



Learning English is already a misspelling minefield without using programs that will confuse children

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It's important that our children know of different spelling between countries – but their minds are already full of a thousand rules and exceptions. Give them a break.

English is a difficult language to learn. This is never more obvious than when you watch your children learn to read and write.

"EA makes an 'ee' sound," I remind my son.

"So why is great spelt EA?"

Yep, for every rule there's an example of that rule being broken, twisted, thrown out – take the old "I before E except after C" rule.

Except when your foreign neighbour Keith receives eight counterfeit beige sleighs from feisty caffeinated weightlifters (full disclosure: I stole this wonderful piece of literature from a friend's coffee cup).

In other words, this little rule that so many of us would have learnt as kids really should say: "I before E except after C or when it sounds like A as in neighbour or weigh and not when you spell science and ageing and insufficiencies and ... oh dear".

Can you imagine trying to teach this to children or those for whom English is a second language? And don't get me started on apostrophes, commas and knowing the difference between there, they're and their (Which is E before I, for those who still care).

And which witch is which? God, I'm starting to twitch.

Z or S?

Americans realize, organize, analyze. Australians realise, organise, analyse.

ER or RE?

Americans have centers, fibers, theaters. Australians have centres, fibres, theatres.

OR or OUR?

Americans color, favor, humor. Australians colour, favour, humour.

SE or CE?

Americans play offense and defense. Australians play offence and defence.

LOG or LOGUE?

Americans have catalogs and dialog. Australians have catalogues and dialogue.

And then there are text abbreviations, emojis and verbal slang, which has exploded into everyday use. So does it matter if your child knows the difference between "your" and "you're" if they're only ever texting "YW" instead of "you're welcome"?

The Advertiser (Australian daily newspaper) reports parents are calling for US programs to be pulled from South Australian schools, arguing they have the potential to confuse young students. Kelly Higgins wrote to her daughter's teacher with concerns about the use of the free online ReadTheory, made in the US.

"There's a lot of American spelling in the programs that (my daughter) is given," she said. "I don't want my child to be writing in a way that she'll have to unlearn when she gets to high school or into the workforce."

Yes, apart from the different accents and slang – think candy (US), sweets (UK) and lollies (AU) – there are also differences in spelling.

Here in Australia, we organise, while in America they organize. And while they do a favor, we Aussies do a favour. We go travelling while they go traveling. So does Mrs

Higgins have a point? Should we ban it? If the best online reading programs are coming out of the US, should we not use it merely because a few words will be spelt incorrectly?

Or do we factor in teaching kids the difference on top of all the other grammar, punctuation and spelling rules? And with American language already everywhere, why should we care?

As we become more global, it's important that our children are aware of variations in spelling across countries. But with so much to absorb as they learn to read and write, perhaps thrusting misspelled words in their faces is not the best idea.

Their little minds are already swimming with a thousand rules and all the examples of when they don't apply.

Clarity is at the heart of reading and writing. Correct spelling and grammar ensure your ability to communicate accurately. And when we educate our kids correctly on the rules and quirks of English, it will ensure they can speak and write in a way others can clearly comprehend.

Grammar, spelling and punctuation are a sign of trust and expertise. And when our kids grow up and enter the workforce, clarity and communication are essential. When they get it wrong, it will call into question their credibility and can often, even unintentionally, be viewed as a sign of carelessness.

Learning English is already a misspelling minefield without using programs that will confuse primary-aged children. And surely our Aussie educators can come up with world-class, local reading programs with Australian spelling?

It's the difference between them knowing their shit and knowing they're shit.

An earlier version of this article appeared in The Advertiser (a daily) in Adelaide, Australia.