
Errors and Causes in English Spelling Writing of

Thai University Students

Patsara Pongsukvajchakul¹

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated English spelling writings to analyze types and causes of spelling errors committed by 67 Thai students of Kasetsart University, Sri-racha Campus. Written data of 4,020 English spelling words were collected during the first academic term in 2021. The NFER's classification of spelling errors, as well as Cook and Singleton's proposition of spelling errors' causes were adopted in the analysis. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to report the results which indicated 360 words with wrong spellings. The findings revealed the largest numbers of spelling errors of others such as reduction of syllables and other forms of words, followed by omission, insertion, substitution, grapheme substitution and transposition, consecutively. The spelling errors were most frequently caused by pronunciation, followed by spelling rules, letter/sound correspondences and syllable structure, respectively. The study suggested that vocabulary learning should include reviewing of English letters and sounds to help learners to spell and write out words correctly, as well as practicing on exercises for learners to apply meanings, forms, functions and spellings of words in writing productively.

Keywords: writing, vocabulary, spelling errors, causes of spelling errors

¹ Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management Sciences, Kasetsart University, Sri-racha Campus
E-mail: fmspsp@ku.ac.th

Introduction

People use a language to convey ideas and thoughts to others. To use a language in all four skills, they need to have knowledge of pronunciation, grammar and especially vocabulary.

According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, “vocabulary” is defined as “all the words in a particular language” (Pearson, n.d.). Vocabulary includes thousands of words with different forms, meanings and functions. To acquire English as a foreign or second language, one needs to have knowledge of words in order to produce a meaningful phrase, clause and sentence.

Knowledge of vocabulary is overt through one’s writing skill. Writing involves a process of prewriting, writing and revising, and it requires vocabulary knowledge in composing written texts. As a sentence is consisted of words with a complete idea, each word in a sentence has its function and meaning. Appropriate words must be used for a sentence to be complete and meaningful.

Writing and spelling are compatible skills. While practicing writing, a person simultaneously learns to spell and write out words, and vice versa. Nation (as cited in Alqahtani, 2015 and Susanto, 2017) claimed that vocabulary knowledge is linked with language practices. Having knowledge of vocabulary, a person can use a language. When using a language, a person’s vocabulary knowledge is increased. As cited in Westwood (2005), scholars viz Baumann and Afflerbach; Graham; Hammond; Hoffman, Scott; and Thibodeau attested that with well-adjusted teaching and development in writing and spelling, learners will get the best practices of the whole language.

Harmer (2007), as well as Rasouli and Jafari (2016), stated that vocabulary is one element of a language which enables a person to express one’s thoughts and feelings. As quoted in Westwood (2005, pp. 2–3), Graham, Harris & Chorzempa, including Stewart and Cegelka, revealed that poor spelling can reduce intelligibility of a person’s written work. A written text can be obscured or misunderstood if any word is misspelled. Incorrect spelling of words is an evidence of a person’s writing inability and carelessness.

Several studies highlighted the importance of vocabulary knowledge and spelling skills. Students were found to commit spelling errors in writing due to

their limited knowledge of vocabulary (Jamil, Majoka, & Kamran, 2016; Sermsook, Liamnimitr, & Pochakorn, 2017; and Özkayran & Yılmaz, 2020). Meanwhile, Karakoç and Köse (2017) indicated that there were significant relationships between students' vocabulary knowledge and writing ability. Students with more productive vocabulary knowledge were more successful in writing performance. Mahanta (2020) gave students a spelling test to find out their spelling errors. Then, students were suggested to use remedial measures in learning vocabulary such as dictionary; word games; crossword puzzles; mnemonics; breaking long words into syllables; reading; correct pronunciation; and more writing. After ten days, students had another spelling test, and they were found to have improvement in their spelling errors after using the remedial measures.

Writing and spelling are supplementary skills. As an English lecturer, the researcher has perceived students' spelling errors as one of the main problems in writing. This study examined types and causes of spelling errors in English spelling writings of Thai university students during the first academic session in 2021. The results will enable the researcher to use right methods and remedial measures in teaching vocabulary. The researcher realizes the importance of accurate spellings which result to productive writings.

Literature Review

A language includes vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar (Harmer, 2007; Rasouli & Jafari, 2016). The key element of sensible communication is vocabulary (Wittgenstein, 2017).

