LESSON OBJECTIVES: Students will be able to identify historical reasons for the development of English spelling. Students will be able to use strategies to improve their spelling.

TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION: audio samples of Old and Middle English

LANGUAGE SKILLS TARGETED IN THIS LESSON:

X Speaking  X Listening  X Reading  X Writing

ESTIMATED TIME: 2 hours and 15 minutes

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Audio samples of Old and Middle English
  - http://faculty.virginia.edu/OldEnglish/Beowulf.Readings/Prologue.html
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QE0MtENfOMU
- Look Say Cover Write and Check Chart from Johanna Stirling’s Spelling Blog
  - http://thespellingblog.blogspot.com
- included in this file:
  - Conversation Questions (print one set for each small group)
  - Sentences for True/False Running Dictation (print, cut into strips, and post around the classroom)
  - handouts: Samples of English (Text A, Text B, Text C)
  - handout: Jigsaw Reading A: Old English Changes to Middle English (copies for half of the class)
  - handout: Jigsaw Reading B: Middle English Changes to Early Modern English (copies for half of the class)

LESSON PLAN AND TEACHER’S NOTES

Motivation/Background Building

Ask the class if they ever have trouble with English spelling and tell them that in today’s class they will be learning a little about why English spelling is the way it is, and also some strategies for improving their spelling.

Divide students into small groups of 3 to 5 students. Have each group choose the following roles:
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- Facilitator (to ask questions and make sure everyone in the group has a chance to speak)
- Secretary (to write the group’s answers where indicated)
- Reporter (to report the group’s answers to the class)
- Timekeeper (optional, to keep the group on track)

**Conversation questions**

Hand a set of the Conversation Questions to each group and have the Facilitator ask each question, making sure each student has had a chance to answer before moving on to the next question.

Spend a few minutes discussing students’ responses with the whole class. The teacher focuses on eliciting responses from the class without providing extensive explanations, which will be provided through the various activities throughout the lesson. Have the Reporters share the words their group to describe English spelling.

Then have the Reporters share their groups’ hard-to-spell words on the board and make a list of them on the board. Ask the class, “If you could decide how to spell these words, how would you spell them?” Invite volunteers to come to the board and write their own invented spellings next to the words on the list. Discuss reasons for spelling changes and whether other students think one spelling makes more sense than another and why.

**True/False Running Dictation**

Pre-teach or clarify the meanings of the words dialect and classified before doing the running dictation. Dialect is used in various ways; explain that here it is meant as “one variety of a language” (like accent, though it could also include differences in vocabulary and grammar). Classified here means “put in a group or category” (not “top secret”).

Post the Running Dictation Sentences in various locations around the classroom, and tell the class that these are sentences about the English language. Explain that students should form pairs or groups of three and take turns “running” to a sentence, reading it, and returning to dictate it from memory to their partners. They can run back and forth as many times as needed and then sit down to take dictation of the next sentence from their partners. Tell them that some sentences are true and some are false. When each pair or group of three has written all six sentences (two or three sentences per student), write or project all the sentences on the board so students can correct their own (or each other’s, if they prefer) writing. Then groups should read through the sentences together and decide whether each sentence is true or false. Below are the sentences with some comments that the teacher can include when going over the sentences with the class:

1. **All living languages are always changing.**
   
   (True—Languages are constantly changing, and over time they change a lot. Languages pick up vocabulary from other languages, but even a language with no contact with other languages will change over time. Pronunciation changes, the meanings of words change, grammar changes, and new words are created. Languages that are written change more slowly than languages that are only spoken, but they still change.)
2. **Latin dialects developed into modern Spanish and French, for example.**  
(**True**—Latin was spoken in the Roman Empire, but there were many dialects. Those dialects changed more and more until they became separate languages, the Romance languages.)

3. **English is classified as a Germanic language, but it includes words from many languages.**  
(**True**—In a “family tree” of languages, English and German are like cousins. In the 5th Century, tribes from the European continent invaded Britain. These people spoke dialects of a Germanic language. Many of them stayed and their language became Old English. Since then, English has taken words from other languages and changed more.)

4. **English has more than 40 different sounds but only 26 letters.**  
(**True**—This is part of the reason why English spelling is hard for many people. For example, English uses “ei” for three different sounds in the words *height*, *weight*, and *receipt*.)

5. **People who have trouble with spelling are usually not intelligent.**  
(**False**—Many very intelligent people have terrible spelling! Some examples are Albert Einstein, Mark Twain, Agatha Christie, and Winston Churchill.)

