

*Grammatical Error Analysis of the First Year English Major Students, Udon Thani
Rajabhat University*

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Abstract

The purposes of this research were 1.) to investigate types of grammatical errors made by the first year English major students, Udon Thani Rajabhat University, 2.) to explain characteristics of the errors and give examples of the errors in order to find out the proper ways to solve those errors. Data were collected from 49 first year English major students' 200-250 word essays. Frequency and percentage were used for data analysis. The results indicated that the most frequent errors were general grammatical errors: verbs, nouns, possessive case, articles, prepositions, adjectives, and adverbs (47.41%), syntactic errors: sentence structure, ordering, and coordination/subordination (19.53%), substance errors: capitalization, spelling, and punctuations (19.20%), lexical errors: word selection and word formation (11.69%), and semantic errors: ambiguous communication and miscommunication (2.17%) respectively. The characteristics of grammatical errors found in this study were omission, misformation, misordering, and overgeneralization.

Keywords: Grammar/ Error Analysis/ ESL and EFL Learning

The significance of the study

In the world of information and technology, English language has played an important role in Thai society. First, it is used as a medium of communication between Thai people and foreigners visiting or doing business in Thailand. Second, it is a mean of instruction in international schools and universities. Third, it is one of the tools used to search for new knowledge and technology. Thus, it can be said that English has served as an essential tool in all aspects of life in Thailand – social, economic, and academic. As a result, since 1996, English has been made a compulsory subject from the first year of primary school through high school matriculation, to prepare Thai people for competency in using English for communication and knowledge acquisition in the information age.

It is claimed that the goal of teaching English is to develop learners' communicative competence consisting of grammatical or linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980). Linguistic competence is knowing how to use the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language. Sociolinguistic competence is knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating. Discourse competence is knowing how to interpret the larger context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole. Strategic competence is knowing how to recognize and repair communication breakdowns, how to work around gaps in one's knowledge of the language, and how to learn more about the language and in the context.

Through communicative language teaching, it is clear that grammatical competence is an important element to develop learners' ability to use the language correctly and appropriately to accomplish communication goals as Skehan (1996) argues that inadequacy of grammar instruction tends to cause fossilization, classroom pidgins and low level of accuracy. Moreover, Ellis (1994; 2002) supports that grammar instruction cannot only improve learners proficiency and accuracy but also supplement the development of fluency. Research has shown that students who focus their attention on linguistic form during communicative interactions can use the language more effectively than those who never focus on form or only do in decontextualized lessons (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). As a result, grammatical pedagogies have been trying to focus learners' attention on linguistic form or raise their awareness about grammatical features needed in order to get their meaning across (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Ellis, 2002; Hinkel & Fotos, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

In the process of second language acquisition, making errors is common, especially grammatical errors as it is regarded as a part of learning a second language or a foreign language. Corder (1967) explains that errors made by second or foreign language learners refer to systematic incorrect utterances occurring in the process of acquiring the language reflecting their underlying knowledge of the language to date, namely, transitional competence. Therefore, learners' errors provide evidence of the system of the language that they are using, or have learned, indicating the state of their linguistic development at a particular point of time. Errors could be found in spoken or written forms. They may contain grammatical errors or communication errors, that is, incorrect and unacceptable utterances, including speaking and writing that is not suitable to the situations.

Causes of errors have been identified by many linguists as Selinker (1972) points out five sources of errors: language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of language learning, strategies of second language communication, and overgeneralization of the target language linguistic materials. Moreover, Richards & Sampson (1974) propose seven factors influencing errors: language transfer, intralingual interference, the effects of sociolinguistic situation, the modality of exposure to the target language and the modality of production, the age of the learner, the instability of the learner's linguistic system, and the effects of the inherent universal hierarchy of difficulty of the particular item being learned.

However, learners' errors could be decreased or solved by conducting systematic analyzing to identify types and characteristics of the errors from learner production of speaking or writing in order to provide them with appropriate feedback and correction. Corder (1967) identifies the significance of errors in three ways. First, through undertaking a systematic analysis, teachers can learn their students' linguistic progress and difficulties. Second, to the researcher, errors provide evidence of how the learners learn or acquire the language and what strategies or procedures do they employ to achieve the learning goal. Third, errors are vital to the learners themselves since they are an essential device for them to test their hypotheses during the process of language learning. Richards & Sampson (1974) support that error analysis is an important tool for teachers to evaluate learners' learning ability in order to set the priority to solve learners' problems from the most frequent errors made by them. Therefore, error analysis is regarded as a diagnosis and prediction of the problems and difficulties of learners. Errors provide significant evidence for teachers to give their students proper corrections and materials to support their learning. Corder (1974) suggests three steps of error analysis including data collection, description, and explanation while Ellis (1997) proposes a more detailed model of error analysis including selection of corpus of language, identification of errors, classification of errors, and explanation.