Nation (as cited in Alqahtani, 2015 and Susanto, 2017) noted that vocabulary learning is essential for listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Vocabulary knowledge enables one to use a language; the use of a language increases one's knowledge of vocabulary. A person with adequate vocabulary knowledge and good spelling skills is likely to write well and commit fewer spelling mistakes.

Classification of Spelling Errors

As cited in Westwood (2005, pp. 54–55), scholars viz Peters; Howell, Fox & Morehead; and Miller, Rakes & Choate identified spelling errors as follows.

1. Letters omitted such as ‘rember’ instead of ‘remember’
2. Letters added such as ‘lotes’ instead of ‘lots’
3. Phonic such as ‘sed’ instead of ‘said’ and ‘hear’ instead of ‘here’
4. Phonic but not conforming to rule such as ‘cyid’ instead of ‘side’
5. Transposition of letters such as ‘aminal’ instead of ‘animal’
6. Substitution of a consonant such as ‘glass’ instead of ‘class’
7. Substitution of vowel such as ‘waet’ instead of ‘wait’
8. Double/single letter errors such as ‘litle’ instead of ‘little’
9. Unclassifiable errors.

Later, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) classified spelling errors into six groups (Cook & Singleton, 2014, p. 83).

1. Insertion – When an extra letter is added in a word, an error of insertion occurs such as ‘vocabulary’ (vocabulary).

2. Omission – When a letter is deleted in a word, there is an error of omission such as ‘softwar’ (software).

3. Substitution – When one letter in a word is replaced with another, this refers to an error of substitution such as ‘catagories’ (categories).

4. Transposition – When two letters in a word are reordered, an error of transposition happens such as ‘foerigners’ (foreigners).

5. Grapheme substitution – When a word has wrong spelling correspondences, this is called an error of grapheme substitution such as ‘thort’ (thought).

6. Others – They are errors that don’t belong to any of the above five groups

Causes of Spelling Errors

Out of eight, the following reviewed Cook and Singleton's (2014, pp. 75–86) four main causes of spelling errors which were related to this study.

1. Pronunciation

There may be differences in pronunciation of sounds between English and one's native language such as the "r" (ram, brunch) sounds of English and "l" (lamb, blunch) sounds of Japanese.

2. Letter/sound correspondences

English is a deep writing system in which its letters and sounds have multiple correspondences. One letter corresponds to many sounds such as "t" in "bath, catch, picture, trip". One sound corresponds to many letters such as /k/ can correspond to the letter "c" in "came", "k" in "kill", "ck" in "back", and "cc" in "according". Two letters can correspond to a single phoneme such as "wh" to /w/ in "when". Some letters are 'silent' and don't have direct sound correspondences. A silent "e" in "dime" produces a long preceding vowel /ai/ but a short vowel /I/ in "dim".

3. Syllable structure

In each language, sounds and letters are differently combined into syllables. English has a consonant-vowel-consonant structure such as bin and pin, as well as a cluster of two or more consonants such as clock, hand and string. A learner with a consonant-vowel structure may have difficulties with the English syllable structure.

4. Spelling rules

Writing systems have rules in using with structure and content words. A person needs to know their differences, including grammar and sounds to spell out words. For instance, the doubling of consonant letters may cause a learner to wrongly add an extra letter such as "tradditional", leave out one letter such as "adress" or do both in the same word such as "neccesary".

Past Studies

Several studies were conducted to investigate types and causes of spelling errors in writings. For instance, Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, & Gaudel (2015) investigated writings of 122 Saudi EFL students and found 1,189 spelling errors related to omission, substitution, insertion and transposition, consecutively. The spelling errors were resulted from deviations of articulation and spelling inherent in English words themselves. In the study of Albalawi (2016), the spelling test and writing essays of 80 Saudi female EFL students were analyzed for spelling errors. Of 824 spelling errors, most students committed errors of omission, followed by substitution, insertion and transportation, respectively. These spelling errors were resulted from overgeneralization and lack of grammar knowledge such as (womans instead of women) and (citys instead of cities). Al-Sobhi, Rashid, Abdullah, & Darmi (2017) found 2,873 spelling errors from the spelling test of 70 male students at the Saudi School in Malaysia. Students mostly committed the spelling errors of substitution, followed by omission, insertion and transposition, consecutively. Anomalous nature of English spelling, lack of awareness of spelling rules and L1 interference were the main causes of the spelling errors. Mahanta (2020) identified nine types of spelling errors committed by 25 high school students. Substitution of letters ranked the highest, followed by omission of letters; single letters instead of double letters; interchange of two adjacent letters; addition of letters; error involving an apostrophe; double letters instead of single letter; words having silent letter; and joining of words, respectively.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate English spelling writings of Thai university students during the first academic term in 2021.
2. To classify spelling errors in English writings of Thai university students during the first academic term in 2021.
3. To analyze causes of spelling errors in English writings of Thai university students during the first academic term in 2021.

