reasonable spelling of “fish” would be “ghoti”.

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One way of engaging children in orthography is through language play. Below are just a few suggestions for doing so:

Questioning and discussing pronunciations

Begin by giving children some of the many poems, jokes or stories that are driven by understanding different spellings. Some suggestions might be a series of sentences:

The bandage was wound around the wound.
We must polish the Polish furniture.
The soldier decided to desert his dessert in the desert.
Since there is no time like the present, he thought it was

time to present the present.
I did not object to the object.
After a number of injections my jaw got number.
Upon seeing the tear in her dress, she shed a tear.

Older learners might enjoy the now-famous poem “Eye Halve A Spelling Chequer” (first verse below).

Eye halve a spelling chequer
It came with my pea sea
It plainly marques four my revue
Miss steaks eye kin knot sea.

Ask children whether they spot anything “wrong” or “interesting” about the text, and use their responses in a discussion of how we know whether we have spelt or pronounced a word correctly. Children may cite word roots, context, or prior learning as “proof”. Bring multilingual learners into the debate by asking how orthography in their language relates to orthography in English, and help them identify similarities and differences in phoneme/grapheme correlation.

Homophone Quiz or Poetry

Help children to engage with metacognitive skills linked to literacy acquisition through playful poetry or games. Children who have identified a homophone whisper it to the teacher (for checking of accuracy) before choosing a partner. Each partner is responsible for one word in the homophone pairing, and give hints to the rest of the class. For example:

Child 1: My homophone is a bit like shouting.

Child 2: My homophone lives in the water.

Child 1: You might do my homophone when you’re sad.

Child 2: My homophone can get really big!!

The partners continue until a child guesses the homophone pairing (e.g. wail/whale). For younger children, the teacher can provide homophone cards, or even clues.

For homophone poetry, older children are challenged to create two mnemonics or acrostic poems for homophone pairs. Using the previous example, this might be

Wails
Are
Incredibly
Loud

And

Whales

Have
A
Large
Elbow

(It will be up to teachers and children to decide whether nonsense sentences are creative or silly!)

Playing with the Nonsense Phonics Screening check words

The Phonics Screening Check offers opportunities to include multilingual children. The inclusion of “nonsense” words can be used as an opportunity to introduce children to the idea that what may look like a nonsense word in English could be a perfectly sensible word in another language. Children who speak other languages can be asked to share some words for other children to learn. If the children are literate, additional discussions can take place about what it might mean to learn to read and write across multiple languages.

Further Reading

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