

Your November 2008 ELMLE

Tips for Teachers

The European League for Middle Level Education:
your local affiliate of the National Middle School Association



Giv up Spellin Rools There to hard! Says Professor Wells

Not every piece of news emanating from our educational colleges is designed to instil joy in the heart of dedicated middle school teachers. **Professor John Wells** of **University College London** and president of the **Spelling Society** has called for a ‘freeing up’ of English spelling. “Hurrah!” goes up the shout of hundreds of seventh graders across the globe, all of whom have been txtn ther frins nsted uv doin hmwrk. “About time!” echo thousands of English-as-an-Additional-Language students who wrestle with the rarified antics of this rather complex tongue. “Whoa!” intone rather a few middle school principals and language arts teachers whose reverence for Shakespeare and Milton and Steinbeck and the history of our magnificent tongue quakes at the suggestion that English is *inconsistent*!

“The teaching of literacy in schools is a major worry. It seems highly likely that one of the reasons Britain and other English-speaking countries have problems with literacy is because of our spelling and the burden it places on children. In Finnish, Italian and Spanish, once you have learned the letters, you know how to spell,” said Professor Wells, going on to say that English is not phonetic and is full of irregularities. “Lots of other things are neglected in class because of spelling.”

He also says the day of the apostrophe is over and done with. “Have we nothing better to do with our lives than fret about the apostrophe? It’s could easily become its or it s, and we’ll could become we ll.”

“It’s time to remove the fetish that spelling is the principal mark of the educated,” he said, pointing to email, text messaging, and chat rooms as the way forward to logical spelling.

Even publishers Collins Language are in agreement. **Elaine Higgleton**, editorial director, said that phonetics is fine in its way, but it's/its based on pronunciation, and whose pronunciation are we going to use? "Would we spell the work 'think' with a th because that's/thats the way most of us pronounce it, or with an f (fink) as it is pronounced in London's East End (and by Vicky Pollard in the popular Britcom '**Little Britain**'), or 'tink' as in Ireland and parts of New York City?"

Author of **Txting: the Gr8 Db8** David Crystal agrees that spelling must change, but says Professor Wells' plea for freedom and simplification is doomed because we are not ready for it. Change will come from the ground up, he argues, and will be an inevitable result of mass usage of mobile phones and email and chat rooms. Remember when we spelled catalog with *ue* on the end? Some still do, and it's/its not wrong.

British commentator and author **Libby Purves** argues for the retention of the old school rules because of 'the etymology of each word from Greek, Latin, or the Low Countries shining through in its spelling'. And with Elaine Higgleton she says that regional pronunciation puts paid to many attempts at simplification. Recalling one of the funniest episodes of another Britcom, **The Two Ronnies**, much laughter and confusion ensues when a working class tradesman tries to buy four candles/fork handles from a hardware merchant. And if the **Prince of Wales** were to write to **Camilla** about their 'hice' in the country or if the laborer were to toast his mates in the pub with the familiar 'chiz mite', how would a simple American be able to understand the meaning if spelling were to be discarded? And speaking of simple, how many people can read **Joel Chandler Harris'** *Uncle Remus* stories in dialect these days?

What about using THERE to mean plural possession, direction, *and* they are? It's/its simple and easy! Meaning would come in context.

What about double consonants to make preceding vowels short, as in RIVVER and MODDEL?

What about dropping the final e when the preceding vowel is short, as in GIV and LOV?

What about Americanisms: thru, lite?



so where do you stand on the spelling issue?



What, me worry? Spelling is not a problem for these middle level students at the American International School of Budapest, though they have suggested that more teachers should get in touch with their inner feelings by sending their own **Tips for Teachers** to alan_heath@asl.org who edits this fine mess each month.

Time to Fall into Line, Folks!



The annual ELMLE conference takes place in Paris in January 2009, and early birds will get the worm by registering on time, both for the conference and for rooms at the conference hotel. Go to www.elmle.org for full details!