

Expect the unexpected



The last chapter of the RHB New Straits Times National Spell-It-Right Challenge will present state champions with some surprises, write NURJEHAN MOHAMED and AUDREY CHEW ERNERN



“

It is important to test the spellers but at the same time not make the words too difficult that they are unable to get a single one right. This is, after all, about encouraging learners to increase their vocabulary.”

— Cambridge English for Life chief academic officer Keith Harris



Online references play a bigger role this year than in previous seasons

THERE are just two more weeks before the final showdown of the RHB New Straits Times National Spell-It-Right (SIR) Challenge and the state representatives would no doubt have one thing on their minds: “What are the words going to be like?”

They have faced wordy challenges such as “obsidian”, “albumen” and “elixir” (primary) and “diaeresis”, “empennage” and “impresario” (secondary) at the state challenges to earn their spots on the national stage.

But they have seen nothing yet.

Followers of the competition would have noted the increasing level of difficulty in the terms given, especially at the National Challenge.

At the Negri Sembilan

and Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya legs, secondary finalists were dumbfounded by medical terminology such as “logorrhoea”, “onychophagist” and “nephrectomy”.

Finalists dealt with “egalitarian”, “herpetology” and “palaeontologist” (primary) and “idiosyncrasy”, “emphysema” and “strychnine” (secondary) at the national level from the first to third seasons.

How are the words chosen?

A content committee, headed by NST Newspaper-in-Education head Mary Chandapillai, is responsible for compiling the word lists for the contest.

Some 10,000 words were culled from six dictionaries — the latest Advanced Learner’s editions of Oxford, Collins Cobuild and Cambridge, as well



Mary Chandapillai

as Merriam-Webster Online, Dictionary.com and MSN Encarta — for the 14 state challenges in the primary and secondary categories.

It is no mean feat to divide the words into primary and secondary terms, and then arrange them into various levels of difficulty.

Some 500 words would be selected for the primary and secondary categories, including tiebreaker words, for the National Challenge on July 23.

While certain terms were repeated in different state challenges, Mary assures contestants that the final stage will not include any that came out before.

In fact, there may not even be words students have encountered before either.

“The bar is being raised higher than ever and it would be insufficient to swallow the dictionary whole,” says Mary, in reference to Kenneth Wu Min Jin’s reputation for memorising

the entire Oxford dictionary.

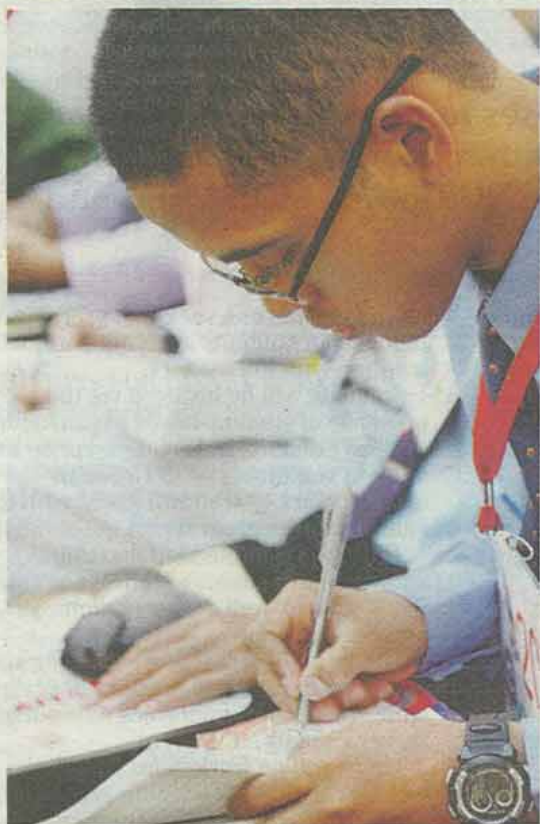
Students should broaden their reading to include Internet sources and various encyclopaedias — online references play a bigger role this year than in previous seasons.

“The English language is evolving so fast that new words that have come into the daily language may not enter traditional dictionaries,” says Mary.

The SIR content committee is, understandably, quite protective over their methods and what words to expect at the finals.

A *Slate* article about how words were chosen for the Scripps National Spelling Bee (May 28, 2009) revealed that shopping catalogues were particularly helpful because they “often feature

Looking up words in the newspaper might come in handy



Students should be aware of word origins



arcane words in their product descriptions".

The SIR team does no such thing as the only sources are the dictionaries listed.

The order of the words and whether they are used in the primary or secondary categories would depend on a number of factors, including the degree of familiarity and whether they can be spelled phonetically.

For the first time, the committee is working with an external party — Cambridge English for Life — to compile and organise the word lists for the National Challenge.

Cambridge English for Life chief academic officer Keith Harris says the words would probably be "sufficiently commonly used" and that the pronunciation would yield some difficulty.

He adds that students would likely use some of these terms later on in life.

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"This is, after all, about encouraging learners to increase their vocabulary," he adds.

Mary says it might stand in contestants' good stead to look out for terms online and in newspapers.

"They should be aware of word origins, such as Greek, Latin and Arabic, and keep in mind that foreign words have been adopted into the English language.

"Greek and Roman mythologies, for instance, have been highlighted in recent

It would be insufficient to swallow the dictionary whole

blockbusters such as *Clash of the Titans* and *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*," she adds.

It might do contestants well to look out for lexical puzzlers in the medical, biological and

technical fields, for instance.

Words from the legal, business and journalistic fraternities may also find their way into the finals.

Students should also listen to the definition and sentence

usage as these could indicate if they should be spelling "leak" or "leek" and can be the deciding factor of who goes home with the first or second prize.

education@nst.com.my