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## **AN ERROR ANALYSIS OF THAI EFL LEARNER'S CONTROLLED DIALOGUE WRITING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research is an investigation to find out the linguistic errors of freshmen enrolled in English 1 as a foundation course at Burapha University, Thailand. There were 212 subjects in this study and they were assigned to do a controlled writing dialogue as pair work. The data consisted of 106 first draft dialogues of approximately 150 words per dialogue. The errors were recorded and classified. The findings of this research reported that the most frequent errors in order of number were capitalization, full stop, subject-verb agreement, adjective, verb tense and prepositional verb phrase. The results could be used for pedagogical purposes to improve student EFL writing.

**Keywords:** Errors, EFL, Controlled Writing

### **1. RATIONALE**

Second language writers make errors, and this should come as no surprise as they are learning the language, and to learn means to make errors. In the field of language pedagogy and second language acquisition, the study of learner's errors or mistakes is called error analysis. This subject has a long history dating back to the 40' and 50'. In the 60's, through the influence of Corder (1981) who is widely regarded as the linguistic who reformed the study of errors, error analysis placed more emphasis on the cognitive process of learning. Within the behaviorist paradigm, errors were seen in terms of bad habits influenced by the mother tongue, but Corder (1981) postulated that errors were made when learners formatted hypothesis about the target language. Errors came to be seen as evidence of an intermediary level of comprehension on the path towards command of the target language. The term interlanguage, coined by Selinker (1972), as cited in Corder (1975) describes this intermediary level of comprehension. Errors are evidence of learning.

An error analysis can serve two important functions: pedagogical and theoretical. The theoretical side is concerned with making hypothesis about the second language acquisition process of

learners while the pedagogical side is more concerned with classroom teaching implications. This study is concerned with the pedagogical side of error analysis. A pedagogical error analysis can provide teachers with information which may serve remedial purposes related to course content and teaching practices (Corder, 1981, 1975; Lennon, 1991; Etherton, 1997; Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982). There may be a difference between errors and mistakes. These two terms may not be interchangeable. As Corder (1981) explains, errors can be seen as evidence that the learner does not yet have full command of the target language system. Mistakes on the other hand occur when a learner does, perhaps, have command but simply forgets to apply his or her knowledge. Mistakes are slip ups and may be caused by any number of reasons; tiredness, forgetfulness, emotional state and environmental factors such time constraints and conditions under which the writing takes place.

## **2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The objective of this research was to investigate linguistic errors of Thai L2 writers.

## **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **3.1 Key Concepts**

A definition of an error is given by Lennon (1990). An error is 'A linguistic form or combination of forms which, in the same context and under similar conditions of production, would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers' native speaker counterparts' Lennon (1990). Despite the negative connotations of the word 'error', they are not in themselves something negative. Indeed, errors are not evidence of a failure to learn. They are evidence of intention to learn. According to Bartholomae (1980), errors are evidence of a learners 'approximative system' or 'interlanguage.'

The term interlanguage was coined by Selinker (1972), as cited in Corder (1975), and refers to the developing knowledge of the target language. As Lightbown & Spada (2006) put it, the learner's interlanguage might contain characteristics of the learners L1 (Thai), elements of the target language L2 (English), and also characteristics common to all learners.

However researchers distinguish two main types of errors: Interlingual errors and Intralingual errors. *Interlingual* errors may, explains Corder (1981), be caused by 'interference from the mother tongue.' This interference may be positive or negative. Richards (1980) suggests that interlingual errors can be traced to the L1 system somehow overlapping or influencing the production of the L2. This process is called language transfer. Lott (1983) suggests there maybe two features of interlingual errors: overextension of an analogy, and transfer of structure. Overextension occurs when the student misuses vocabulary because the item shares features of

the L1, and transfer of structure occurs when the student adopts L1 structural forms onto their L2 writing.

According to Richards's, *intralingual* errors are the result of a learner's hypothesis about the L2. Richards (1980) suggests intralingual errors are overgeneralizations, 'extensions of L2 rules' simplification, 'reduction' developmental, 'reflecting stages of linguistic development', communication based 'resulting from strategies of communication', induced, 'from sequencing and presentation', errors of avoidance, 'failure to use' and overproduction, 'L2 used correctly but too frequently'.

In addition to the above distinctions, researchers also classify errors according to their severity or gravity. Global errors, as Dulay et al., (1982) describe them, are errors '...that effect the overall sentence organization'. These errors 'significantly hinder communication'; whereas local errors are errors '...that affect single elements (constituents) in a sentence...' These do not, generally speaking, cause problems with meaning.

