Analysis of Errors in Writing English Composition Committed by Thai EFL Non-English Major Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the English linguistic elements which cause errors in writing English made by the first-year undergraduates majoring in non-English academic disciplines under the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Phranakhon Rajabhat University. This study was conducted with fifty Thai EFL undergraduate students. An instrument for this study included a worksheet on which students were required to write a 100-120 word composition, entitled My Personal Background. The findings revealed that the research participants committed different kinds of grammatical errors in writing the target language, from morphological to sentential levels. Most errors were mainly resulted from the dearth of L2 linguistic knowledge and the difficulty of the L2 grammatical system. The results from the written English errors have implications for English grammar teaching and learning.

Keywords: Analysis of errors, writing English composition, Thai EFL non-English major students

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Introduction

Writing is an active skill that all language learners have to experience. It is a difficult process and more complicated performance in second language acquisition. Obviously, learners have to take much time, more concentration, and keep practicing it in order to achieve their ultimate goal in language learning. In writing a target language composition, particularly in a university level, it is one of the challenging tasks that language learners are absolutely assigned and have to accomplish. Writing involves a great deal of L2 linguistic competence, including L2 rules, writing mechanics, and writing styles. The writing process also plays an important role in a provision of opportunities to enhance learners' vocabulary and grammatical competence. Moreover, it develops their understanding of how logical ideas should be presented and how well their messages are understood through writing production.

Often, language learners fail to acquire the target language. This is because they usually find the L2 linguistic elements very complicated, i.e. the second language features are greater different from those of their first language. This results in making errors while attempting to communicate in L2. Lack of good linguistic competence in the new language system is another cause of L2 learning failure. The process of human language learning in both the mother tongue and the target language involves the making of errors. Naturally, children acquiring their first language also produce errors. Making errors is part of a process of language learning. Inevitably, learners of a second language probably commit a number of errors. Dulay and Burt (1974: 1) claim that "You can't learn without goofing." A goof or error the language learner makes is considered a natural product of the process of second language learning "for which no blame is implied." Ellis (1994: 47) maintains that "learners make errors in both comprehension and production." In sum, committing errors relies primarily on the process of human learning and language learning; without it, learners do not know how well they learn the new language.

Purpose of the study

This study aimed at investigating the L2 linguistic elements which cause errors in writing made by the first-year undergraduates pursuing their bachelor degree at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Phranakhon Rajabhat University. They were majoring in non-English academic disciplines.

Research question

The study attempted to answer the following question:
1)   What are the L2 written grammatical errors made by Thai EFL students majoring in political science, public administration, community development, and business Chinese?

Significance of the study

Given learning English as a foreign language at Phranakhon Rajabhat University, the English learning achievement yielded an unsuccessful achievement outcome. More specifically, in the English for Everyday Communication 1100201 class taught by the researcher, the achievement outcome was relatively low. Most Thai students at

Phranakhon Rajabhat University have encountered the difficulty in learning the English language, particularly in writing skills. One of the major challenges resulted in the unsuccessfulness of writing L2 is the structural differences between L1 and L2. The greater the differences between the two languages there are, the more difficulty in learning the target language students have. Thus, it is crucial to realize what grammatical areas they have faced cause the failure in L2 writing. The results of the study would uncover the problematic areas of acquiring the L2 linguistic system. Moreover, the findings may give guidance to teachers of English in planning their teaching activities which correspond to students' competence.

Significance of learner error

Corder (1967) insists that errors are significant in three different ways. Firstly, they give the teacher with information about how much the learner have learned, i.e. how far towards the learner's goals he or she has progressed and what remains for the learner to pursue. Secondly, errors provide the researcher with evidence of how language is learned, what strategies or procedures the learner is using in the mastery of the language. This shows a new role which is of primary interest to researchers in the target language. Lastly, errors are considered devices by which the learner used to discover the L2 linguistic competence and test his or her hypotheses about the nature of the L2. It is believed that errors committed by language learners help reveal the L2 acquisition process which is the major concern of EA researchers in attempting to discover how language learners learn a new language in order to improve language pedagogy.

