

Mother Tongue Transfer: A Case Study of Errors in English Sentence Writing of Undergraduate Students

การถ่ายโอนภาษาแม่ กรณีศึกษาข้อผิดพลาดในการเขียนประโยคภาษาอังกฤษ ของนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรี

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the typical types of grammatical errors frequently made by Thai undergraduate EFL learners when they write their English sentences. The researchers employed the translation test as their instrument to elicit the answer to the research question. In the data collection, the subjects were assigned to take the translation test and then Thai to English sentence translation was analyzed to reveal the total number of errors that frequently occurred in each error type. The study revealed that the most frequent and salient grammatical errors found in the students' translation test were the suffix omission, especially at the end of the verb of the third person singular noun or pronoun subject, in plurality and, in the past tense verb. The data showed that Thai linguistic features caused by mother tongue transfer influenced the English sentence writing of Thai undergraduate EFL learners. For future research, larger sample size was recommended to be used to enhance the degree of credibility. Besides, future research should be conducted with non-English majored Thai EFL learners who have low English proficiency to reaffirm that they are likely to use their native language to produce their English writing. Interestingly, lexical and syntactic errors are suggested to be conducted because these two factors can be the evidence why the EFL learners do not perform well in their writing.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Error Analysis (EA), Mother Tongue Transfer

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อตรวจสอบข้อผิดพลาดทางไวยากรณ์ประเภทต่าง ๆ ที่มักเกิดขึ้นกับนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรีของไทยเมื่อนักศึกษาเขียนประโยคภาษาอังกฤษ โดยศึกษาลักษณะทางภาษาไทยที่ถูกถ่ายทอดไปยังนักศึกษาที่ศึกษาภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศเมื่อเขียนประโยคภาษาอังกฤษ นักวิจัยใช้แบบทดสอบการแปลเป็นเครื่องมือ

มือในการหาคำตอบสำหรับคำถามการวิจัย จากนั้นจึงวิเคราะห์การแปลประโยคภาษาไทยเป็นอังกฤษเพื่อแสดงให้เห็นถึงจำนวนข้อผิดพลาดทั้งหมดที่มักเกิดขึ้นในข้อผิดพลาดแต่ละประเภท การศึกษาพบว่าข้อผิดพลาดทางไวยากรณ์ที่พบบ่อยที่สุดในการทดสอบการแปลของนักศึกษาคือการละเว้นคำต่อท้ายของคำกริยาที่มีประธานเป็นคำนามเอกพจน์หรือคำสรรพนามเอกพจน์บุรุษที่สาม ในทำนองที่ป็นรูปพหูพจน์ และในทำนองของคำกริยาที่อยู่ในรูปอดีตกาล ลักษณะทางภาษาไทยที่เกิดจากการถ่ายทอดภาษาแม่มีอิทธิพลต่อการเขียนประโยคภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษา ผู้วิจัยเสนอให้มีการศึกษาในกลุ่มตัวอย่างที่ใหญ่ขึ้นสำหรับการวิจัยในอนาคต เพื่อเพิ่มระดับความน่าเชื่อถือของงานวิจัย นอกจากนี้การวิจัยในอนาคตควรศึกษากับผู้เรียนระดับปริญญาตรีชาวไทยที่ไม่ได้เรียนวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษและมีความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษต่ำเพื่อยืนยันว่าพวกเขามีแนวโน้มที่จะใช้ภาษาแม่ของตนในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ ประการสุดท้ายการวิจัยในอนาคตควรจะมีการศึกษาข้อผิดพลาดเกี่ยวกับคำศัพท์และโครงสร้างทางไวยากรณ์เนื่องจากปัจจัยทั้งสองนี้สามารถเป็นหลักฐานเพิ่มเติมได้ว่าเหตุใดผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศจึงเขียนภาษาอังกฤษได้ไม่ดี

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะที่เป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ, การวิเคราะห์ข้อผิดพลาด, การถ่ายโอนภาษาแม่



Introduction

No one denies that English is one of the international languages that have been widely used all over the world. Srinivas (2019) stated that to succeed in this fast-paced and highly advanced era, English seems to be an effective means of communication with other people worldwide. It is the language of most information resources, handbooks, manuals, labels and so on. It is also the prime language of the international conference. Besides, many textbooks are written in English, which becomes essential, especially in education. As a result, learners study English in schools and universities in almost every country. Learners having a high proficiency in English seem to get a better chance of social upper mobility and opportunities in seeking further knowledge, to keep up with modern technology and progress in their education and specialized careers.

