The purpose of this column is to highlight the most critical issues of teaching spelling to English Language Learners (ELLs). At the end of the column is a list of helpful resources that expand on this topic and that provide teachers with information about how to accommodate spelling/word study instruction for English Language Learners.

In order to address spelling instruction most effectively for ELLs, middle school English/language arts teachers will be successful if they attend to these issues:

- Knowledge of the characteristics of the English spelling system (these have been addressed in previous columns)
- Assessment of spelling knowledge
- Familiarization, as much as possible, with the characteristics of the languages our ELLs speak—the sounds, spelling system, and syntax of these languages
- Effective instructional practice

Knowledge of the Characteristics of English Spelling. In order to appreciate the levels on which the spelling system of English operates, teachers must step away from the expectation that English spelling is highly irregular because it doesn’t represent sounds in a consistent manner. English is more consistent in representing sound than is often realized, but it also represents meaning quite consistently through its consistent spelling of prefixes, suffixes, and most base words and Latin and Greek word roots. For example, note how the sounds change in the base word resign when the suffix -ation is added (resignation) but that the spelling of the base—r-e-s-i-g-n—does not change, serving to visually preserve the meaning relationship that is shared by the two words. (See this column in March 2002 VM for a fuller discussion of this and other characteristics of English spelling.)

Older English Language Learners who are literate in their first language and whose first language has a Romance base (for example, Spanish) can first become aware of this consistent spelling of meaningful word parts by noting the similar spelling of Latin and Greek cognates. Comparing and contrasting Spanish and English words such as teléfono/telephone, número/number, and sorpresa/surprise are particularly helpful in this case. (Editor’s note: Alleen and Don Nilsen explore this idea in their article on p. 27 of this issue.)

Assessment. Middle schoolers acquiring English as a new language are also negotiating to various degrees the different sound and meaning features represented by the English spelling system. By administering a qualitative spelling inventory, teachers can learn much about ELL students’ sensitivity to and awareness of English phonology and spelling and how these relate to students’ native languages (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004). To date, most of the work in ELL spelling assessment has focused on Spanish, but the value of a qualitative spelling inventory for revealing what any ELL knows about English, regardless of native language, is invaluable. In general, the assessment will confirm other assessment information concerning students’ level of proficiency in spoken and written English and inform teachers about where to begin spelling instruc-
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Once teachers have determined the spelling level for each of their ELL students, it’s a good idea to plan instruction following more, rather than less, the scope and sequence of spelling instruction that is appropriate for native English speakers (see this column, September 2002). As with most native-English-speaking students, ELLs who are moving beyond the beginning phase of literacy development in English will need time to explore and learn about spelling patterns within single-syllable words. It helps them focus on the sounds in English and the consonant and vowel patterns that represent those sounds; it also forms the basis for a strategy they can use to decode longer, polysyllabic words in English. Good instructional practices for spelling development include pretesting spelling words to be examined during the week; engaging students in categorizing words through word sorts and writing sorts; offering word hunts; keeping a journal of interesting words.

Our ELL students’ development in literacy critically depends on their learning how English printed words work, and this is precisely what appropriate spelling instruction provides. Undeniably, providing this instruction is a challenge for middle school teachers, but the potential for student engagement and learning is well worth the commitment.

Resources for Assessing and Teaching Spelling with ELLs