Sources of errors

Interlingual and intralingual errors

Interlingual errors directly involve the mother tongue. Corder (1971) claims that interlingual errors are resulted from the interference of L1 habits, particularly patterns, rules, or systems when mastering the new linguistic systems. Interference is viewed as negative transfer, since it negatively influences the L2 performance. Leki (1992: 108) reports that students learning English as a second language commit a great number of errors in sentential level due to L1 interference.

Interlingual interference is caused by differences in categories, constructions, elements, rules, and meaning across languages. It can be further subcategorized into two types: preclusive and intrusive interference. The former is resulted from what does not exist in the mother tongue interferes with what is being learned in the target language. It seems to be clear that Thai learners are more likely to commit an error of the use of English articles and adding plural morphemes to plural nouns, for they do not exist in Thai language. The latter is caused by the different sentence pattern between L1 and L2 as in case of adjective-noun order. In English, an adjective comes before a noun, but the adjective comes after a noun in Thai. This is a major problem for Thai learners learning the English language. It is also resulted from overgeneralization from what is already known in the new language system.

Intralingual errors, according to Richards (1971), are linguistic items produced by L2 learners which do not reflect the structure of L1, but the generalizations based on

partial exposure to the new language. Language learners attempt to "derive the rules behind the data to which he/she has been exposed, and may develop hypotheses that correspond neither to the mother tongue nor to the target language" (Richards & Sampson, 1974: 6). In other words, language learners produce deviant or ill-formed sentences by applying their knowledge of the L2 linguistic rules and system to the new contexts.

Another important cognitive factor involved committing errors in L2 writing is language transfer. The term "transfer", according to Odlin (1989), is defined as the influence resulted from similarities and differences between the L1 and any other language that has been previously mastered. According to Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2003), L2 learners is more likely to depend primarily on their L1 grammar to some extent. An empirical evidence demonstrated the kinds of errors L2 learners commit, "which often involve the transfer of grammatical rules from their L1." The mother tongue influence is also discovered in the acquisition of L2 syntax and morphology as in case that Thai speakers acquiring English often forget to put –ed particle at the end of a regular verb in order to form a past tense verb. This is because a past tense –ed particle does not exist in Thai. Another obvious situation that causes errors in writing L2 of Thai speakers is question and negation structures in L2. Most Thai speakers often form a question or negation without adding an auxiliary before a main verb. Moreover, there is no any inflectional morphological system in the Thai language. Words are not modified or conjugated for tense, person, possession, number (singular/plural), gender, or subject-verb agreement (Slayden, 2010). Determiners, articles, in particular, do not exist in Thai words. To form a larger unit, Thai words are assembled through compounding and adding more particles and other markers. Tense, politeness, verb-to-noun conversion, and other grammatical objectives were performed with the addition of modifying words to the basic subject-verb-object word order.

Classifications of errors

Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982: 146-191) propose three descriptive classifications of errors: surface strategy taxonomy, comparative taxonomy, and communicative effect taxonomy. This study was conducted based on only surface strategy taxonomy.

