

Perspectives on teaching spelling to Czech learners of English

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Abstract

The article compares the orthographic system of English and Czech, focusing on their consistency in representing speech sounds. It further explores the historical and linguistic factors that have led to the irregularities in the English spelling system and outlines the key challenges Czech learners encounter when learning English spelling and pronunciation, with reference to fundamental differences between English and Czech orthographies. The second part of the article is devoted to the relevance of correct spelling in the modern era and presents some strategies that support explicit teaching of English spelling rules.

Key words: English orthography, Czech orthography, spelling, pronunciation, letter, speech sound, teaching spelling.

Perspektivy výuky anglického pravopisu u českých žáků

Abstrakt

Článek porovnává ortografický systém angličtiny a češtiny se zaměřením na jejich konzistentnost při zaznamenávání hlásek mluvené řeči. Dále zkoumá historické faktory, které vedly k nepravidelnostem v anglickém pravopisném systému, a nastiňuje klíčové výzvy, kterým čelí čeští žáci při osvojování si anglického pravopisu a výslovnosti s ohledem

na zásadní rozdíly mezi anglickou a českou ortografií. Druhá část článku je věnována významu správného pravopisu v moderní době a představuje některé strategie, které podporují explicitní výuku anglických pravopisných pravidel.

Klíčová slova: anglická ortografie, česká ortografie, pravopis, výslovnost, písmeno, hláska, výuka pravopisu

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Introduction

The English and Czech languages are typologically different in many aspects. In this article, we will focus on one of them, particularly the level of consistency between English and Czech orthography and phonological systems. While English is considered to be inconsistent in spelling and pronunciation, Czech is typically described as a relatively consistent language (Caravolas, 2004, p. 5). In this article, we aim to outline the main differences in the spelling systems of the Czech and English languages and the consequences that follow for the Czech students of English, specifically in the areas of reading, writing and pronunciation.

“An ideal writing system for a language would be an alphabet that always spells a particular sound in only one way” (Kessler, 2003, p. 267). In such a case, there would be no discrepancies or irregularities about transcribing the spoken form of a word in a set of letters. Nevertheless, no language is completely consistent in its spelling-sound system. “Alphabetic orthographies vary considerably in the consistency of their grapheme-phoneme and phoneme-grapheme correspondences” (Caravolas et al., 2005, p. 108).

In this respect, Seymour et al. (2003) use the terms deep and shallow orthographies, the former referring to spelling systems containing many inconsistencies and complexities, the latter to systems with consistent grapheme-phoneme correspondences. Other authors, for instance Dich & Pedersen (2013), talk about opaque and transparent orthographies or consistent and inconsistent orthographies.

It is only logical that the level of orthographic consistency has an impact not only on the reading and pronunciation skills of foreign language learners but also on their writing accuracy. As Caravolas et al. (2005) suggest, the consistent orthographies should promote faster acquisition of conventional spelling skills than less consistent ones. This assumption is also supported by Dich & Pedersen (2013), who claim that: Learning to read and write is easier (and faster) in transparent orthographies, i.e. orthographies where correspondences between letters and sounds are consistent, as in Italian or Finnish, than in opaque orthographies, where these correspondences are inconsistent, as in English or Danish (p. 52).

The Czech language belongs to languages with rather consistent orthographies. It uses 39 speech sounds (phonemes) and 42 corresponding letters, plus letters <q>, <w> and <x> that only occur in words of foreign origin (Ústav pro jazyk český, 2025). English, on the other hand, is found “closer to the end among the deepest orthographies” (Fuková, 2023, p. 13). Standard British English, predominantly taught in Czech schools, uses 44 speech sounds and 26 letters. In other words, the Czech language disposes of enough letters to record each distinct speech sound individually and unambiguously, but English does not. While in Czech speech, each sound corresponds mostly to one particular letter, in English “each sound is represented by more than one written letter or by sequences of letters; and any letter of the word represents more than one sound, or it may not represent any sound at all” (Astuti et al., 2021, p. 153). According to Ball & Blachman (1991), the 44 English phonemes are represented by roughly 250 different spellings. Therefore, mastering English spelling and deducing the correct pronunciation of written English may seem rather challenging, especially to Czech students, who are not used to such complexity in their mother tongue.

