

*Analysis of French Grammatical Errors Using Surface Strategy Taxonomy:
A Case Study of Thai University Students*

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Abstract

This study was aimed to investigate the grammatical errors made by Thai university students and to find out the causes of grammatical errors in French writing. The participants in study were 16 third-year Thai students majoring in French of the Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. The research instrument was the written final exam of an elective course for French major entitled French for Thai Art of Living and Culture of which five open-ended questions were comprised. After conducting the identification, the grammatical errors of the participants were analyzed and classified through the concept of surface strategy taxonomy and the linguistic categories of grammatical errors. The descriptive statistic including frequency and percentage as well as the content analysis were employed in this study. The research findings revealed three significant main points: 1) There were a total of 643 grammatical errors based on surface strategy taxonomy in which the frequency of misformation was the highest at 58.94%, followed by omission 32.19%, addition 7.93%, and the lowest percentage was shown in misordering 0.93%. 2) In terms of linguistic categories, the most apparent errors were found in word forms 22.55%, subsidiary in verb forms 18.35% and articles 16.95%. The error in subjunctive mode was the least likely to be found only 0.62%. 3) The causes of grammatical errors were found to be interlingual interference, English Interference, and intralingual interference.

Keywords: French Grammatical Errors, Surface Strategy Taxonomy, Error Analysis, Thai University Student

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Introduction

Error analysis in foreign language learning is much important as it helps find different cases of learners 'mistakes, limits or problems while learning the target language. The found results were brought into solutions as well as errors' reduction. Besides, language learners' error analysis could contribute to in-depth comprehension on the language learning process. It could be useful for instructors and curriculum conductors who work on the development of teaching media, books, manuals and materials together with the improvement of teaching technics in order to be more responsive to learners' limits, needs and specific characteristics. Nevertheless, it should be noted that foreign language teaching in this modern era does not perceive learners' error as a negative factor but as a common process by nature that every learner has to experience (Sritong, 2015; Saengklaijaroen, 2018).

Error analysis is always raised as a co-point within contrastive analysis in order to derive differences between mother tongue and second language or foreign language of learners and to predict possible errors that could occur (Sritong, 2015: 105). Furthermore, one of the popular used concepts for analyzing and grouping errors is surface strategy taxonomy (Dulay *et al.*, 1982). It is currently brought into application especially among grammatical error studies.

Grammar is served as a key tool to achieve the correct sentence and the efficient communication. Thus, grammar is considered as an interesting issue and is taken into account by scholars aiming to develop the pedagogy of a foreign language. However, during the past decade, there were quite few studies about French grammatical errors of Thai learners. Moreover, among their relevant cases, the other previous studies were mostly related to some grammatical errors for example Srisawangsap (2017) investigated errors in French adjective use of the second-year university students while the other study of Charoensit (2019) analyzed errors of French grammatical structures on "modes et temps" among first year university students. Hence, it could be concluded that French grammatical errors study regarding Thai learners still reveal a knowledge gap in research. This study aimed therefore to analyze French grammatical errors under the concept of surface strategy taxonomy in the context of Thai university students learning French as a foreign language. This analysis covers every main category of grammar. In addition, causes of errors including pedagogical implications were also proposed at the end of this study.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify and classify grammatical errors made by Thai university students in French writing.
2. To find out the causes of grammatical errors in French writing.

Theoretical Background

Error Analysis (EA)

Error in linguistic means the use of a language that its native speakers consider as a mistake and incomplete knowledge (Richards and Schmidt, 2002) while Waelateh *et al.* (2019) concludes "EA is an operation in which the errors made by someone in speech or in writing are detected, recorded and interpreted and information on the specific difficulties that someone has in speech or writing English sentences." Richards and Schmidt (2002) divided

errors into 2 types: 1) Interlingual Error which means the errors transferred from learners' mother-tongue such as those of grammar, vocabulary or pragmatics, and 2) Intralingual Error which means the errors caused by ignorance of target language's rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false concepts hypothesized. In part of Tongwanchai (2015), he indicated his objectives of errors analysis comprised of 1) to find out how good is learners' language knowledge 2) to find out what ways learners employ to learn such language and 3) to collect data on significant difficulties in language learning that could contribute to language teaching as well as teaching media preparation.