There has been a continuation of research studies in the area of error analysis both in Thailand and abroad. For example, Likittrattanaporn (2002) conducted a research study on an analysis of English grammatical errors of 90 third year students majoring in Accounting and Marketing, Faculty of Social Sciences, Srinakarinwirot University of Thailand. It was discovered that the percentage of general grammatical, morphological, syntactic, and semantic errors were 57%, 11%, 28%, and 4% respectively. The characteristics of errors were using grammatical omission (21.15%), wrong grammar (48.08%), grammatical replacement (19.23%), and grammatical commission (11.54).

Moreover, the study of Abushihap, El-Omari & Tobat (2011) was conducted in order to investigate and classify the grammatical errors in the writings of 62 students of the Department of English Literature and Translation at Alzaytoonah Private University of Jordan. The students enrolled in a paragraph writing course in the first semester of the academic year 2009/2010. These errors were first classified into six major categories and then they were divided into subcategories. It was observed that the category that included the largest number of errors was the errors of prepositions, which comprised 26% of the total errors. The following most problematic areas were respectively: morphological errors, articles, verbs, active and passive and tenses. On

the basis of the students' results, the researcher has included some pedagogical implications for teachers, syllabus designers, textbook writers and text developers.

Based on the significance of errors and error analysis in second and foreign language learning, the researcher who is an English lecturer in a university would like to investigate grammatical errors made by the first year English major students enrolling the subject EN51105 English Form and Use 1 at Udon Thani Rajabhat University in the first semester of 2012 academic year. These students were the freshmen English majors so it was essential to find out their language ability and difficulties that could provide useful evidence to improve their linguistic competence that is an important part of communicative competence.

Purposes of the study

1. To investigate types of grammatical errors made by the first year English major students, Udon Thani Rajabhat University
2. To explain characteristics of the errors and give examples of the errors in order to find out the proper ways to solve those errors.

Research Methodology

Population The population for this research consisted of 96 first year English major students from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences studying EN51105 English Form and Use 1 in the first semester of 2012 academic year.

Samples The samples of this research were 49 first year English major students from Class 1/1 obtained by purposive sampling.

Research Instrument Data were collected from 49 first year English major students' 200-250 word essays introducing themselves.

Data Collection In the first class time, the students were asked to write a 200-250 word English essay to introduce themselves in one hour. Then, the essays were collected for error analysis.

Data Analysis

1. Grammatical errors were analyzed and categorized into 5 different types adapted from James (1998), including general grammatical errors (articles, nouns, pronouns, verbs, possessive case, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions), substance errors (capitalization, punctuations, and spelling), lexical errors (word selection and word formation), syntactic errors (sentence structure, coordination/ subordination, and ordering), and semantic errors (miscommunication and ambiguous communication). Each error was counted and put into each type.
2. The errors were then explained and exemplified to identify the characteristics of the errors adapted from Ellis (1997), including omission (leaving out grammatical items required for sentences), misformation (using the wrong forms of words or structures),

misordering (putting the words and sentences in the wrong order), and overgeneralization (using over grammatical forms in sentences).

Statistics The statistics used for data analysis were frequency and percentage.

Results

1. The results of grammatical error analysis of the first year English major students divided by types of errors were shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The results of grammatical error analysis of the first year English major students divided by types of errors

Types of Errors	Numbers of Error	Percentage of Errors
1. General Grammatical errors	284	47.41
1.1. Articles	32	5.34
1.2. Nouns	66	11.02
1.3. Pronouns	11	1.84
1.4. Verbs	88	14.69
1.5. Possessive case	52	8.68
1.6. Adjectives	8	1.33
1.7. Adverbs	6	1.00
1.8. Prepositions	21	3.51
2. Substance Errors	115	19.20
2.1. Capitalization	51	8.52
2.2. Punctuations	30	5.00
2.3. Spelling	34	5.68
3. Lexical Errors	70	11.69
3.1. Word selection	51	8.52
3.2. Word formation	19	3.17
4. Syntactic Errors	117	19.53
4.1. Sentence structure	64	10.68
4.2. Coordination/ subordination	21	3.51
4.3. Ordering	32	5.34
5. Semantic Errors	13	2.17
5.1. Miscommunication	6	1.00
5.2. Ambiguous communication	7	1.17
Total	599	100

Data from Figure 1. indicated that the most frequent errors were general grammatical errors: verbs, nouns, possessive case, articles, prepositions, adjectives, and adverbs (47.41%), syntactic errors: sentence structure, ordering, and coordination/ subordination (19.53%), substance errors: capitalization, spelling, and punctuations (19.20%), lexical errors: word selection and word formation (11.69%), and semantic errors: ambiguous communication and miscommunication (2.17%) respectively.

2. The characteristics of grammatical errors found in this study were divided into 4 characteristics: omission, misformation, misordering, and overgeneralization.