Surface Strategy taxonomy

Surface strategy taxonomy focuses on the ways surface structures are changed in specific and systematic way. For instance, language learners may omit some necessary linguistic items or add unnecessary ones; they may misform or misorder items. According to a surface strategy perspective, analyzing errors can identify cognitive processes that underlie the learner's reconstruction of the new language (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982: 150). Surface strategy taxonomy is further classified into four major subcategories as shown in Figure 1.
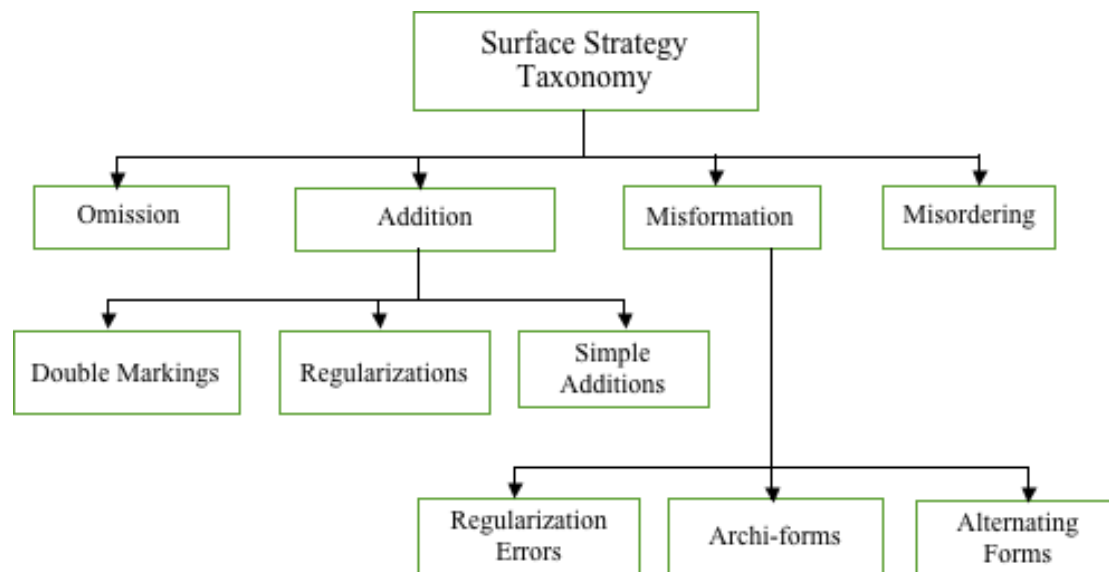
Figure 1: Classification of Errors Based on Surface Strategy Taxonomy

1. Omission

Omission errors refer to the absence of a linguistic element which is needed in a well-formed utterance. Morphemes (words) are categorized into two classes: content and function words. Content words are of most importance in syntactic structure. All well-formed sentences need content words, since they convey referential meaning of a sentence. Content words include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Unlike content words, the primary function of function words is to make sentences grammatically correct. They play a minor role in conveying the meaning of a sentence. Articles, prepositions, auxiliaries, noun, and verb inflections are examples of function words.

2. Additions

According to Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982: 156), addition errors refer to the presence of a linguistic element which is not required in a well-formed utterance. This takes place after language learners have acquired some L2 linguistic rules. Addition errors include three sub-categories:

 2.1 Double marking: This error refers to the repeated use of a certain linguistic element which is not required in some linguistic construction.

 e.g. *Jim didn't *goed* to the movie yesterday.

 2.2 Regularization: Errors 'in which a marker that is typically added to a linguistic item is erroneously added to exceptional items of the given class that do not take a marker' (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982: 156).

 e.g. *All *staffs* here are friendly.

 2.3 Simple addition: An addition error which cannot be characterized as either a double marking or a particularization. It refers to the incorrect use of a linguistic element which is not required in a well-formed utterance.

 e.g. *This room includes a variety of modern *furnitures*.

3. Misformation

Misformation errors take place as a result of the use of the incorrect form of the morphemes or structure. They can be further classified into three sub-categories:

3.1 Regularization errors: This error occurs due to the wrong use of a regular marker in place of an irregular one.

e.g. *speaked* instead of spoken

3.2 Archi-forms: Errors are caused by the selection of a word in one class to represent the other in another class. They can be found in all stages of the L2 acquisition.

e.g. I saw him the day before yesterday. *Him* went to the movies.

3.3 Alternating forms: This error is resulted from the use of different words in the same linguistic structure.

e.g. *He *seen* them the day before yesterday.

4. Misordering

Misordering errors are characterized by the inaccurate placement of a morpheme or group of morphemes in an utterance. They take place systematically for both L1 and L2 learners in the linguistic constructions which they have learned.

e.g. *I don't know where *is* he.