6. **Spanish is a new language in the United States.**  
(**False**—Spanish was spoken by the first permanent European settlers in North America. The Spanish language has been present in what is now the United States since the 1500s. English now includes many words from Spanish.)

**Presentation #1**

This part involves handing groups samples of first Old, then Middle, and then Early Modern English to show how English has changed over the years and how the relationship of pronunciation to spelling has also changed, resulting in many non-phonetic spellings today. The samples were chosen because they are well known and students’ children are likely to encounter them in high school or college, and because they are not religious texts.

Students form their groups again from the first activity. Tell the class that now they will be looking at some writing. Don’t tell them yet what the languages are. Hand out one copy of Text A to each group and give students time to look at it carefully and answer the questions. Explain that the writing at the bottom of the page is the same as that in the image, but clearer. What language do the groups think this is? After everyone has had a chance to voice their opinions, tell them that this is a sample of **Old English**. Do students recognize any words? How about letters? What unfamiliar letters do they see? Would anyone like to try to read some of this aloud? Draw a horizontal line on the board and all the way to the left, write *Old English* and the years 450 to 1066. Tell them this is an Old English poem called *Beowulf* and that native English speakers today would have to learn Old English like a foreign language. This is an example of English after Germanic tribes invaded Britain.
Now hand out Text B and again give students time to look at it and answer the questions. Tell them this is from a Middle English book called The Canterbury Tales. On the board, near the middle of the horizontal line, write Middle English and 1150 to 1500 (the dates are approximate, and remind students that language change doesn't happen overnight, and also that there were also many dialects!). Do they recognize more letters? More words? Which ones? Would anyone like to read aloud? This is an example of English after the Normans invaded England and Norman French became the language of power and also greatly influenced English.

Finally, hand out Text C and follow the same procedure. This is a part of Macbeth by Shakespeare, which is written in Early Modern English. Explain that reading Shakespeare is challenging for most native speakers, but it is much closer to modern English than Middle or Old English! On the right of the timeline, write Early Modern English and the dates 1500 to 1800 and tell the class that what we are speaking now is called Late Modern English. This is an example of English after Old English and Norman French had totally mixed, and also after the invention of the printing press!

Now play an audio sample or read aloud from each selection, from past to present. Focus on the Middle English text for a moment. Point out that unlike our Modern English, almost all letters were pronounced. Write soote, roote, sonne, bathed, droghte, and nyght on the board. Point out that when there was an “e” in a word, including at the end of a word, it was pronounced, not silent like it is today. In the words droghte and nyght, the “gh” is pronounced in the back of the throat like a German “ch,” not silent as it is in the modern drought and night. Many silent letters such as e, k, and gh can be explained by the fact that pronunciation has changed while those parts of the spelling stayed the same. Do students' languages have silent letters?

Tell the class that they will now be reading more about how English has changed over the years and then teaching their classmates. Make sure it is clear that English is still changing today, and immigrants are influencing and contributing to English pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar even as they learn it.

Practice #1

Jigsaw Reading

Give the students on one half of the room Jigsaw Reading A: Old English Changes to Middle English and those on the other half Jigsaw Reading B: Middle English Changes to Early Modern English. Circulate as students read and help as needed. When everyone has finished reading, pair each A with a B. When the class is settled into pairs, partners tell each other about what they have read. Encourage students to tell information in their own words as much as possible, checking their papers every once in a while but not reading directly from them. Students ask each other the questions from their papers and answer based on their readings.

Go over the answers to the questions as a class.

Presentation #2

Ask the class if they find this information interesting. What do they think about it? Tell them that now you will be doing an activity to help them practice the spelling of words they find difficult.
Go back to the hard-to-spell words you wrote on the board after the Conversation Questions. List them on the board, and elic a few more hard-to-spell words from the jigsaw readings. Do any of them have silent letters that may have been pronounced in the past? For example, many students have trouble with the word *daughter*: the *gh* in daughter used to be pronounced like a German *ch*. Pay attention to the problem parts of words. In some cases, like the word *debt*, the spelling was changed during the Renaissance to make it look more like the Latin word, even though the “b” has never been pronounced in English.

Tell the class you are going to show them how to use a tool that can help them practice spelling. Project this spelling chart from Johanna Stirling’s spelling blog, or draw a simple copy on the board: [http://thespellingblog.blogspot.com/p/downloads.html](http://thespellingblog.blogspot.com/p/downloads.html) (click on *Look Say Cover Write and Check Chart* and scroll down for instructions.)

Demonstrate how to use the chart column by column, using one or two of the students’ hard-to-spell words.