According to Quin (2017), university English learners face vocabulary limitation, lack of systematic grammar, and misuse of knowledge. He researched three aspects – lexis, syntax and discourse applying three methods:

the writing test, the questionnaire and the interview. His salient findings showed that native language transfer varied with different stages of writing influence the number of errors learners make in lexis, syntax and discourse-level. Most learners fail to employ a proper sentence pattern to express their meaning because of their lack of knowledge of the sentence pattern and the word in their learning process. Learners not having English as their mother tongue have to learn English as their second or foreign language (L2). The acquisition of English as a second or foreign language; however, is disparate from the mother tongue acquisition. Also, the second language is always studied after most learners can communicate fluently in the first language. Consequently, it is unavoidable for L2 learners to apply their mother tongue rules to learn L2. “The transfer of mother tongue has become an indisputable fact when it comes to language learning” (Zhao, 2019, p. 940). As a matter of fact, language transfer from L1 to L2 naturally occurs in productive skills. Some errors of mother tongue transfer could therefore

be found in both writing and speaking skills. It is one of the most critical factors that contribute to the unsuccessful acquisition of L2.

Oral and written language play an equal role in international communication, depending on the needs and settings. It is obviously seen that English is widely accepted as the main international language, so integrated skills of English learning, speaking and writing have been emphasized so far. It cannot be denied that one of the skills that are important for communication is writing. However, a lot of Thai EFL learners still have difficulty in writing although they have been studying English from kindergarten 1 to grade 12 or university level.

There have been several studies in error analysis investigating types of errors committed by learners from different L1 backgrounds in the English acquisition as a second or foreign language. It has always been assumed that in a second language learning situation, learners rely extensively on their native language (Gass and Selinker, 2001). If the structures of the two languages are distinctly different, then one could expect a relatively high frequency of errors to occur in L2. This phenomenon indicates an influence of L1 on L2 (Ellis, 1997). When the learners

experience gaps in their L2 syntactic structures, they adjust the form of their L2 written responses by using syntactic items which are part of their L1 (Bhela, 1999). For Thailand, the majority of Thai EFL learners studying English as a foreign language have problems in all skills particularly writing. However, this study only investigated the Thai linguistic feature contributes to the errors in the writing of Thai undergraduate EFL learners. The researchers did not study the errors caused by mother tongue transfer in lexis, syntax, and

discourse because of the time limit and lack of coresearchers having expertise in those three mentioned aspects.

Objective

This study is to investigate what Thai linguistic features contribute to the errors in the writing of Thai undergraduate EFL learners in these categories, inflectional suffix omission, wrong tenses, verb “to be” omission, article omission, word-for-word translation, wrong catenative structure, and the use of have/has instead of there is/are. The results of this study can serve as a guideline for instructors of English to better understand the difficulties encountered by their learners in English L2 writing, provide suggestions and recommendations of suited teaching approaches and design teaching materials to improve the learners’ writing competence. This study emphasizes on the grammatical errors in the sentences translated by Thai undergraduate EFL learners by examining grammatical errors stemming from mother tongue transfer.