Research methodology

Subjects

The population of the study included the first-year students pursuing their bachelor degree at Phranakhon Rajabhat University. They were from fifteen academic disciplines under the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. After the selection process through simple sampling, there were only four academic majors in the study: political science, public administration, community development, and business Chinese. Then, students of the four academic disciplines were drawn from simple sampling again, i.e. every third number student in a class list was picked. Finally, there were fifty four non-English major freshmen.

Research procedures

The research participants were asked to write a 100-150 word paragraph entitle "My Personal Profile." To facilitate their writing, they were provided a mind map, i.e. the topic areas which they should include in their composition. Participants were assigned to write a paragraph on his or her own background knowledge. This process lasted about 1.30–2.00 hours. After completing the task, all worksheets were collected for further steps.

All data gathered were analyzed using the following steps. Firstly, the data were collected from the worksheet which was an instrument and analyzed according to Corder's error analysis procedure. Secondly, the data were identified for errors. Lastly, the errors found in the worksheets were then classified based on the four subcategories of the surface strategy taxonomy and recorded in the error recording form accordingly. Error category was determined prior to the data collecting process.

Findings

The Table 1 illustrates some examples of ill-formed sentences produced by the research participants.

Table 1: Distribution of Error Category

Linguistic category	Participant's error	Grammatically correct sentence
Syntax		
	Preposition **a. Underuse of preposition**	
	I was born Pathumthanee.	I was born in Pathumthanee Province.
	b. Misuse of preposition	
	Present I'm study in Pranakorn rajabhat University	At present (Presently), I am studying at Phranakhon Rajabhat University.
	Possessive adjective incorrect **a. Underuse of possessive adjective**	
	Nickname is Vin.	My nickname is Vin.
	I'm birthday is September 18 1997	My birthday is on September 18, 1997.
	Sentence construction incorrect **a. Run-on sentence**	
	I like noodle and I dislike English and Match because It very hard.	I like noodle. I dislike English and math, because they are very hard.
	Fragment **a. Omission of main verb**	
	I reading cartoon.	I like reading cartoon.
	Article **a. Indefinite article incorrect**	
	I liked to watch a action and Comedy movie	I like to watch action and comedy movies.
	b. Overuse of indefinite article	
	I like a cool weather.	I like cool weather.
	c. Underuse of indefinite article	
	My father's job is police.	My father's job is a police officer.
	d. Underuse of definite article	
	In Future maybe I will work in hospital	In the future, I will work in hospital.

Morphology

Capitalization
a. Underuse of capitalization

My name is kritsana.	My name is Kritsana.
My nickname is tae	My nickname is Tae.

b. Overuse of capitalization

My mom she is Accountant	My mom is an accountant.
I like sport Volleyball.	I like volleyball.
I like music is POP, Jazz	I like pop and jazz music.

Vocabulary incorrect
a. Misuse of vocabulary

I studied at Pathumthanee Nunthamunee Bumrung school.	I graduated from Pathumthanee Nunthamunee Bumrung School.
My favorite subjects are Thai and Social.	My favorite subjects are Thai and social studies.
I'm 20 yearago	I am 20 years old.
my brother job is study.	My brother's job is a student.

Punctuation
a. Underuse of punctuation

My name is Artit Hanta	My name is Artit Hanta.
In my future I would like to be a soldier	In my future, I would like to be a soldier.

Spelling
a. Misspelling

I likes movies are sci-fi and commadi.	I like sci-fi and comedy movies.
my favorite movies is comedy and extion.	My favorite movies are comedy and action.
I am reading cratoon.	I am reading cartoon.

Abbreviation
a. Misuse of abbreviation

My address is 89/29 m.3, Bangkuwat, Muang, Pathumthanee 12000.	My address is 89/29 Moo 3, Bangkuwat Sub-district, Muang District, Pathumthanee 12000.

