Spelling Development in Thai Children

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Thai, a tonal language, has a distinctive alphabetic orthography. In the current study, spelling development in Thai children is examined. A number of predictions about spelling development and types of errors are made based on previous research on other orthographies in conjunction with the characteristics of Thai language and its orthography. Spelling of words was assessed in 60 Thai children ranging in age from 7 years to 9 years from Grade(s) 1, 2, and 3. After 4 months of school, Grade 1 children achieved 32% correct, Grade 2 children 85% correct, and Grade 3 children 87% correct for word spelling. Spelling performance rapidly increased between the youngest Grade 1 children and the older children with relatively few errors made by the older children. We found striking commonalities with other orthographies previously studied and also orthography-specific characteristics emerged. Homophonous consonants, consonant clusters, visually similar letters, vowel length, and other irregularities in the orthography posed significant challenges to young learners. As predicted the complex vowel combinations and tone system also proved problematic.

Key words: development, error analysis, spelling, Thai

Introduction

The majority of research on literacy development has primarily been conducted on linearly arranged alphabetic orthographies, in particular Indo-European languages. Thai, a tonal language, forms an interesting comparison, as it has a distinctive alphabetic orthography with a non-linear arrangement of vowels that can be placed vertically above, or below, or to either side of the consonant, and that combine across the syllable to produce a large additional number of vowels or diphthongs. Thai orthography also has
shared properties with syllabic scripts, as it has implicit vowels for some consonants. In order to gain greater insights into universal, typological, and orthography-specific developmental patterns and processes, it is essential to examine literacy development in diverse orthographies with markedly different characteristics. Moreover, literacy research has predominantly focused on reading rather than spelling development. In the current study, spelling development in Thai children is examined. First, I will discuss the important factors and features that have been found to affect spelling development in previously studied orthographies. Subsequently, I will review the characteristics of the Thai language and its orthography prior to outlining the research aims and predictions of the current study.

**Important factors associated with spelling development**

**Consistency in phoneme-grapheme mapping**

The relative consistency of the alphabetic orthography being learned affects spelling development. There are a few orthographies that are very consistent in terms of mapping between phonemes and graphemes, for example Turkish, Finish, Serbo-Croatian (Caravolas, 2005). However, the majority of languages deviate to some extent from this one-to-one mapping, and instead have many-to-one spelling-sound (feedforward), or many-to-one sound-spelling (feedback) correspondences, irregular, and/or opaque (silent letters) spellings. When there are letters written that do not correspond to the spoken language (e.g. *wrist* or *knight*), children need to rote learn the orthographic information necessary for representing these spellings. The likelihood of children spelling a word correctly is related to its regularity (Romani, Olson, & Di Betta, 2005) and “the greater number of rules, exceptions, and sources of inconsistency, the more slow and difficult the learning process is likely to be” (Caravolas, 2005 p. 499).

**Spoken language effects**

Young children bring a wealth of knowledge and experience of their spoken language to the task of learning to read and write. In particular, in relation to learning to spell, it is important to consider what children know about the spoken language (Treiman & Kessler, 2005), as the phonologi-