2.1. Omission is the lack of form or grammar that is supposed to have in the sentence but the students omit it. For example, no article, no main verb, no helping verb, no preposition, no punctuation, no possessive case, no subject, and no object.

Examples:

- My father is **soldier**.
- There are 49 **student** in my class.
- My **father name** is ...
- I study English because I **like**.
- I **majoring** in English.
- I **very happy**.
- I **dinner** with my family every weekend.
- My family **live** in Udon Thani.
- I **like listen** music in my free time.
- I **majoring** in English.
- I study English because **it important**.

2.2. Misformation is using the wrong forms of words or structures for example, misspelling, incorrect word selection, wrong form of verbs, wrong form of adverbs, wrong form of adjectives, and wrong form of nouns.

Examples:

- English is important **nowaday**.
- I want to be **a businesswomen**.
- My father **he is a farmer**.
- **Me** and my friends do homework together.
- **I have happiness** with my teachers and friends.
- **I am graduated** from...
- **I interest** English.
- I am **exciting** to study English.
- I like **roasting** chicken.
- I like music because it's **relax**.
- They **sing good**.
- I **frequent do** homework.
- My teacher is **beauty**.
- I like **fire rice**.
- My favorite **single** is Dome.
- My brother is a **Army**.
- I **look** T.V. and make homework before I go to bed.
- **I don't smart** English but I like.
- I like sing because it **funny**.

2.3. Misordering is putting the words or sentences in the wrong order for example, incorrect placement of adjectives, nouns, or verbs.

Examples:

- My brother is **younger than me six years**.
- I take a **shower finished** at 7.00 am.
- Our family **have a new member is elder brother's children**.
- I love **Campus Sampraw** because **air fresh and environment clean**.
- I am **tall** 165 cms.
- My hometown is **far** from Udon 45 kms.
- My favorite food is **rice sticky and chicken grill**.
- My mother is **a woman beautiful and kind**.

2.4. Overgeneralization is using over grammatical forms in sentences for example, putting a preposition when it is not needed, applying _ed past tense signal with irregular verbs, putting _s to signal plural for exceptional nouns.

Examples:

- I want to **go to abroad**.
- Last summer my family went to Pattaya and we **swimmed** in the sea.
- My brother have 2 **childs**.
- There are a lot of **peoples** in Udon Thani.
- My teacher and I often **discuss about** the lessons.
- I look **forward to see** my future.

Summary and Discussion

The results showed that the most frequent errors made by the first year English majors were general grammatical errors: verbs, nouns, possessive case, articles, prepositions, adjectives, and adverbs (47.41%), syntactic errors: sentence structure, ordering, and coordination/subordination (19.53%), substance errors: capitalization, spelling, and punctuations (19.20%), lexical errors: word selection and word formation (11.69%), and semantic errors: ambiguous communication and miscommunication (2.17%) respectively. The characteristics of grammatical errors found in this study were omission, misinformation, misordering, and overgeneralization.

The evidence of grammatical errors indicated that the first year English majors had some difficulties in using correct grammatical forms and structures. However, these errors did not affect communication process much since the students could get themselves understood; only a few per cent of errors caused miscommunication and ambiguous communication. Nevertheless, teachers still need to pay special attention to these errors, especially general grammatical errors such as the use of verbs, nouns, and sentence structures, the most frequent errors made by the students. Besides, there were some language problems of syntactic errors, substances errors, and lexical errors that teachers have to emphasize when teaching to help the students use better English to a more advanced level.

As for the types and characteristics of errors made by the students, it could be analyzed for the causes of errors that most of the errors were influenced by intralingual interference: overgeneralization, ignorance of the rule restrictions, and incomplete application of rules (Richards & Sampson, 1994). Moreover, language transfer of the mother tongue (Thai) (Selinker, 1972; Richards & Sampson, 1974) also affected the numbers of errors found in this study, especially omission of words and misordering of words and sentences because of the differences of Thai and English. Finally, modality, or level of exposure to the target language (English) was an important source of errors since most of these students were from rural areas and the opportunities to expose to or use English in real life were rare. As a result, teachers need to realize the important of these factors influencing the errors made by the students. Furthermore, the errors from this research study can be used for improving learning and teaching process, including giving appropriate feedback and developing teaching materials to solve specific grammatical problems of the students in order to develop their language proficiency effectively.

Suggestions

1. Error analysis is an important instrument for teachers to not only find out learners' language difficulties, but also to evaluate their ability and progress of linguistic development. Therefore, systematic error analysis should be widely informed to and undertaken by second or foreign language teachers of all levels.
2. The results of an error analysis can be used for further research to solve the students' problems, for example, providing the students with noticing grammar lessons, developing error analysis exercises, promoting self-correction and peer correction, enhancing the use of grammar through communicative activities, or implementing other teaching techniques to reduce grammatical errors.
3. There should be research studies to compare grammatical errors made by students with difference language proficiency.

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