Word order
a. Misplace of proper name

It's Hospital Changraipachanukroh	I was born in Chiengraipachanukroh Hospital.

b. Repetition of object

I like reading comic books and ghost story books.	I like reading comic and ghost story books.
I like to watch romantic movies and ghost movies.	I like to watch romantic and ghost movies.

c. Omission of main noun

My special are listen music and	My hobbies are listening to

play badminton.	music and playing badminton.
favorite is English, match, social.	My favorite subjects are English, math, and social studies.

Pronoun reference
a. Use of pronoun without any antecedent nouns to which it refers

It's Hospital Changraipachanukroh	I was born in Chiengraipachanukroh Hospital. It is located in Chiengrai Province.

b. Overuse of pronoun

My mom she is 41 yearago	My mom is 41 years old.

Negative marker
a. Negative marker incorrect

I think I have not special abilities but I like to think and remember somethings Hard	I think I have no any special abilities, but I like to think and remember something hard.

Possessive case incorrect
a. Omission of 's

My brother nickname is oil.	My brother's nickname is Oil.

Tense

Incorrect use of tense
a. Tense incorrect

I study at Phranakhon Rajabhat University.	I am studying at Phranakhon Rajabhat University.
I have been studied at Nawamintrachutit Suankularb Pathumthani.	I studied high school at Nawamintrachutit Suankularb Pathumthani.

Incorrect passive construction
a. Passive construction incorrect

My home is build in years 1977	My home was built in 1977.

Incorrect present continuous construction
a. Present continuous incorrect

Now I studying at Phranakorn Rajabhat University.	I am now studying at Phranakhon Rajabhat University.

Incorrect present perfect construction
a. Overuse of past participle

I have been went to Singapore.	I have been to Singapore.

To infinitive or gerund
a. Misuse of to infinitive or gerund

My hobbies are play soccer and watching TV.	My hobbies are playing soccer and watching TV.
In freetime I like to swimming play tennis	In my free time, I like to swim and play tennis.

Subject-verb agreement
a. Disagreement of subject and verb

I likes movies are sci-fi and commadi.	I like sci-fi and comedy movies.
he like go to southAsians.	He likes to go to Southeast Asia.
I favorite subject is English and Thai.	My favorite subjects are English and Thai.

Auxiliary
a. Overuse of be

I'm go to University by bus	I go to university by bus.
I like color is Red, Blue, Black, White.	I like red, blue, black, and white.
In year 2012 grandfather is die and years 1995 uncle is die.	My uncle died in 1995 and my grandfather died in 2012.

b. Underuse of be in the present continuous

Currently studying at Phranakhon Rajabhat University.	Currently, I am studying at Phranakhon Rajabhat University.

L1 Interference

a. L1 Negative transfer

I like colour green and I dislike colour black.	I like green, but I dislike black.
I like music pop-rock.	I like pop rock.
Family have members 4 people.	My family has four members. There are four members in my family.

Others

a. Ambiguous sentences

I have family three.	My family has three members.
My hobbies sport is swimming.	1) My hobby is swimming. 2) My favorite sport is swimming.

Discussion

The study aimed at identifying the errors in writing the English composition of Thai EFL undergraduates majoring in non-English discipline. The process of classifying L2 errors was based on the surface strategy taxonomy. The findings of the study correspond to the results of previous studies conducted in Thai contexts (Kittiprasert, 1998; Yipcharoenporn, 2000; Sattayatham & Honsa, 2007; Sattayatham & Rattanapinyowong, 2008; Jenwitheesuk, 2009; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha; 2013; Hinnon, 2014; Promsupa, Varasarin, & Brudhiprabha, 2017; Sermsook, Liamnimitr, & Pochakorn, 2017; and Suvarnamani, 2017). Most Thai EFL learners at all educational levels make a high frequency of grammatical errors in writing the English composition. They have encountered problematic areas of writing in L2 in every linguistic construction: in word, phrase, clause, sentence, and paragraph levels.