Research Methodology

Population and Participants

The population included seventy Thai students whom the researcher taught in the English course during the first academic term in 2021. All these students were purposively chosen as research participants.

To collect data, the participants had to take all six vocabulary tests. At the end, 67 students completed all the tests. Two withdrew the course while one missed the test. Thus, the English spelling writings of these 67 students were collected for the study.

Data Collection

Certain steps were followed in collecting data for the study.

1. Writing tests of spellings were prepared. The English course contained lessons of six units from the openMind Level 2 (Bowen, Rogers, Taylore-Knowles, and Taylore-Knowles, 2014). In each unit, the vocabulary part contained about 15–20 words in which 10 words (at least 50 percent) were randomly chosen for a writing test. There were altogether six spelling writing tests of sixty different words. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all the spelling writing tests were prepared online with the Google forms. See a list of sixty target words in Table 1.

Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5	Unit 6
Bottle	Ask out	Field	Awful	Ceramic	Admire
Creamy	Blind	Foggy	Crowded	Contact	Adventure
Crunchy	Bored	Forest	Decorate	Cotton	Argue
Flour	Break	Hill	Empty	Install	Creativity
Greasy	Divorced	Island	Gift	Log	Experience
Juicy	Engaged	Lake	Great	Metal	Independent
Ketchup	Sick	Ocean	Guest	Nylon	Relationship
Salty	Thirsty	Rainy	Lively	Press	Status
Sour	Tired	Stormy	Relaxed	Rubber	Through
Spicy	Worried	Sunny	Snack	Website	Value

Table 1: A List of 60 Target Words from the openMind Level 2
(Source: Bowen, Rogers, Taylore-Knowles, & Taylore-Knowles (2014))

2. The spelling writing tests were conducted online after learning of each unit was completed. For each test, students had fifteen minutes to write out ten words in which their meanings or contexts were provided.

3. Data of all six vocabulary tests were kept in the online drive. There were altogether 4,020 spelling words collected from 67 participants of the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved these steps.

1. Collected data of 4,020 written spelling words were investigated and divided into three groups: words with correct spellings; word with incorrect spellings; and words with spellings of others.

2. Words with incorrect spellings and spellings of others were examined and classified into errors of insertion, omission, substitution, transposition, grapheme-substitution, or others based on the NFER's classification (Cook & Singleton, 2014, p. 83).

3. Cook and Singleton's (2014, pp. 75–86) proposition was adopted in the study to analyze causes of spelling errors such as pronunciation, syllable structure, spelling rules and letter/sound correspondences.

4. Analyzed data were checked for reliability by English experts in another university before the results of the study were reported using quantitative and qualitative methods.

Results and Discussion

1. Words with Correct Spellings, Incorrect Spellings and Spellings of Others

Of the total 4,020 written English words, the results revealed 3,285 words (81.7%) with correct spellings and 360 words (9.0%) with incorrect spellings. The rest of 375 words (9.3%) contained spellings of others.

Of the 60 target words, all 67 students (100.0%) were found to exactly write out two words: "sour" and "break". Almost all students (98.5%) perfectly wrote out five words: "adventure", "cotton", "lively", "status" and "sunny". On the contrary, students most frequently misspelled three words: "argue", "value" and "relationship" (82.1%, 77.6% and 76.1% respectively).

There were 49 target words found with spellings of others. Most students (71.6%) alternated “press” with ‘click’, ‘push’, ‘type’, ‘put’, ‘hold’, ‘enter’, ‘trap’ and ‘dial’. One student (1.5%) substituted other words for “cotton”, “creativity”, “crunchy”, “divorced”, “empty”, “forest”, “gift”, “guest”, “juicy”, “lively”, “relationship”, “rubber”, “sick”, “spicy”, “sunny” and “tired”.

2. Types of Spelling Errors

According to Figure 1, spelling errors of others (44.6%) ranked the highest, followed by omission (16.3%), insertion (13.0%), substitution (12.0%), grapheme substitution (8.7%) and transposition (5.4%), consecutively.

