

Hesitant Learners

By Suzy Hopkins

Two afternoons every week I volunteer at a school for two classes of 4th graders. Many of these sweet kids are non-English speakers. I help them improve their reading skills.

It always strikes me how difficult English must be to learn since there are as many exceptions as there are rules. Take the word *fool*. It can be a verb meaning 'to deceive' or a noun meaning 'a halfwit or dope.' Try to explain halfwit to a foreigner.

Now the spelling becomes an issue. Fool rhymes with pool and cool which are spelled the same. But what about jewel or rule and mule? Don't forget fuel, cruel and duel. Explain why the contraction of you will, you'll, sounds the same but is so different.

Because their parents don't speak English they don't get any help at home. Some of these kids will thrive, some won't.

I feel lucky that English is my first language.