**Practice #2**

Put students back into their small groups and pass out one spelling chart to each group. Give each group 2-3 words difficult to spell words. These should be words that your students commonly have difficulty with. As a group, have them create the entries for the words you’ve given them. Once finished, each group should put one word entry up on the projected chart and present it to the class.

**Application**

Have students work independently to identify 5 words from today’s class that they find difficult to spell. Have them pull from the hard-to-spell list on the board and the jigsaw reading. Once they’ve generated the list, give them a copy of the spelling chart and ask them to fill in the chart using the words from their personal list.

Circulate as the students enter their own words and practice using the chart.

Conclude with a short class reflection on the content of the lesson. Is this information interesting to students? Is it helpful? Do students think English spelling should be reformed? If students are interested, speculate together on how English may change in the next 10 years.

**Extension Activities for the Classroom and Beyond**

**Should English Language Spelling Be Reformed?**

Have students decide whether they think English spelling should be reformed. Students divide into two groups based on their position on the question and discuss their reasons. If possible, students do online research for facts to back up arguments. After each group has made a list of reasons, hold a debate and then have students individually write persuasive paragraphs.

**Ongoing Use of Spelling Charts**

Have students continue to use their spelling charts. Follow up on a regular basis with dictations of sentences using the words students have been working on. Since spelling ability likely varies a lot
within a class, this is a good ongoing activity for a volunteer to do with small groups. If some students are interested in learning more about the histories of words, show them how they can look up the etymology of a word and include it in the “how to remember” section.

History of Students’ Native Languages
Students research the history of their native languages on the Internet and report back to the class. Include influence on English if applicable. This could be done as a group project with students who speak the same language(s).

TED Talk: Where Did English Come From? (Level 500 and 550)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversation Questions: English Spelling and Pronunciation</th>
<th>Instructions to the Teacher: Copy and cut out one set per each group.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you think about English spelling? Is it more difficult than spelling in other languages?</td>
<td>Have you ever felt shy or embarrassed about your spelling?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show the other members of your group how to write and pronounce their names in your language.</td>
<td>What strategies do you use to remember how to spell difficult words?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you know about the history of your native language(s)? What languages are similar to your native language(s)?</td>
<td>What do you know about the history of English? Where does it come from? What languages are similar to English?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What English words have very strange spellings, or spellings that are hard to remember? Secretary, listen to your group and write 3 of the words.</td>
<td>Finish this sentence: English spelling is _______________________. Secretary, listen to your group and write 3 of the adjectives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Sentences for Running Dictation**

**Instructions to teacher:** Post these sentences separately around the classroom. Students form pairs or groups of three. Have students take turns "running" to a sentence, reading and remembering it, and running back to their partners to dictate the sentence. Students check each other’s work. After all sentences have been checked, groups or partners discuss whether they think each statement is true or false (#5 and #6 are false).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. All living languages are always changing.</th>
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<th>2. Latin dialects developed into modern Spanish and French, for example.</th>
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<th>4. English has about 44 different sounds but only 26 letters.</th>
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<th>5. People who have trouble with spelling are usually not intelligent.</th>
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<tr>
<th>6. Spanish is a new language in this country.</th>
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</thead>
</table>
Look at this text and discuss these questions with your group:

1. What language do you think it is?

2. Do you recognize any letters?

3. Do you recognize any words (circle any words you recognize)?

4. How much can you understand of this story?

Beowulf (British Library)
http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/beowulf
Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour,
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(so priketh hem Nature in hir corages),
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages…

Now look at this text and discuss these questions with your group:

1. What language do you think it is?
2. Do you recognize any letters?
3. Do you recognize any words (circle any words you recognize or almost recognize)?
4. How much can you understand of this story?

The Canterbury Tales (British Library)
http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-canterbury-tales-by-geoffrey-chaucer
Now look at this text and discuss these questions with your group:

1. What language do you think it is?
2. Do you recognize any letters?
3. Do you recognize any words (circle any words you recognize or almost recognize)?
4. How much can you understand of this story?

Macbeth

Accursèd be that tongue that tells me so,
For it hath cowed my better part of man!
And be these juggling fiends no more believed
That palter with us in a double sense,
That keep the word of promise to our ear
And break it to our hope. I'll not fight with thee.

MACBETH
Then yield thee, coward,
And live to be the show and gaze o' th' time.
We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,
Painted upon a pole, and underwrite
“Here may you see the tyrant.”

MACBETH
I will not yield
To kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet
And to be baited with the rabble’s curse.
Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane
And thou opposed, being of no woman born,
Yet I will try the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,
And damned be him that first cries “Hold! Enough!”

They exit fighting. Alarums.