An interesting approach was introduced by Wayne B. Dickerson (1987), who in his article “Orthography as a Pronunciation Resource” views English spelling rules as an effective tool for teaching pronunciation, given the possibility of predicting word pronunciation based on consistent relationships between spelling and sound. He suggests abandoning the traditional “listen and repeat” approach and integrating spelling into pronunciation teaching using clear rules that are understandable to students, linking spelling patterns to vowel length, stress, and vowel reduction. He proposes a “3 P” model—perception, production, and prediction – that could encourage students not only to listen and produce sounds, but also to predict pronunciation based on written form. This approach allows students to become more independent, more accurate, and aware of the systematic connections between English spelling and pronunciation.

Reasons for the inconsistency of the English spelling system

Crystal (1996, p. 274) claims that “the English spelling system is the result of a process of development that has been going on for over 1.000 years. The complications we encounter today are the consequences of the major linguistic and social events which have taken place over this period”. Similarly, Rao (2018) explains that:

English is a West Germanic language that has borrowed many words from non-Germanic languages, and the spelling of a word often reflects its origin. There were many changes in the English language over the centuries due to socio-historical reasons and linguistic reasons (p. 2).

Old English had a relatively transparent writing system devised by Christian missionaries who adapted the Roman alphabet by adding more letters to accommodate

to the speaking reality (Hammond, 2011). Interestingly, there were letters called 'thorn', 'eth' and 'ash' corresponding to today's English sounds /ð/, /θ/ and /æ/ (Crystal, 1996).

The situation has rapidly changed after the Norman Conquest in 1066, which is considered to be one of the two main causes of the inconsistency of today's English spelling (Brinton & Arnowick, 2006, p. 261). In the Middle English period, the influence of French was far reaching and by the 15th century, the English spelling was a mixture of Old English and French. The Norman scribes introduced many of French writing conventions, while, at the same time a great number of French and Latin words were entering the English language, some in their original spelling, some adapted to reflect their English pronunciation. The spelling was largely inconsistent and one word could be spelt in a number of ways (Crystal, 1996).

During the Early Modern Period, the introduction of a printing press gradually started contributing to the standardisation of English, but at the same time, many printers were "foreigners who introduced their native conventions at will, and who were uncertain of orthographic traditions in English" (Crystal, 1996, p. 66). The Renaissance movement brought increased interest in classical languages and learning and, together with the industrial revolution and colonisation of new countries, this caused an influx of new words into the English vocabulary, with a varying level of spelling adaptation. As Crystal (2018, p. 136) remarks: "English, perhaps more than any other language, is an insatiable borrower. Whereas the speakers of some languages take pains to exclude foreign words from their lexicons, English seems always to have welcomed them".

While the English spelling was gradually becoming standardised with the growth of printing, pronunciation kept developing. Linguists agree that another major reason for the complicated relationship between English letters and sounds was the Great Vowel Shift, a gradual change in the long vowels that shifted higher in their place of articulation in the mouth, or became new diphthongs. For instance, before the Great Vowel Shift, the words *gees* (*geese*) and *mys* (*mice*) were originally pronounced with /e:/ and /i:/ respectively, which was reflected in the spelling (Crystal, 1996, p. 55). These changes happened roughly between 1400–1700 and affected English pronunciation but did not impact spelling, and for this reason, the spelling of English vowels often does not match their pronunciation today (Wolfe, 1972).

In addition to the reasons mentioned above, like early printing and standardization, some spellings were influenced by typesetters' preferences and regional dialects (Howard-Hill, 2006) and the fact that English has never had any official academy regulating spelling such as the Czech Republic, France or Spain. Although the list of reasons for the irregularities we observe in today's English spelling is not complete, it clearly shows the historical roots of the problem that the students of English are faced with today. However, linguists studying English sound-letter correspondence believe that the spelling is not completely irregular and random. For instance, Crystal (1996, p. 224) claims that English spelling and pronunciation correspondence is about 75% regular

and the impression of its unpredictability is caused by some 400 words which do not follow the usual spelling tendencies but, unfortunately, belong to the most frequently used ones in the English language.

Although several spelling reforms have been attempted, “there has never been a serious, co-ordinated attempt to remedy the various accidental and deliberate corruptions of representing speech sounds in a regular manner in English” (Improving English Spelling, 2025). According to Crystal (2012) and Hammond (2011), a fundamental reform of the English spelling is not possible mainly because various groups of reformers have disagreed on the nature and extent of proposed changes.