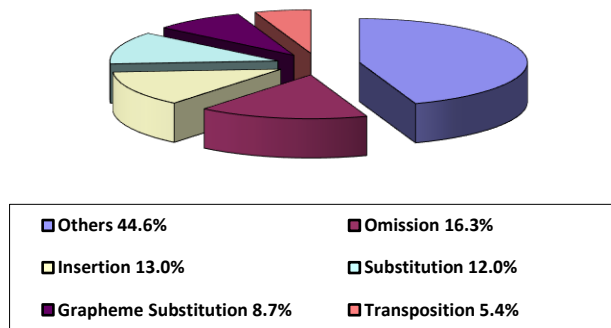


Figure 1: Percentage of the Types of Spelling Errors

2.1. Errors of Others

The spelling errors of others could be divided into four groups.

1. Reduction of syllables such as

- ‘fog’ instead of “foggy”
- ‘sacks’ instead of “snacks”
- ‘stall’ instead of “install”
- ‘web’ instead of “website”

2. Other forms of words, for example,

- ‘argument’ instead of “argue”
- ‘boring’ instead of “bored”
- ‘creative’ instead of “creativity”
- ‘decorated’ instead of “decorate”
- ‘engagement’ instead of “engaged”
- ‘fog’ instead of “foggy”

3. Other words with correct spellings and meanings, for instance,
- ‘jar’ and ‘can’ instead of “bottle”
 - ‘crispy’ instead of “crunchy”
 - ‘flied’ instead of “field”
 - ‘powder’ instead of “flour”
 - ‘fat’ and ‘oily’ instead of “greasy”
 - ‘tomato sauce’ instead of “ketchup”
 - ‘sea’ instead of “ocean”
 - ‘nervous’ instead of “worried”
4. Other words with incorrect spellings and no meanings such as
- ‘devorce’ instead of “divorced”
 - ‘gurasgay’ instead of “greasy”
 - ‘rubbon’ instead of “rubber”
 - ‘sicking’ instead of “sick”

2.2. Errors of Omission

The following samples showed the errors of omission of consonants (d, n, r, s and y) on the left and the errors of omission of vowels (e, i and u) on the right.

- ‘blin’ in “blind”
- ‘relaxd’ in “relaxed”
- ‘reliaoship’ in “relationship”
- ‘creativity’ in “creativity”
- ‘stomy’ and ‘storm’ in “stormy”
- ‘throg’ in “through”
- ‘intall’ in “install”
- ‘rain’ in “rainy”

2.3. Errors of Insertion

The samples on the left revealed the errors of insertion of consonants (n and r) while those on the right were added with vowels (a, e, i and o).

- ‘rainny’ in “rainy”
- ‘satatus’ in “status”
- ‘forrest’ in “forest”
- ‘guste’ in “guest”
- ‘bilind’ in “blind”
- ‘divorcoed’ in “divorced”

2.4. Errors of Substitution

The sample words on the left had the errors of substitution of consonants (b, c, n, t and y). The vowels (a, e, i and o) in the words on the right were replaced with others.

- 'wedsite' in "website"
- 'relex' and 'relexed' in "relaxed"
- 'spisy' in "spicy"
- 'advanture' in "adventure"
- 'bliud' in "blind"
- 'divorced' in "divorced"
- 'webside' in "website"
- 'divirced' in "divorced"
- 'juice' in "juicy"

2.5. Errors of Grapheme Substitution

These sample words contained the errors of grapheme substitution due to wrong spelling correspondences.

- 'bottol' instead of "bottle"
- 'crunchchy' instead of "crunchy"
- 'emthy' instead of "empty"
- 'kidchup' instead of "ketchup"
- 'lage' instead of "lake"

2.6. Errors of Transposition

The spelling errors of transposition could be arranged into three groups.

1. Transposition resulting to change in a word's meaning

- 'tried' instead of "tired"

2. Transposition resulting to no change in a word's meaning

- "agrument" instead of "argument"

3. Transposition resulting to no meaning of a word

- 'feild' instead of "field"
- 'thristy' instead of "thirsty"
- 'tierd' instead of "tired"
- 'stromy' instead of "stormy"

3. Causes of Spelling Errors

According to Figure 2, pronunciation (36.5%) was the most frequent cause of spelling errors, followed by spelling rules (28.4%); letter/sound correspondences (24.3%); and syllable structure (10.8%), respectively.