Macbeth (Folger Digital Texts)
http://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/html/Mac.html
Many people throughout history have said that English spelling should be simplified. You may agree or disagree with this, but for now, here is a taste of the history of English spelling:

The Beginning of English Writing

The Romans left Britain in the 5th Century AD. When they left, Germanic tribes called Angles, Saxons, and Jutes arrived from mainland Europe and many stayed there. Their language became Old English. People mostly spoke Old English and sometimes used letters called runes.

A man named Augustine of Canterbury is responsible for bringing the Roman alphabet to England and using it to write the English language. He came to Britain from Rome in 597 AD as a Christian missionary. He and his scribes used the Roman alphabet that we use today. There weren’t enough letters to represent all the Old English sounds, so the missionaries used combinations of Roman letters, and also borrowed runes such as δ for the “th” sound. Church scribes wrote books by hand.

In the 8th Century, Vikings invaded England. Vikings also spoke a Germanic language, and this influenced Old English.

1066

In the year 1066, Norman French invaders, led by William the Conqueror, conquered England and stayed there. Thousands of French words entered the English language. Speakers of Spanish and other Romance languages recognize many words in English. A few of these came into English directly from Latin, but the majority of them came to English through Norman French.

The Normans used French spelling for English words, changing cwen to queen and using “c” instead of s in some words. Some words were changed to English pronunciation, for example flower and lesson, but many kept their French spellings, for example, people and marriage, and autumn.

For a long time, England had three major languages. French was the language of power, government, the courts, and the nobility. Latin was the language of the church and education. And English continued to be spoken by the common people, but it wasn’t written very much. When English was written again several hundred years later, it had changed very much! It now included many, many French words, and the pronunciation and spelling had changed. The Canterbury Tales is the first book written in Middle English after these changes had happened.
Questions to ask your partner:

1. When did people start to print books in England (instead of copying them by hand)?

2. Before the printing press, was it OK to spell one word in different ways?

3. How did Dutch printers (printers from the Netherlands) influence English spelling?

4. What was the Great Vowel Shift?

5. Why does the word *debt* have a silent “b”?

6. What else do you want to tell me about this reading?
Many people throughout history have said that English spelling should be simplified. You may agree or disagree with this, but for now, here is a taste of the history of English spelling:

The Printing Press

In 1497, a man named William Caxton brought the printing press to England. Before that, books were written by hand, and people were flexible about spelling. They just tried to spell words the way they were pronounced, which varied from place to place. During that time, for example, you could find the word *beauty* spelled *bealte*, *buite*, *beauute*, *bewtee*, *bewte*, *beaute*, and *beautyte*! The whole idea of a “correct” or “incorrect” spelling was new and came after the introduction of the printing press.

Printers had to decide which dialect to choose. They chose the English dialect of London, which was the dialect of *The Canterbury Tales*, so many spellings reflect the pronunciation of London English at that time. Also, many printers were Dutch, so they used the Dutch spelling with silent “h” for words like *ghost* and *gherkin*.

The Great Vowel Shift

During the same time the printers were trying to create a standard spelling, big changes in pronunciation were happening in English. People used to pronounce the *k* in *knee* and the *w* in *write* and the *gh* in *eight*, but when standard spelling was established, people had stopped pronouncing them! Major changes were also happening in the pronunciation of vowels. This was called *The Great Vowel Shift*, and nobody knows exactly why it happened. It is normal for pronunciation to change over time, but these changes were dramatic and happened quickly. Some of the spellings reflected the old pronunciation, and some reflected the new. Read these words aloud: *knead, bread, wear, great*. The vowels are the same, but are they pronounced the same way?

Love of Latin (the language!)

In the 1500s and 1600s, during the Renaissance, people were rediscovering ancient Latin and Greek literature and tried to copy it to make English spelling more fancy (and sometimes confusing). For example, *receyt* was changed to *receipt* because the Latin word included a "p" that was pronounced. *Dette* was changed to *debt* for the same reason. Can you remember the spelling of the word *asma*? What about *asthma*? Which makes more sense: *diaria*, or *diarrhea*? *Asma* and *diaria* were changed to look more like the Greek words.

World English

Finally, English is a very welcoming language—it takes vocabulary from many languages, and often keeps the original spellings, which follow different spelling rules. Can you think of some examples from your native language?
Questions to ask your partner:

1. When did Saint Augustine bring the Roman alphabet to England?

2. What is an example of a sound in Old English that the Roman alphabet didn't have?

3. What language did the people speak who invaded England in 1066?

4. Does English today include many words from the Normans? If so, what are some examples?

5. What were the three major languages spoken in England during this time?

6. What else do you want to tell me about this reading?