Throughout history, there have been many attempts to lay out the rules of English spelling in various spelling guides. Czech learner's of English may find useful Jiří Nosek's *Grafika moderní angličtiny* (1991) or Brook's *Dictionary of the British spelling system* (2015).

Problems Czech learners face when acquiring English spelling and the corresponding pronunciation

The following paragraphs aim to sum up the major differences between the English and Czech orthographies and how these might affect Czech learners' spelling and pronunciation in English.

Some letters of the English alphabet are pronounced differently from the identical letters in the Czech alphabet. Consequently, Czech learners, especially in the novice stages of learning English, may pronounce these letters as if they were reading in Czech. The letter <c> is sometimes pronounced as /ts/ in words like central and percentage, the letter <w> is pronounced as /v/ in words like win or Washington, the digraph <ch> as /x/ in words like Chaos or technical and the digraph <th> as /t/ in words like mathematics or thousand. Another common mistake is the Czech pronunciation /ŋk/ of the English digraph <ng> at the end of words like king, song or playing. The fact that some English sounds do not exist in Czech and are difficult to articulate (especially /θ/ and /ð/) further supports this type of mispronunciation. Based on long-term teaching experience and observation, a related problem, typical even for advanced Czech learners, is the avoidance of the most common English vowel /ə/ in unstressed syllables, and its replacement by the corresponding spelt vowel (e.g. computer, government, banana are mispronounced as [kɔm'pjʊ:tə], [ˈɡʌvənmənt], [bʌ'nɑ:nə]).

Many English letters and combinations of letters correspond to more than one sound. Learners who learned to pronounce a certain letter or digraph in one particular word may incorrectly transfer that pronunciation to other words. This may lead to mispronunciation of English words whose spelling includes, for instance, the letter <g> (e.g. gymnastics, genre, target), the letter <c> (e.g., specific, special) or the letter <a> (e.g. natural, comfortable). Some examples of common digraphs that correspond to more

than one sound are <ch> (e.g. cherry but chef, Christmas), <ea> (leaf but pear, beard) or <oo> (foot but blood). Notoriously diverse is the pronunciation of the <ough> letter group, which can be pronounced in ten different ways, as illustrated by the sample words *through*, *thought*, *though*, *tough*, *thoroughly*, *cough*, *plough*, *slough*, *lough* and *hiccough* (The Ten pronunciations of -ough, 2025).

About 60% of English words include so-called silent letters (Dubosarsky, 2009), that is, letters that are spelt but never pronounced. In Czech, all letters in words are normally pronounced and Czech learners of English may, therefore, have the tendency to do the same when reading in English. Words that are commonly mispronounced on various levels of students' proficiency include silent <k> (*knight*, *knee*), silent <l> (*half*, *walk*), silent <p> (*psychology*, *pseudo*), silent <w> (*wrist*, *write*), silent <t> (*whistle*, *wrestle*), silent (*thumb*, *bomb*, *debt*) or silent <h> (*heir*, *exhhaust*). Silent vowels often cause problems in the pronunciation of words like *their*, *fruit*, *biscuit* or *leopard*. Logically, the existence of silent letters may also affect learners' writing. As Astuti (2021) asserts: It is clear that silent letters create a disparity between how to spell a word and how to pronounce a word in English. When students have only heard a word and try to write it, they might leave the letter out because they do not hear it spoken (p. 154).

When trying to deduce the spelling of words based on their pronunciation, Czech learners must also face the fact that one sound frequently corresponds to different spellings. Therefore, it may be hard to predict how a word is spelt based on knowledge of a similar-sounding word. For instance, the sound /ʃ/ at the novice of a word usually corresponds to <sh> (e.g. *shoe*, *shy*), but in the words that come originally from French (e.g. *sure* or *sugar*) it is represented by the letter <s>. Even more diverse are the spelling representations of most vowel sounds. For instance, the vowel /i:/ most commonly corresponds to digraph <ee>, but can be spelt in sixteen other ways, some of which are rather rare (Brooks, 2015, p. 196-199).