Literature review

A sign of improving language competence in second language learning is committing errors. There have been various studies about error analysis in Second Language Acquisition research. Corder (1981) characterized errors and mistakes as different. He explained that errors occur because learners change their language production from rules of performance. There are occurrences that indicate the sign of the learners’ imperfect or limited knowledge of the target language. Besides, not only do errors represent a lack of competence and affect the language learning process, but they also show learners’ difficulty in correcting

them. On the other hand, mistakes are an unsystematic phenomenon of deviant forms, usually caused by memory lapses, physical states and psychological learning. Native speakers or learners are commonly aware of their mistakes and can correct them without much difficulty. However, errors and mistakes are two words implying a wrongful action often done unintentionally. Although used in different contexts, they can sometimes be used interchangeably as they both refer to the same concept. The word “error” is used in formal language, but the word “mistake” is used in everyday utterances. “Error” is mostly used in formal situations and in written language with regards to technical issues. In contrast, the term “mistake” is used more often in spoken English. In the same way, Gass and Selinker (1984), claimed that errors provide evidence of the learners’ level in the target language, so contrastive analysis (CA) and error analysis appeared to explain learners’ errors.

CA is particularly important for the interlanguage study where is interested in the emergence of the languages rather than in the finished product. Not only is CA beneficial to translation, but it also assists in error prediction. The more differences the two languages of a learner have, the more errors he makes. Also, CA is helpful to explain the word-for-word translation errors made by a learner. Further, CA helps explain the error caused by mother tongue transfer (L1 transfer), i.e. interlingual errors. The mother tongue is the native language that will become a child’s first language. However, it is not always straightforward that the mother may provide bilingual or multilingual input for the child. It may be that the “mother” herself is bilingual, or some other adults, who use more than one language, to speak to the child to share

the mother’s role. Briefly, mother tongue can be more than one language, but most of them are the first language of a child. Additionally, Pengpanich (2019) explained that CA helps find the similarities of languages (Language Universals). According to Chakon (2017), CA supports the teaching of writing and reading.

Because of the limitation of contrastive analysis, error analysis interested researchers in second language acquisition. Practically, errors do not always occur in the different structures between the native language and target language, but many of them occur in the same or similar patterns of the two languages. Namely, contrastive analysis concerns about only the learners’ native language and the target language, but error analysis can provide a methodology for the study to examine the errors in learners’ language which is the same as pathological anatomy (Quin, 2017).

Pengpanich (2019) stated that many linguists investigated causes of errors, especially mother tongue transfer, and summarizes that those causes of error are language transfer, fossilization and word-for-word translation. For language transfer, this cause comes from the Transfer Theory of a well-known psychologist, Skinner, who states that it is the habits that govern a learner’s speaking. When an individual learns a new language, the existing knowledge (L1) will inevitably interfere with the second language production. Apart from language transfer, it is believed that L2 learners, unlike L1 learners, generally do not reach the same level of competence as native speaker; their “final state” grammar is not the target-language grammar. Thus, these rules and items “fossilize”. According to Selinker (1974), the fossilizable structure of L1 will emerge exceptionally when the L2 learner is excited or nervous. However, for some learners, the fossilization of

L1 might occur even when the learner is in his normal condition. The other one is a word-for-word translation. When a language learner struggles to communicate something, he does not know how to express; it is likely that he employs his mother tongue to communicate. Another reason to make him automatically use L1 is that the learner might concentrate on what he is talking about, or the content, so much that he unconsciously speaks the second language in the manner of word-for-word translation.

According to Corder (1979), the errors are the failure to utilize a known system correctly: they are unsystematic. Moreover, beginning language learners who do not yet have full command of a language system produces errors. Richards (1974) classified the errors as interlingual errors and intralingual errors. The interlingual error is caused by the transfer of the learner's native or background language. On the other hand, the intralingual error is caused by the transfer within the target language. He further classifies these errors into two categories: performance errors and competence errors. The performance errors are related to certain factors such as fatigue, memory limitation and so on. On the other side, the competence errors are systematic and represent either a transitional stage in the development of grammatical rules or the final stage of the learner's knowledge mistakes or lapses referring to performance errors made by native speakers.

