Dr. Cheesman's App Chat: Spelling

By: Elaine Cheesman, Ph.D.

I'll admit it. As a newly minted teacher many decades ago, I was a terrible speller! To avoid the principal's wrath at my misspelled words on bulletin boards, I bribed the "smart" kids in my 6th grade class with extra credit points to find and correct the misspelled words I "intentionally" placed on bulletin boards. Every time a new display appeared, they rushed up, notebooks in hand, and found my misspelled words.

Like many kids growing up in the 50's and 60's, the "look-say" method of the Dick and Jane readers formed the basis of my reading instruction, with "meaning" based, unrelated word patterns. I may have learned to read this way, but memorizing letter sequences was not the way to learn to spell. I really didn't fully understand the English spelling system until I was in my 40's, when I was introduced to multisensory, systematic instruction. Imagine my surprise when I learned that about 87% of English spelling is predictable, or "phonetically regular." Finally, my word-processing efforts no longer lit up like a Christmas tree.

Research shows that instruction that explicitly links speech sounds to their spellings reinforces reading and spelling simultaneously! The most effective spelling programs teach people to spell the same word patterns they are learning to read, along with instantly reading and spelling the most common high-frequency words noted by Dr. Edward Fry.

The apps in this review systematically introduce concepts in a carefully sequenced progression, provide engaging practice, assess mastery and, in some cases, monitor and report individual student progress. I've included a developmentally sequenced list of apps, starting with the most basic and progressing to older students and adults.

Phonetically Regular, One-Syllable Words

Sound Beginnings by Preschool University


Spelling starts with phonemic awareness (sequencing speech sounds in oral words). This app matches pictures at the beginning, middle and ends of consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words and by matching letters to sounds. By touching the letter, the user can hear the associated sound (spoken by a child's voice); touching pictures allows the player to hear the name of the picture. Like all the apps by Preschool University, the images, voice, and audio reinforcements are of the highest caliber.

ABC Spelling Magic Short Vowel Words by Preschool University


The Word Building game includes only the three letters needed; the Moveable Alphabet includes all letters. Consonants are in red; vowels are in blue. Touching the letters reveals the sound. Touch the picture to hear the word, then drag letters into the boxes under the picture to spell the word. Incorrect spellings won't stick! The letters of correctly spelled words blend into the word. Positive feedback is a short snippet of classical music!

ABC Spelling Magic 2 Consonant Blends by Preschool University


Following the same format as ABC Spelling Magic, Spelling Magic 2 focuses on beginning and ending consonant blends and double letter spellings (e.g., ff, ll, ss). Touching the picture reveals the oral word; touching the spaces below the picture reveals the sounds; touching the letters reveals the corresponding sounds. I was gratified to discover that both letters appeared simultaneously in words with final doubled letters (e.g., the). The format is identical in all Spelling Magic apps by Preschool University. My only criticism is the name of the developer. These apps are good for older learners, too!

ABC Spelling Magic 4 Silent Final e by Preschool University


In the Short/Long Vowel game, the CVC picture and word appear first (e.g., cap). When the player drags the final silent e into place, the picture changes (cape) and the corresponding word is spoken.

abc PocketPhonics: by Apps in My Pocket Ltd


This app combines handwriting practice and spelling individual letters as well as letter combinations, or digraphs (e.g., th, sh, ch). This app reinforces spellings by using the target spelling sound correspondence to spell spoken words. It includes a well-organized list of consonant and vowel digraphs. It allows the adult to enter multiple names to customize practice and monitor progress. The upgrade includes an intelligent tutor that monitors progress and focuses games on individual needs. This app could be improved with more inspiring feedback and rewards, but educationally, it is very sound.

Phonetically Regular, Two-Syllable Words

ABC Spelling Magic 3 by Preschool University


This app builds two-syllable words with 4 – 5 letters. Most are closed syllables, but a few examples have open syllables.

High Frequency (a.k.a. "sight") words

English Words 1-300: Everyone Learns by Teacher Created Materials ($8.99)
This app offers seven interactive games and four learning activities designed to read and spell 300 of the most common high frequency words. Touch the robot to hear the word; then write the word below. The player also can record his/her own voice. The player must complete the set of five words to access the related, very engaging games. Tap the robot to hear the word clearly pronounced. Then tap the check at the end of the word to hear the word pronounced and spelled. One can tap the letters to hear the letter names or words pronounced. Instant feedback will not let you make a mistake. At any time, the player can easily access oral instructions and tap the words to hear them pronounced. Images and sound are professionally produced.

For Mature Spellers
Spel It Rite Pro by Todor Dimitrov


Note: This is listed under iPhone apps, but can be played on an iPad.

The objective is to select the correctly spelled word from two choices. The word is presented orally (requires an internet connection). Instant feedback quickly corrects errors. One can review the spelling, pronunciation, definition, and synonym of missed words.

Customized Word Lists
A+ Spelling Test by Innovative Mobile Apps


The adult must type and record spelling lists. Mature learners can type in their own lists. This takes very little time and effort with prepared lists. The app includes several engaging activities; a test tracks progress, and reports can be emailed. You only have to enter each email address once.

SpellingCity by SpellingCity


Although the provided word lists are not particularly useful for increasing spelling achievement, one can easily create customized lists to suit any purpose. This is particularly useful for students learning to spell advanced words. On a PC, the adult creates an account at www.vocabularyspellingcity.com. Then one can easily create a new list with a specific focus. After the words are entered, one selects definitions and sentences or creates original text. Once done, users can play a game on the iPad or computer; Appealing bonuses are alphabetizing the lists and handwriting features! One can create a PDF document of the word list in manuscript, D'Nealian, Cursive, or American Sign Language, with a choice of sizes.

Your recommendations are encouraged!

If you would like to recommend an app, send me the information via email at: DrCheesman@Gmail.com or www.MyReading-WritingHelp.org.

From the iTunes app store, click on the app, and then email it to me. It provides all the necessary information.

Dr. Cheesman is an associate professor at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs. The courses she developed are among the nine university programs officially recognized by the International Dyslexia Association for meeting the Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading.

Copyright © 2013 International Dyslexia Association (IDA). We encourage sharing of Examiner articles. If portions are cited, please make appropriate reference. Articles may not be reprinted for the purpose of resale. Permission to republish this article is available from info@interdys.org.