The irregularities in English spelling result in the existence of numerous homophones, words that sound the same but must be spelt differently (e.g. *pair* – *pear*, *flower* – *flour*, *to* – *two* – *too*). In the Czech language with its transparent orthography, homophones are incomparably less frequent and mostly include words differing in the letters <i> and <y> that correspond to the same sound or paired voiced/voiceless of consonants at the end of words (e.g. *být* – *bít*, *led* – *let*). Likewise, English vocabulary includes homographs, words that have the same spelling but different pronunciation (e.g. *tear* /tɪə, tɛə/ or *row* /rəʊ, rəʊ/ r. In Czech, homographs are rare (e.g. *panícký*, *proudit*), and since one of the pair of English homographs is typically used more frequently and learned earlier than the other, Czech students tend to pronounce its less frequent counterpart identically, and thus incorrectly (e.g. *wind* /waɪnd/ mispronounced as /wɪnd/ or *lead* /lɛd/ mispronounced as /li:d/).

Is learning correct spelling still important today?

Correct spelling has always been a sign of human literacy, although recently there has been a tendency to downplay its importance. The question has arisen whether spelling is not an antiquated concept, with the existence of online references, automatic document spellchecking and the public's patience with poorly spelt words (Reed, 2012). As Pan, Rickard & Bjork (2021) put it: In the early 21st century, scepticism as to the importance of spelling has grown, some schools have deemphasised or abandoned spelling instruction altogether, and there has been a proliferation of non-traditional approaches to teaching spelling. These trends invite a re-evaluation of the role of spelling in modern English-speaking societies and whether the subject should be explicitly taught (and if so, what are research-supported methods for doing so (p. 1523).

Some authors point to the fact that spelling is so a cognitively demanding skill that children minimise the use of other composing processes and for those who have difficulty learning to spell it might lead to arrested writing development (McCutchen, 1988; Berninger, 1999).

Nevertheless, it is still true that incorrect spelling might lead to difficulties in comprehension, a negative impression of a writer's argument and slow down the process of reading if a text contains misspelt words (Treiman, 2018). "Contrary to the assertions of sceptics, an examination of research on how human beings view spelling errors suggests that the longstanding approbation of spelling skills remains justified" (Pan et al., 2021, p. 1526). Especially in a professional area, good spelling skills lead to a more positive evaluation by potential employers.

For English language learners, proficiency in spelling is important not only for the development of writing skills, but it also supports reading (Moats, 2005). Although some researchers claim that poor spelling ability does not automatically mean that students are poor readers, as good readers can decode more words than they can spell or encode (Berninger et al., 2002). Snow et al. (2025) clearly explain that the real importance of spelling for reading lies in the fact that both build and rely on the same mental representation of a word and, therefore, if the learner has mastered the spelling of a word, it strengthens its mental representation and makes it accessible for fluent reading.

Explicit teaching of spelling rules

What might be questionable is whether to teach the rules of English orthography explicitly, or let learners memorise the spelling of each individual word and leave discovering the spelling regularities and irregularities solely to them. Graham & Santangelo (2014) point out that for more than a century, scholars have argued that spelling should not be directly taught because it is ineffective or inefficient. Yet, their comprehensive meta-analysis of 53 experimental studies on how native English-speaking children acquire

spelling demonstrates the opposite: direct spelling instruction clearly improves students' phonological awareness as well as their reading and writing skills, regardless of their level of proficiency.

Research into teaching English as a foreign language seems to support these findings. Pérez Cañado (2006) developed an intervention program which drew students' conscious attention to selected spelling aspects and, through pre-tests, post-tests and delayed post-tests, clearly confirmed the essential role of consciousness raising in English spelling instruction. In the Czech educational context, Pospíšilová (2017) aimed to improve her students' pronunciation of words including silent letters in a series of specifically devised presentation and practice activities and found out that her pedagogical intervention brought about immediate as well as long-term improvement in students' pronunciation of such words. Fuková (2024), focusing on the effect of teaching spelling on the ability to predict pronunciation in Czech lower-secondary learners of English, proved that following her seven-week teaching intervention aimed at acquiring pronunciation rules for selected English letters (<g>, <o>, <c>, <s>), her students significantly improved in reading both real and pseudo words including these letters.