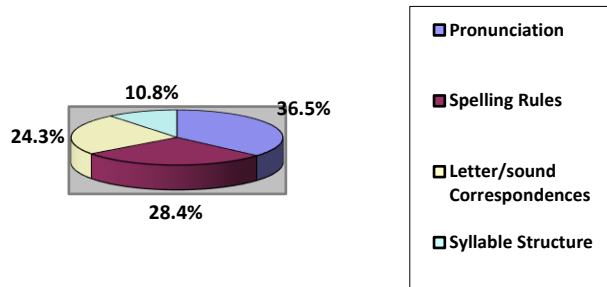


Figure 2: Percentage of Causes of Spelling Errors

3.1. Pronunciation

Differences in pronunciation of sounds could result to spelling errors of the following sample words.

- 'agruement' instead of "argument"
- 'devoid' instead of "divorced"
- 'guste' instead of "guest"
- 'iland' instead of "island"
- 'relexed', 'relex' instead of "relaxed"
- 'stomy', 'stromy' instead of "stormy"
- 'tried', 'tied' instead of "tired"
- 'valve' instead of "value"

3.2. Spelling Rules

Students' inadequate knowledge of spelling rules related to English grammar and content words caused the following samples of spelling errors.

- 'argument' instead of "argue" (a noun instead of a verb)
- 'arguement' instead of "argue" (no deletion of 'e' before adding 'ment')
- 'boried' instead of "bored" (not 'borry' but "bore")
- 'creative', 'create' instead of "creativity" (an adjective and a verb instead of a noun)
- 'decorated' instead of "decorate" (a past form instead of a present form)
- 'forrest' instead of "forest" (an extra consonant 'r')
- 'gifts' instead of "gift" (a plural form instead of a singular form)
- 'guest' instead of "guests" (a singular form instead of a plural form)
- 'rain' instead of "rainy" (a noun or a verb instead of an adjective)
- 'relax' instead of "relaxed" (a verb instead of an adjective)

3.3. Letter/sound Correspondences

The following samples had spelling errors due to usage of wrong English letter/sound correspondences.

- ‘advanture’ instead of “adventure” (between ‘a’ and ‘e’)
- ‘bottol’ instead of “bottle” (between ‘ol’ and ‘tle’)
- ‘cunchchy’ instead of “crunchy” (silent ‘r’ and double consonants ‘ch’)
- ‘devorced’, instead of “divorced” (between ‘e’ and ‘i’)
- ‘emthy’ instead of “empty” (silent ‘p’ and between ‘th’ and ‘t’)
- ‘feild’ instead of “field” (between ‘ei’ and ‘ie’)
- ‘lage’ instead of “lake” (between ‘g’ and ‘k’)
- ‘matal’ instead of “metal” (between ‘a’ and ‘e’)
- ‘soly’ instead of “salty” (between ‘o’ and ‘a’)
- ‘spisy’ instead of “spicy” (between ‘s’ and ‘c’)

3.4. Syllable Structure

The samples of spelling errors due to wrong syllable structures were as follows.

- ‘bilind’ instead of “blind” (2 syllables instead of 1 syllable)
- ‘creativity’ instead of “creativity” (4 syllables instead of 5 syllables)
- ‘gurasgay’ instead of “greasy” (3 syllables instead of 2 syllables)
- ‘intall’ instead of “install” (2 syllables instead of 3 syllables)

Discussion

In the study, students committed spelling errors of using wrong forms of words, wrong words with no meanings and wrong letter/sound correspondences. This could be explained by referring to Harmer (2007, pp. 60–62), including Rasouli and Jafari (2016), in which a language is consisted of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Without knowledge of these elements, a person can make errors in spelling and writing out words. Meanwhile, Nation (as cited in Schmitt, 2000, p. 5), as well as Rasouli and Jafari (2016), noted that to be masterly in words, a person must have different types of word knowledge such as meanings, written forms, spoken forms, grammar and collocations.