Surface Strategy Taxonomy

James (1998) conceived the definition of "taxonomy" as a science that regards categorization. This term must possess certain constitutive criteria. Within language error analysis, there are many types of error taxonomy. However, surface strategy taxonomy (Dulay *et al.*, 1982; Sritong, 2015) is mostly used as a concept to apply in study.

Surface strategy taxonomy focuses on the study of the form distortion that are divided into four following sorts:

1. Omission is an absence of an item that makes a sentence incomplete and causes a problem on the comprehension of such sentence. Mostly, learners frequent such mistake in grammatical morphemes more than in content morphemes that express the meaning for instance the omission of article, verb to be or -ing form after the verb that makes the sentence grammatically wrong.
2. Addition is a presence of an unnecessary item in a sentence. Such case is divided into three kinds: 1) double marking for example "We didn't went there." 2) regularization such as the use of past form of the verb "eat" in "eated" and 3) simple addition such as general misspelling cases not linked to those of double marking or regularization.
3. Misformation is the error that occurs by the use of wrong form of the morpheme or structure. It is comprised of three kinds: 1) regularization errors such as "himself" malformed into "hisself" and "children" into "childs" 2) archi-forms that happens in the selection of subject pronoun for example, "Give me that. Me hungry." 3) alternating forms that is caused between learners' vocabulary knowledge and their grammatical developing process. This leads into confusion during the use of the language such as the use of "they" instead of "it", "he" instead of "she" or the misconception of part of speech like between "her" and "she".
4. Misordering is the incorrect placement of a morpheme or group of morphemes for example, "He is all the time late." "All the time" is placed in the wrong position. Another example, "What Daddy is doing?" there is a misordering between "Daddy" and "is".

As this taxonomy presents clear criteria, the researcher could study errors and categorized them following the aimed target.

Methodology

Target Group

Using purposive sampling, the target group of this study was 16 third year students majoring French in the Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University, Thailand and enrolled in French for Thai Art of Living and Culture course during the 2nd semester of the academic year 2020. This group of students had acquired experience in French language study for 5 years: 3 years

in high school and 2 years in university. Besides, they had accomplished at least four courses of French grammar study at the university level.

Research Instrument

The used instrument for data collecting of this investigation is the final exam subject test of French for Thai Art of Living and Culture course, which includes five questions with the allotted time of 1.30 hours. The use of dictionary was not allowed during the exam.

Data Collecting and Analysis

The researcher collected the data from his own 16 course final exams that were corrected by researcher team. All found errors were sorted by four surface taxonomy criteria: 1) omission 2) addition 3) misformation and 4) misordering. Furthermore, the categorized errors were then analyzed and discussed according to nine linguistic categories of grammatical errors (Sritong, 2015) as follows: 1) verb forms 2) word forms 3) preposition 4) articles 5) agreement of modifiers of nouns 6) sentence fragment 7) subjunctive mode 8) subject-verb agreement and 9) word order. The analysis was conducted by using descriptive statistic including frequency and percentage. Content analysis was also employed.

Results and Discussion

According to 16 subject tests, the study result following surface taxonomy found in total 643 grammatical errors. Those of misformation were revealed 58.94% as the most. Its subsidiary was orderly shown by 32.19% of omission, 7.93% of addition and 0.93% of misordering. Considering among grammatical categories, the errors in word forms occurred the most as rated in 22.55% while verb forms showed 18.35% and articles 16.95%. The least was shown 0.62% in subjunctive mode (see Table 1). Moreover, by cross analysis, the errors associated with word forms occurred the most in the categories of omission, addition and misformation whereas misordering co-appeared only with word order.