Studying Thai learners' errors in English writing, Pengpanich (2019) conducted studies of error analysis on Thai learners' errors in writing English, high-frequency errors committed by Thai learners are classified into two types: sentence-level and discourse level. The sentence-level errors consist of the misuse of parts of speech, the

"verb to be", comparison, relative clauses, noun clauses, word order, tenses, run-on sentences, "have/has" and "there is (are)." The discourse level errors are mostly related to reference words. Obscure references often cause readers to misunderstand or have wrong ideas from what the writers intend to communicate. According to Chalaysap (2002), the main error categories are as follows:

1. Sentence Level: unintelligible sentences, fragments, sentences with comma splices and two finite-verb simple sentences

2. Clause Level: relative clauses, adverb clauses, and noun clause.

3. Phrase Level: noun phrases, verb phrases and incorrect expressions. Errors in noun phrases were mostly a noun and its determiner. Verb phrases had errors in subject-verb agreement, tenses, wrong verb forms and confusion between active-passive voices.

4. Word Level: errors of articles, word choice, prepositions, references and others.

Most errors were categorized into either intralingual or interlingual or partly intralingual and partly interlingual. Selinker (1972) proposed five categories of errors: language transfer, transfer-of-training, strategies of second-language learning, strategies of second-language communication and overgeneralization of TL linguistic material, as cited in (Cheuytongkarn, 2004). The findings were that language transfer was the significant cause of errors in written English. She emphasized that most errors were caused by the differences between English and Thai structures. Wongsbhindu (2007) stated that most Thai learners committing two main categories of grammatical errors, morphological errors and syntactical errors. Many studies have been conducted on this issue because error analysis

is crucial to foreign language learning. English teachers in Thailand find error analysis a very effective tool to improve their teaching effectiveness and their learners' writing proficiency.

In the aspect of methodology, there have been two schools of thought concerning the investigation of learners' errors. Corder (1981) justified the first school of thought that if we were to achieve a perfect teaching method, errors would never have occurred in the first place. Therefore, the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of our teaching techniques. The philosophy of the second school is that we live in an imperfect world. It cannot be denied that errors will always occur despite our best efforts. Our concern should be focused on techniques for dealing with errors after they have occurred.

Initially, teachers in the language teaching in Thailand tended to follow the concept of the first school. In writing, they were very strict and corrected almost every single error they found. It was not until the communicative approach became widely accepted that teachers' attitude towards errors changed. They now agree that errors are unavoidable, and learners can learn from their errors. If learners are overly corrected, they may become discouraged. As a result, a lack of confidence will possibly obstruct their language learning process and competence.

Although the studies of error analysis reviewed above indicate similar findings on types and causes of errors, they provide good evidence confirming that error analysis is of great popularity and errors are significant problem areas made by Thai students when writing English. The more information about deficiency teachers and learners know, the higher degree of improvement and competence they will attain.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Selinker (1972) proposed that interlanguages are systematic and have normal properties of natural languages. That is to say they are bound by rules in the same way as other languages. In his study in 1972, Selinker suggested that interlanguage is based on three fundamental rules: over-generalization that comes from patterns found in the language being learned; transfer that is from patterns found in the learner's native language and fossilization that is the cease of a learner's language development.

This study investigated transfer, one of the Selinker's interlanguage basic principles, by following five steps in an error analysis of Corder (1974), which consisted of collecting a sample of learner language, identifying errors, describing errors, explaining errors and evaluating errors. According to most EA studies, there are two groups of learners' sources of errors, interlingual and intralingual (Erdogan, 2005; Sabzalipour, 2012). Catalán (1997) claimed that these two groups of error classifications could clarify the processes and strategies which lead to errors. The present study only focuses on the interlingual source of errors which result from the transfer of the learner's native language or mother tongue rules into the target language.

The study covered interlingual errors in seven categories:

1. Inflectional suffix omission
2. Wrong tenses
3. "Verb to be omission"
4. Article omission
5. Word-for-word translation
6. Wrong catenative structure
7. The use of have/has instead of there is/ there are

Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods are employed in this study to examine the relationship between mother transfer and English sentence writing of undergraduate Thai EFL learners.