As mentioned in Alqahtani (2015), scholars such as Rivers and Nunan; Laufer and Nation; Maximo; Read; Schmitt; Gu; Marion; and Nation agreed that a language learner must have adequate vocabulary knowledge to successfully communicate in spoken and written texts. Nation (as cited in Alqahtani, 2015 and Susanto, 2017) denoted necessity and relation between language practices and vocabulary knowledge. The knowledge of vocabulary enables one to use a language; the use of a language increases one's vocabulary knowledge. Having sufficient knowledge of vocabulary and good spelling skills, a person is likely to write well and make fewer spelling errors. The results of this study were conclusive in which students committed a few spelling errors. This was on the grounds that in learning vocabulary, students learned to pronounce words and do exercises which allowed them to spell and write out the words. These language practices helped students to employ knowledge of vocabulary in writing resulting in fewer spelling errors committed.

In the study, students were revealed to most frequently commit spelling errors of others. They tended to write new words having wrong spellings and no meanings such as 'devorce' instead of "divorced"; 'fram' instead of "field"; and 'gurasgay' instead of "greasy". This was consistent with the study of Cook (as cited in Cook, 2004) in which English spelling errors of L2 adults, L1 adults and L1 children were compared. The L2 adults were found to commit errors of others which involved an attempt to produce new words such as 'boldiest' and 'relegone' more than the L1 adults and L1 children.

The study results showed students' spelling errors concerning functions and forms of nouns, verbs and adjectives such as 'snack' instead of "snacks"; 'create' instead of "creativity"; and 'fog' instead of "foggy". This was conforming to the study of Liu (2015) in which Chinese students also committed grammatically misspelled errors of singular and plural forms of nouns, as well as errors in word forms such as nouns, verbs and adjectives.

Of the four types, spelling errors of omission were the most frequent, followed by insertion, substitution and transposition, respectively. The results of this study were congruent to the studies of Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, & Gaudel (2015); Albalawi (2016); and Fitria (2020) which found the largest numbers of omission errors and the smallest

numbers of transposition errors. On the contrary, Al-Sobhi, Rashid, Abdullah, & Darmi (2017), as well as Mahanta (2020), indicated that students most frequently committed errors of transposition.

In the study, students' spelling errors were most frequently caused by pronunciation, followed by spelling rules; letter/sound correspondences; and syllable structure, respectively. These were corresponding to Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, & Gaudel (2015) and Liu (2015) in which the main cause of spelling errors involved wrong utterance and spelling of words; unawareness of rule restrictions and incomplete rule application; false analogy; and overgeneralization. In addition, Al-Sobhi, Rashid, Abdullah, & Darmi (2017) noted that students' spelling errors were mostly caused by deviant English spelling systems, lack of spelling rules knowledge and interference from a native language. The deviant English spelling systems included wrong homophones; silent letters; double consonants; and wrong correspondences of English phonemes and graphemes. The lack of spelling rules knowledge involved the inflectional suffixes -es, -ed, -ing and the incorrect insertion of -es inflectional suffix. The interference from a native language included substitution of native graphemes to English graphemes. Altamimi and Rashid (2019) also noted unawareness of spelling techniques and rules as the main cause of spelling errors.

Conclusion

In the study, 4,020 spelling words written by 67 students were investigated for types and causes of spelling errors. The results showed the largest numbers of spelling errors of others, followed by omission, insertion, substitution, grapheme substitution and transposition, consecutively. Pronunciation was the primary cause of the students' spelling errors, followed by spelling rules; letter/sound correspondences; and syllable structure, respectively. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand, the study was conducted online with the researcher's students during the first academic term in 2021 at Kasetsart University, Sri-racha Campus.

Suggestions

Language teachers are urged that when teaching vocabulary, students should be given practices on spelling and writing out words, as well as doing language practices such as writing on using different forms and functions of words. Having good spelling and writing skills, students will likely commit fewer spelling errors.

The findings have verified that in teaching English, teachers must focus on both vocabulary and grammar knowledge. With simultaneous learning of forms, spellings, meanings and functions of words, students will be able to employ the words both in written and spoken forms.

Students committed spelling errors caused most frequently by pronunciation. Since English alphabets do not correspond directly to 44 phonemes, one letter can correspond to many sounds, and one sound corresponds to many letters. Meanwhile, two letters can correspond to a single phoneme while some letters are “silent” and do not have a direct sound correspondence. Teachers are suggested to review students on English letters and sounds before teaching them how words are pronounced and spelled, especially words with intricate spellings and sounds.

This study has underscored important roles of English lecturers. Students should be reinforced to learn and have more practices on English sounds and pronunciation, as well as spelling rules and patterns of words. Students must also be encouraged to practice more writing. With adequate vocabulary knowledge and good spelling skills, students will write better and commit fewer spelling errors.

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