Explicit learning of English spelling is at the heart of the Jolly Phonics method, which is widely used in teaching reading and writing to native English-speaking children but has been successfully adopted for teaching English as a foreign language. Through its multisensory activities, learners are introduced to 42 'letter sounds' of English from the very novice of their English language instruction. They learn to identify individual sounds in words together with their most common spelling representations in so-called 'Jolly Phonics order', in which the letter sounds are grouped into seven categories based on the complexity of their pronunciation-spelling correspondence. Alongside the regular correspondences, learners are also taught 'tricky words', highly frequent English words with irregular spelling, such as *have*, *was*, *want* or *said* (Jolly Learning, 2025). Although this method used for teaching native English-speaking children has its opponents, who believe that reading and writing should be taught to young language learners only after they have acquired the basic listening and speaking skills, it also has a number of advocates (Ariati et al., 2018; Mekawy et al., 2021). An adaptation of the method aimed specifically at Czech primary learners of English has been designed by Jana Bártová, a primary school teacher who developed and successfully promoted her own system of teaching materials called 'Jolly Body Phonics' (Bílková, 2021).

Direct teaching of spelling-pronunciation rules is directly recommended for students with dyslexia, as this learning difference frequently involves difficulty with implicit learning of linguistic structures (Komoros & Smith, 2012). Tribushinina, Berg & Karman (2021) carried out an intervention study on lower-secondary Duch students with dyslexia, who received a contrastive spelling instruction once a week for eight weeks. The results suggested that even a short explicit intervention using cross-linguistic comparisons can considerably improve students' spelling skills.

Useful advice regarding teaching spelling, not only to learners with specific learning difficulties, is provided by Ivanová (2009). She stresses that learners should learn to spell only those words they can pronounce and use and that “gradation of difficulty in introducing beginners of English spelling is of utmost importance” (p. 22). She advises to proceed as follows:

- start with three-letter and four-letter ‘phonetically regular’ words, e.g. *dog, cat, name*;
- gradually introduce consonant digraphs (e.g. *shop, chips, this, wish*) and common vowel digraphs (*book, see*);
- deal with common polysyllabic words (e.g. *animal, umbrella*);
- show how to divide more difficult words into syllables (*wea.ther, tea.cher*);
- bring the learners’ attention to the most frequent consonant clusters and make them notice the order of consonants (e.g. *night* but *tenth, going* but *foreign*);
- later pay attention to the spelling-pronunciation relationships of frequent productive suffixes (e.g. *mention, dangerous, kindness*) and grammatical endings (e.g. *boys* but *ladies*).

(Ivanová, 2009, p. 24)

She also suggests that learners should be helped to identify differences between Czech and English usage of the alphabet. Her practical tips include explicit teaching the rule of ‘silent e’, which at the end of a word makes the vowel in front of it say its alphabetical name (e.g. *name, kite*), rules of pronouncing the English letter <g> (<g> + <a>, <o>, <u> is pronounced /g/, <g> + <e>, <i>, <y> is pronounced /dʒ/, the letter <y> (always pronounced /j/ at the novice of a word), and others (Ivanová, 2009, p. 23). While she clearly recommends that English spelling should receive regular and systematic attention in English lessons, she also observes that Czech teachers seem to be much stricter than those teaching native English, forcing their students to learn the spelling of every word that occurs in the textbook, which is clearly inadequate.

Conclusion

The contrast between the orthographic consistency of Czech and the complexity of English spelling and pronunciation poses a challenge for Czech students of English and may impair their ability to accurately decode and encode English words. Thus, it is important for English teachers to recognize and understand these systematic differences and adapt their teaching strategies to support Czech students in developing efficient spelling and pronunciation skills in English. Some promising approaches have been mentioned above (Dickerson, 1987, Jolly Phonics method and Ivanová, 2009). In spite of English irregular spelling, research shows that English is not entirely unpredictable. Some studies indicate that explicit teaching of English spelling rules may be helpful especially for learners from non-native backgrounds like Czech students, contrary to

long-standing beliefs that spelling should be learned through memorization. An example of such an approach is *Jolly Phonics*, a method of teaching English to young learners, which directly presents spelling-pronunciation correspondences from the first lessons. Explicit focus on English orthography proved to be an efficient strategy particularly for learners with dyslexia-related learning difficulties. However, further empirical research is required to comprehensively evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of explicit instruction in English spelling on various levels of students' proficiency.

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