Population and Sample

The subjects of the study were 38 first-year Thai EFL learners of Eastern Asia University enrolling in English II. There were 19 Thai EFL learners from the School of Liberal Arts majoring in Business English and 19 Thai EFL learners from the School of Aviation majoring in Aviation Management. The subjects did not pass the placement test when they enrolled on this course.

Research Tools

A translation test was used as an instrument in this research. Thai to English sentence translation was analyzed. There were seven categories of errors found in 21 sentences as follows: suffix omission, verb to be omission, article omission, word-for-word translation, wrong catenative structure, use of has/have instead of there is/are, and wrong tenses. The analysis employed three sentences in each category of error.

Data Collection

For the data collection procedures, before Thai EFL learners took the test, they had been taught: simple past, yes/no and wh-question, statements, and short answers with regular and irregular verbs; the past form of the verb to be; there is/there are; one, any and some; a preposition of place; quantifiers; questions; how many and how much; count and non-count nouns; questions for describing people: what...look like,

how old, how tall, how long, and what color; modifiers with participles and prepositions. Thai EFL learners were allowed to spend 1 hour doing the test in their classes one week after the midterm examination. Those two groups of participants did not take the test at the same time owing to different class schedules. The participants were informed that the test was the extra mark for those who failed the midterm exam, but learners who passed; it would be the bonus mark for a better grade, so they tried to do their best.

Statistical Analysis

After verifying the errors in the translation test, the researcher classified the errors in tables and analyzed the data with Microsoft Excel. For the data analysis, the frequency of errors that were caused by mother tongue transfer from each sentence was counted to obtain the total number of errors in each error type. The percentage of each type of errors was reported, and an explanation was given to reveal what Thai linguistic features caused English writing errors.

Result

This paper investigates only the errors in sentences written by undergraduate Thai EFL learners, especially those caused by mother tongue transfer, although some answers may have more than one error. There are seven types of the error caused by mother tongue transfer that causes ungrammatical sentences as follows.

1. Inflectional suffix omission

1.1 The omission of the suffix-s and -es in a plural noun

e.g. I have two car.

The suffix-s is omitted in the word “car” which is a plural noun after the word of quantifier “two”.

It is because we don't put anything in a plural noun in Thai. If we want to show plurality in Thai, we just put the quantity word before a countable noun.

1.2 The omission of the suffix-s and -es in the verb with 3rd person singular pronoun.

e.g. He study English every day.

The suffix-ies is omitted in the verb "study". Learners might not know that in present simple tense when a subject is a third singular person in an affirmative sentence, the suffix-s, -es and -ies is put in the main verb. We don't put anything in the verb following a third singular pronoun subject in Thai.

1.3 The omission of apostrophe-s showing possession

e.g. Tom house is big.

The suffix apostrophe-s is omitted after a proper noun "Tom" because, in Thai, we don't put anything after verb in possessive case of nouns. Instead, we put the word "of", or in Thai, "ของ" after the belonging and before the owner.

2. Errors in verb "to be" omission

e.g. He handsome.

The verb to be "is" is omitted in this sentence. It is because, in Thai, we can use the pattern of the subject plus adjective. We don't have any linking verbs in Thai.

3. Errors in article omission

e.g. I am student.

The article "a" is omitted in this sentence. It is because we don't put any determiner in front of the noun about an occupation in Thai.

4. Errors in using word-for-word translation

e.g. When they don't have work, so they

will don't have money. เมื่อพวกเขาไม่มีงาน ดังนั้น พวกเขาจะไม่มีเงิน

This sentence is translated by word-for word-translation from Thai to English.

5. Errors in using wrong catenative structure

e.g. Jim doesn't want to go to school.

This learner might not know that the verb "want" must be followed by an infinitive

with "to" because we can use the verb after verb in Thai, but we cannot do so with some certain English verbs.

6. The use of has/have instead of there is/there are

e.g. Have many tables in this room.

This learner begins his/her sentence with the word "have" instead of "there are".

In Thai, we can use the verb "มี" in a sentence without subject, but we cannot do so in English Language.

7. The errors of wrong verb tense

e.g. I go to school yesterday.