Types of errors	Omission	Addition	Misformation	Misordering	Total	Percentage
Verb forms	26	10	82	0	118	18.35
Word forms	40	15	90	0	145	22.55
Prepositions	39	7	33	0	79	12.29
Articles	39	5	65	0	109	16.95
Agreement of modifiers of nouns	33	7	57	0	97	15.09
Sentence fragment	26	5	11	0	42	6.53
Subjunctive mode	0	0	4	0	4	0.62
Subject-verb agreement	4	1	37	0	42	6.53
Word order	0	1	0	6	7	1.09
Total	207	51	379	6	643	
Percentage	32.19	7.93	58.94	0.93		100.00

Table 1: Frequency of Grammatical Errors Classified by Surface Taxonomy and Grammatical Categories

This following part presents examples of errors for each category.

1. Misformation

Example 1: « *Le brahmane invite le génie protecteur à la maisonnette aux esprits qui faire face à l'est.* » This sentence shows misformation at the verb « faire » that is not conjugated following the noun or the subject in front of it. According to French grammar, the first verb must be conjugated in harmony with subject. This error corresponds to verb forms in grammatical categorization. The correct sentence should be « *Le brahmane invite le génie protecteur à la maisonnette aux esprits qui fait face à l'est.* »

Example 2: « *Le premier fois de Wai, c'est pour montrer le respect au Bouddha.* » This sentence possesses an error of structure at « le premier fois » as the use of the words' gender does not correspond to its modified noun. In French, a noun has its gender and its modifiers such as article and adjective must be formed in accordance with its. This error relates to articles and agreement of modifiers of nouns. Thus, the correct sentence should be « *La première fois de Wai, c'est pour montrer le respect au Bouddha.* »

2. Omission

Example 3: « *Normalement, on peut trouver le Nam Prik est la sauce brune.* » This sentence still lacks of a relative pronoun, which is the subject of the subordinate clause and modifies the word « Nam Prik ». Following French grammatical rule, the word « qui » must be used to complete the missing part. This error relates to agreement of modifiers of nouns. Thus, the correct sentence should be « *Normalement, on peut trouver le Nam Prik qui est la sauce brune.* »

Example 4: « *Le Khon est la danse masquée qui est origine indienne.* » This sentence is classified in the omission group as there is an absence of the preposition « de » in front of the word « origine ». In French, it is the expression « être d'origine + adjective of nationality ». This error is linked to the use of prepositions. Thus, the correct sentence should be « *Le Khon est la danse masquée qui est d'origine indienne.* »

3. Addition

Example 5: « *La croyances de Krathong est tenue pour que les mondes se font pardonner par la déesse de l'eau.* » In this sentence, three errors are found regarding addition and misformation. The first one is the word « croyances » with an unnecessary additional « s ». As it is preceded by the definite article « la », which is singular and its verb is conjugated in singular form, this noun does not need « s » that is a sign of plural. The word « les mondes » that signifies « people » is usually used in singular form. Thus, its article should be « le » and there is no need to put « s » at the relevant noun. These two errors are linked to noun forms in grammatical categories. The last point regards misformation. The word « pour que » must be followed by subjunctive mode. Hence, the conjugated verb « font » must be « fasse » that is also singular instead. The correct sentence should be « *La croyance de Krathong est tenue pour que le monde se fasse pardonner par la déesse de l'eau.* »

Example 6: « *La bougie et les bâtons d'encens dans les Krathongs ne sont pas éteintes.* » This sentence has its error at the word « éteintes » in which there is no necessity to put « e » before « s ». This word is in « participe passé » or past participle form that must correspond

to its subject according to French grammar. The subject in this sentence is comprised of two nouns, which are different in terms of gender as « bougie » is feminine singular while « batons » is masculine plural. In this case, the subject is considered as masculine plural. Thus, « participe passé » or past participle must correspond to the masculine plural noun by representing only « s » at its end. This error is associated with subject-verb agreement. Therefore, the correct sentence should be « *La bougie et les bâtons d'encens dans les Krathongs ne sont pas éteints.* »

