Common polysyllabic words: Some key strategies

The following teaching approaches will help those pupils who need to improve their spelling of common polysyllabic words.

Teaching approaches

• Demonstrate for pupils the phenomenon of the unstressed vowel by showing examples such as interested, vegetable, family. Give pupils a bank of words that exhibit this feature and ask them to highlight the unstressed vowels.
• Identify common letter patterns associated with this feature and decide on ways to help remember these words, for example, Liam is in parliament.
• Explain the convention that words ending with a single consonant preceded by a short vowel double the consonant before adding vowel suffixes, such as -ing, -er, -est, -ed.
• Ask the class to audit errors in high-frequency words by trawling through their exercise books, working in pairs. Each pupil draws up a list of target words for inclusion in a spelling journal. The words are also written in English books to provide a marking focus for the teacher.
• Use crossword dictionaries and other resources to create a list of words with common letter strings but different pronunciations, such as ough (cough, drought, through), ight (bright, freight, height), our (flour, pour, tour).
• Make sure that pupils understand the difference between long and short vowel sounds by doing a quick 'show me' card activity where pupils hold up a 'long' or a 'short' card in response to a word spoken by the teacher.
• In pairs, ask pupils to list ca, ce, ci, co and cu words and to read them aloud to hear the differences and to find the patterns.

More activities

• Set up a word-sort activity: ask pupils to put a bank of words on cards into groups according to the spelling of the long a phoneme. Ask them to investigate the most likely spelling of this phoneme at the end of words, in the middle of the words and in combination with different consonants. Use words such as mate, day, eight, rage, estate, play.
• Set up a word activity of sorting words according to spelling pattern to discover the most common spelling patterns for long i and e phonemes followed by the t phoneme. Use words such as beat, knight, quite, seat, spite, neat.
• Ask pupils to investigate the three main ways (and any other ways) of spelling the long o and long u phonemes. Ask them to work in groups to
generate a bank of words containing the sound, sort them by spelling pattern and try to draw conclusions about spelling possibilities.

• Ask pupils to carry out an investigation of words that double the final consonant and those that do not. Have them produce posters to illustrate their findings.

• Set up an investigation of high-frequency homophones (one of the most common sources of error in high-frequency words). Pupils are required to draw up lists of such words and devise ways of remembering them. Examples are: for/four, there/their/they’re, one/won, where/wear, saw/soar/sore, would/wood, be/bee, our/hour, what/watt, see/sea, two/to/too, your/you’re, made/maid, by/bye, night/knight, way/weigh, morning/mourning, heard/ herd, through/threw, know/no, which/witch, hear/here, right/write, hole/whole, past/passed, new/knew, its/it’s, road/rode, days/daze, died/dyed, side/sighed. Differentiate this activity by asking more-able pupils to investigate the phenomenon of heteronyms instead: buffet, sewer, lead, read, tear, wind, wound, bow, entrance, row, sow, live.

• Use 'show me' card starter activities to identify quickly which pupils still have problems with high-frequency homophones.

• Play hangman: pupils work in pairs or teams to correctly spell mystery key subject words written on card or the board.

• Lead a whole-class 'look, say, remember, cover, write, check' starter activity with whiteboards to introduce the spelling of unfamiliar subject-specific vocabulary. The class is then encouraged to decide on their own best individual strategies for remembering the words.

• Play team challenge: the class is divided into groups, each one responsible for a different curriculum/topic area. Each group identifies ten key words from that area. Group 'A' then disperses, one member to each of the other groups, and challenges the other group members to a spelling test. The process is repeated with each group challenging the others in their subject areas.

• Play spelling millionaire: decide on the spelling focus (for example, unusual words, plurals, subject-specific) and choose a pupil to write the word on the board. Three lifelines are allowed:
  - 'ask the audience'
  - 'phone a friend' (the pupil on the spot chooses someone else to spell the word)
  - '50/50' (the teacher offers the pupil two choices).