The learner might not know that he/she has to change the base form of the verb

(v1) to past tense verb (v2) in the simple past tense because, in Thai, we don't change the pattern of the verb when the time of the action changes. We just put adverbs of time in the sentence to indicate the tense.

Summary of errors

From the 798 sentences written by undergraduate Thai EFL Learners, a total of 138 errors was noticed. The distribution of the causes of errors is shown in the table.

Table 1*The Distribution of the Causes of Errors Made by Undergraduate Thai EFL learners*

Types of errors	No. of errors found	Percentage
Suffix omission in a plural noun	22	15.94
Suffix omission in the verb with a 3rd person singular pronoun	35	25.36
The omission of apostrophe-s showing possession	12	8.69
Verb “to be” omission	11	7.97
“Article” omission	16	11.59
Types of errors	No. of errors found	Percentage
Word-for-word translation	4	2.9
Wrong catenative structure	11	7.97
The Use of “have/has” instead of “there is/are”	14	10.15
The error of wrong verb tense	13	9.43
Total	138	100

From the table, there are 138 errors found in the whole 798 sentences of undergraduate Thai EFL learners. We can notice that the errors caused by omitting suffixes –s or –es in third person singular noun or pronoun have the highest percentage (25.36%), followed by the omission of the suffixes-s or –es that showed plurality (15.94%). Next, mother tongue transfer has an influence on learners to omit the article with the percentage of 11.59%, and the use of “have/has” instead of “there is/are” with the percentage of 10.15%. Moreover, there is also wrong verb tense with the percentage of 9.43%. Besides, there is also the omission of the suffix apostrophe-s

in possession with the percentage of 8.69%. The next two errors are from the use of wrong catenative and the verb to be omission with the percentage of 7.97. The least frequent errors are from the use of word-for-word translation (2.9%).

Discussions

Previous studies (Bennui, 2008; Watcha rapunyawong & Usaha, 2013; Rattanadilok Na Phuket & Othman, 2015) indicate that interlingual interference is one of the sources of errors found in EFL learners’ pieces of writing. This is because the learners always thought in their first language when they produced written English sentences. The findings of this study also agree with the mentioned conclusion.

As stated earlier, the objective of this study is to examine the influence of mother tongue transfer on sentences written by undergraduate Thai EFL learners. The results support the role of language transfer of second language learners as it can be seen from the most frequent error: suffix omission in the verb with a 3rd person singular pronoun and suffix omission in a plural noun. It is because of the differences between English and Thai. Thai language has no suffixes in these structures. For undergraduate Thai EFL

learners, the reason is also the same, that is, the differences between both languages. It is worth mentioning again that the study focuses on the errors caused by mother tongue transfer only. There are many errors caused by other causes like an overgeneralization and fossilization, which is out of the scope of this study. In addition, other sources may lead to serious errors: very limited knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, as well as learners' carelessness. These two sources cannot be underestimated because they appear in the learners' translation test in this study as well. As a result, EFL learners' awareness of the two mentioned sources should be raised to reduce any unexpected errors.

All in all, we can get clues about learners' internal process from their errors. Because of the similarities and differences between the two languages, the learners could find it easy or difficult to understand and acquire the new language system. Learners cannot avoid switching between L1 and L2 while constructing a new language system. As a result, it is teachers' responsibility to provide correct feedback for their

students in their writing assignments, so that they can learn from their mistakes. In shorts, teachers of languages can use error analysis as a tool to teach and students can acquire languages more by using error analysis.

Recommendation

It is recommended that a larger sample size be studied to increase the degree of credibility. Further study should be conducted more systematically; the error analysis should be extrapolated to the extent of an overgeneralization, which is not less important than the error from mother-tongue transfer. The study of other variables such as Academic Achievement Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Thailand; the lexis, syntax and discourse features of the mother tongue that is Thai, should be investigated in the future study. These variables may be factors affecting the writing of the learners as well. Teachers who are teaching English as EFL should concern more about the findings of this study and be ware of the errors which frequently occur in their students' writing.



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