More importantly, the results of the study uncover the L1 influence in L2 acquisition, particularly in sentential and clause errors. The positive and negative interferences are found in the study, i.e. transfer of L1 rules and some L2 linguistic avoidance are applied in written English texts. The use of articles, punctuations, auxiliaries, and tenses are among the major problems of L2 learning failure.

With regard to the findings from the sources of errors, it can be concluded that interlingual errors were resulted from the dearth of participants' L2 linguistic rules. The participants in this study are more likely to produce English sentences by transferring their knowledge of L1 linguistic rules to L2 written texts.

Implications for EFL teachers

The study of error in writing English texts help illustrate the areas of difficulty that L2 learners encounter in learning the new language system. Also, it can infer the nature of the learners' L2 competence at a given stage and indicate what language learners know and what they still have to acquire. In some English courses, particularly English grammatical structure courses, the results of the study help L2 language teachers to point out the different types of errors to the learners and to focus more on the errors that have a high frequency rate in order to achieve a satisfactory level of L2 competence in English writing. Errors identify the language teachers how effective the teaching methods is and show what parts of the syllabus have not been learned enough or taught and what parts of the syllabus are still needed further attention.

It would be better for language teachers to assign more written English assignments for which the learners would have to do much writing in the L2 as well as to do research more of the topic they want to write about by reading a lot of English materials and thinking in English. Moreover, if different group work activities are applied to language classes, learners will have more opportunity to practice the L2 with their partners to improve both L2 competence and performance of writing skill. Also, proficient learners of L2 would help correct errors that less proficient learners commit. Interestingly, group work assignments would reduce learning burdens, for instance, stress and work load.

Some L2 linguistic items that are viewed as major causes of errors must be taught or identified at earlier stage of the target language learning. It will be good if teachers of

L2 work together to solve learners' problems related to making L2 errors. Learners of the target language should also be encouraged to write L2 composition in class and at home. Some writing mechanics and paragraph patterns should be taught in order for learners to produce well-form essays. Furthermore, some samples of bad L2 written production should be used as one in-class activity, for learners can correct and analyze L2 errors. Learning from errors makes learners realize well the types of errors and prevents them to commit such errors again.

Implications for English lnguage teaching pedagogy

It is obvious in this study that most Thai EFL learners acquiring L2 rely primarily on interlingual transfer, particularly in the learning environment where language learners are less likely to expose to formal English classes. A few hours a week of L2 instruction is not enough for effective learning the new language. Considering use of L1 in L2 classes would be helpful for better understanding of difficult areas of L2 grammatical elements as in case that the introduction of contrastive comparisons of the L1 and the L2 linguistic systems would give the L2 learners a clear picture of the similarities and differences between the two language systems.

Recommendations for further research

The study made an attempt to investigate certain characteristics of errors committed by Thai EFL undergraduates and to examine the sources of errors. The primary focus of the study was on the detection of errors at lexical and sentential levels. Since this study is limited only to the textual level, a study beyond the textual level like discourse level would be possible to other researchers. Another limitation is that this study was conducted through quantitative method in discovering only types of errors, using a qualitative method coupled with quantitative one would yield profound details of causes of errors.

According to the findings of the study, Thai EFL learners committed a large number of L2 grammatical errors. This shows that the language teachers of writing classes should pay more attention to the writing product together with the writing process. If possible, remedial writing classes should be offered to less proficient language learners or to all first-year students before the start of the first semester. Also, teachers of English should be aware of L2 linguistic rules. Errors, regardless of the teaching methods used in the classroom, still exist and stay as long as L2 teaching is practiced. Teachers, therefore, should not be concerned, rather they should draw the students' attention to the different linguistic systems of the mother tongue and the target language. This will help L2 learners acquire the new language with ease.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to uncover the grammatical errors committed by Thai EFL students from their writing of English composition. A number of different L2 errors were discovered in written English texts. The errors were found from both morphological and sentential levels. The major cause of error was due to the fact that language learners were equipped with inadequate grammatical competence of the English language. Carelessness was also the cause of error.

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