4. Misordering

Example 7: « *Un match dure cinq minutes : pour se battre trois minutes et pour faire une pause deux minutes.* » In this sentence, the ambiguity appears because of its misordering. This error involves word order in grammatical categories. The correct sentence should be « *Un match dure cinq minutes : trois minutes pour se battre et deux minutes pour faire une pause.* » When the words are rearranged, the sentence becomes smoother.

Example 8: « *Dans le passé, il y avait beaucoup de secret recettes pour chaque maison.* » This sentence shows the error at the word « secret », which is considered as an adjective. In general, adjectives are placed at the back of noun in French. The word « secret » should be then placed after the word « recettes ». Apart from that, the error is also linked to agreement of modifiers of nouns. As the word « recettes » is a feminine plural noun, the adjective « secret » should be modified into « secrètes » in accordance with it. Hence, the correct sentence should be « *Dans le passé, il y avait beaucoup de recettes secrètes pour chaque maison.* »

According to the demonstrated findings, it could be discussed that the ranking of errors in each category of French grammar discovered in this study corresponded well to the one of Jiamin *et al.* (2020). His result revealed that in the use of English prepositions, Chinese students committed most of their errors in terms of misformation followed by omission, addition and misordering respectively. The study indicated that the causes of prepositional errors were found to be interlingual interference, intralingual interference, and insufficient input of the target language.

Moreover, the study of Sritong (2015) showed the same kind of findings. In other words, Thai students leaning Spanish committed grammatical errors in terms of misformation as the most followed by omission, addition, misordering respectively. Its results reflected the causes of errors that came from 1) interference from L1 and L2 and 2) difficulty about coherence and cohesion of student's writing ability.

Considering from linguistic categories of grammatical errors, the most common errors were found in word forms while their subsidiaries occurred in verbs forms. Both forms of errors appeared in taxonomy of misformation as the most. These findings are different from those of Sritong (2015) showing that Thai students who learned Spanish committed most of the error cases in verbs forms and word forms as the second most. In terms of verbs forms, the majority of errors were found from verbs' conjugation, omission and wrong tenses. Meanwhile, those in word forms were detected from the missing of some consonants and vowels, which malformed words.

Conclusions

The results of this study revealed that word forms in French caused the most obstacles for Thai learners. The cause of such problem might be due to the French particularity in terms of its nouns that must change form following their gender and number. Among French nouns, the genders are sorted by masculine and feminine. In several cases, we could make a masculine noun into feminine by modifying the last part of the word. Most nouns could be added “s” in order to make them plural. By the way, there are also many nouns that could be made plural apart from adding “s” or even need to have their form totally changed. Although, such modification has its rule, there are still several exceptions. As this special characteristic does not exist in Thai language, there are numerous cases of wrong usage among Thai learners. Besides, the errors in word forms were committed by misspelling or using English spelling ways instead of French. This factor reflected the influence of English that Thai students learn as the first foreign language. The occurrence of numerous errors in word forms might be due to learners’ needs of nouns use more than other kinds of word in writing.

In terms of subjunctive mode, it was found as the least among errors. Such result was completely different from the finding of Charoensit (2019) indicating that the most numerous error made by students majoring in French was le subjonctif présent. This point could be explained that the research instrument of Charoensit (2019) was the exam that assessed directly French grammar and in which the questions regarded precisely subjunctive mode while for the one of this study, the sample group had autonomy to form their own sentences as well as to select grammar use for their answers in the exam. Thus, according to the findings of this study, it could be stated that the sample group does not have good comprehension and could not frequently make sentences in subjunctive mode. As a result, the use of such structure appeared quite few in the exam and brought into the least finding of its errors. It could be implied that subjunctive mode should be given importance and emphasized for the competency development in French grammar usage.

One important limitation of this study is that there are still quite few studies on grammatical errors between French and Thai. Hence, the comparison regarding its results with other works could not be conducted yet.

The Causes of Grammatical Error

According to the results of this study, the causes of errors were shown as follows:

1. Errors Caused by Interlingual Interference

Interlingual interference, also called native language (mother tongue or L1) interference is the main cause of grammatical errors in foreign languages that occurs in every linguistic study (Patiyasevi, 2018; Saengklaijaroen, 2018; Chamtakong, 2019; Charoensit, 2019) including this one. Such interference is caused by the different grammar between L1 and L2 or foreign language as well as could lead into negative transfer. In other words, learners take up the grammatical knowledge of L1 to use in the writing of L2 or foreign language. Brown (2000) stated that for language learners, before the system of the second language became familiar, the native language was the only reliable linguistics system upon which they could use for reference in the early stage of learning a foreign language. Therefore, when a learner wants to express his complex ideas, the thoughts in the mother tongue would inevitably interfere his communication. For this study, Thai and French are originally and topologically different.

Hence, it is possible that a learner uses the sentence structure or grammar of his familiar mother tongue in French communication and could be led into language errors.

2. Errors Caused by English Interference

English interference is another factor that causes French grammatical errors (Srisawangsap, 2017). The majority of university students in this generation had started learning English since their kindergarten level while French was debuted only in high school level. Thus, learners are more familiar with English. Sometimes, they use English structure or grammar in French communication. Although both languages possess some common parts or similarities, they have certainly also some differences. This results errors in French grammar usage of Thai learners.

3. Errors Caused by Intralingual Interference or Intralingual Errors or Influence of the Target Language

Intralingual interference is also another factor that was found from the analysis of this study. According to Ellis (2015), the errors were caused by the influence of the target language during the language learning process. In other words, such errors were originated by incomplete learning of L2 rules. In terms of French language, it is well known that its grammatical rules are very difficult and complicated. Once learners are lack of the exact knowledge of French grammatical rules and its exceptions, it could lead into errors (Patiyasevi, 2018; Saengklaijaroen, 2018; Charoensit, 2019). This could be portrayed in overgeneralization of the rules and deviant structures production in French writing. Besides, some expressions might have similar structure but they are different in meaning. This makes learners conceive sentence ambiguity and makes readers grasp difficultly the main idea of sentence (Jiamin *et al.*, 2020).

Pedagogical Implications

In the following part, this study put forward implications of error analysis as well as some suggestion about French teaching and learning.

1. As the influence of mother tongue is the main factor that affects the target language and causes errors, the reduction of interlingual interference could be a very useful guideline for learners. Instructors could explain the differences of grammar between L1 or target language, which means Thai and French in this regard, in order to make learners realize such point and take it into account when conducting writing or various kinds of communication. Furthermore, instructors including educational institutes should create an environment for French learning in order to form a foreign language sense.
2. In regards of errors caused by intralingual interference, instructors could bring found errors to develop into parts of content for pedagogical management by attributing additional in-depth explanations as well as relevant lessons to errors and learners' problematic topics.
3. Encouraging learners to participate in learning process and to correct their own mistakes could contribute more efficiently to the development of learners' writing skill.

Suggestions for Further Research

The current study was brought into some recommendations as follows:

1. The study could be investigated in a larger scale of sample group in order to conceive a clearer picture of errors. The subjects can be selected from different universities and chosen from different grades.
2. As this study analyzed the data from students' writing works, errors analysis in French speaking could be further investigated in the future.
3. Additional studies about communication contexts such as formal and informal communications, the decency of vocabulary use in different situations regarding occasion and culture in communication should be conducted as only the accuracy in grammar does not make communication achieve objectives.

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