### **3.2 Related Studies**

In a study of Thai learner's collocation errors, Phoocharoensil (2011) examined the writing of ninety, first year undergraduate students. The students were divided into a low proficiency group and a high proficiency group. The data in this study was elicited in a classroom environment. Students were asked to produce a descriptive essay within a sixty minute time limit. The student's writing was analyzed according to grammatical collection (noun + preposition, verb + preposition, adjective + preposition and preposition + noun) and lexical collocation (noun + verb, verb + noun, adjective + noun and verb + adverb). The author's findings suggest that with regards to the high proficiency group, lexical collocation errors slightly outnumbered the grammatical collocation errors. Verb + noun collocations were the most frequent among the high proficiency group (25.28%) followed by adjective + noun (13.79%) then verb + adverb (6.90%) and finally noun + verb at 5.75%. With regards the grammatical collocations, the high proficiency group had problems with verb + prepositions and noun + prepositions at 18.39% each, followed by adjective + prepositions at 8.05% and noun + prepositions at 3.45%. The major area of lexical difficulty among the low proficiency group was as follows: verb + noun 40.54%, noun + verb, 11.71%, adjective + noun 5.41%, and verb + adverb at 0.90%. With the low proficiency group, grammatical collocation problems were: verb + prepositions 23.42%, preposition + noun 12.61%, adjective + preposition 5.41%. No errors were found in the noun + prepositions category. Phoocharoensil (2011) hypothesizes on the sources of these errors and claims that 'Thai learners of English evidently are heavily reliant on their L1 collocational knowledge, transferring an equivalent from Thai to English'. This kind of strong contrastive stance is prevalent in the Thai literature. In addition to collocation errors, some authors have

looked at specific verb problems. Another study is from Arakkitsakul (2008) focused solely on present perfect tense problems among 60 Thai students. The data was gathered from multiple choice, cloze, error identification task, fill in the blank, translation and interviews. The aim was to see how well they knew the usage and form of present perfect tense. The author presents the findings at different levels of understanding. For example, students in this study have a moderate level of understanding of adverbs of time frequently used with present perfect. The learners could recognize the structure of regular and irregular forms at a moderate level. The participants did moderately well in subject/verb agreement in the present perfect tense, but the ability to use present perfect and past simple tense was rather low. In the abstract, the author states that ‘...Thai interference in speaking and writing is a major problem’. Sattayatham & Rattanapinyowon (2008) looked at the paragraph organization of Mahidol medical students. The participants were asked to read several medical ethics articles from the internet. They were then required to write an opinion paragraph based on one of the articles they had read. This study looked at paragraph organization, not specifically linguistic errors, but larger discourse errors like controlling ideas, supporting sentences, and conclusions. The results are somewhat discouraging it has to be said, with most of the students lacking the ability to produce coherent paragraphs, according to the author. In an opinion paragraph, the top errors according to frequency in the opinion paragraph were: lexical, articles and plural forms.

The studies above look at specific problems while some authors investigate errors within a general linguistic category. Pongsiriwet (2001) looked at the grammatical errors of 155 Thai freshmen from various majors at Kasetsart University. The data came from 80 randomly selected in-class narrative assignments based on the topic of significant events or people in the students’ lives. From 80 selected compositions there were, excluding spelling and capitalization, 947 errors. The author also looked the relationship between grammatical accuracy and discourse features. In this study, spelling errors and capitalization problems were not counted. In my study they were. The errors were put into a standard linguistic category table. There were 12 categories altogether. They are presented here numbered according to rank order of frequency, as shown in the authors study: 1 subject/ verb agreement, 2 verb formation, 3 tenses, 4 singular/ plural nouns, 5 word form 6 verb omission 7 articles, 8 prepositions, 9 fragments 10 pronouns, 11 subject omission and 12 extraneous subject. From this the top three most common errors were subject/verb agreement, verb formation and tenses. The author hedges that one cause may well be negative transfer from Thai to English. The authors state that while English distinguishes plural and singular nouns with suffixes, Thai does not and requires a separate numerical marker. The author states: ‘This difference probably leads to student errors in using the singular form of an English noun where a plural is called for’. They give an example from their data: \* *I try to read a lot of book*. Interestingly, if this student was applying Thai grammatical rules completely they would have said \**I try read book a lot*.

In another such study, Bootchuy (2008) aimed at categorizing grammatical errors made by 41, first year, Thai graduate students in an English master's degree programme at a Bangkok university. The data in this study came from 41 writing assignments and 41 final term papers. The data was analyzed to find error frequencies and percentages. The study also aimed at finding out in what way the students transferred from L1 to L2 in their writing. In addition, the student errors were analyzed for possible intralingual sources. The study focused on 'ill-formed sentences', and the results showed that the most frequent types of ill-formed sentences were: 1. Omission of subjects, verbs, objects and complements. 2. Incorrect compound and complex sentence structures. 3. Word order errors. The author states that 'interference errors appeared the most frequent among the three types of errors.' In this study, the three types of errors were interlingual, intralingual and developmental errors. Developmental errors are those kinds of errors made by children learner their first language.

In another study which uses a general linguistic classification, Chakorn (2005) looked at the lexico-grammatical errors in Thai business letters. The author analyzed 109 authentic business letters (mostly confirmations and clarifications of business dealings) and found 209 errors. The author states that the '...top three types of lexico-grammatical errors are in the following categories respectively: verb 22%, preposition 19 % and determiner 16%.' In the discussion section, the author appears to take a strong contrastive stance (with some hedging) by saying the verb errors '...can probably be explained by the fact that, unlike English verbs, Thai verbs cannot be conjugated.' It should be said that many Thai researchers seem convinced that L1 to L2 transfer is the major cause of Thai writing errors.

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## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Participants**

The subjects were freshmen enrolled in English 1 as a foundation course at Burapha University, Thailand. There were 212 participants in this study and they were assigned to do a controlled

writing dialogue as pair work. The data consisted of 106 first draft dialogues of approximately 150 words per dialogue.

#### **4.2 Data Collection**

The participants were assigned to choose one dialogue consisting at least 150 words from the classroom book. Then they wrote a dialogue by using the same linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and under similar conditions of production. The subjects were asked to submit the dialogue before the summative test date.

#### **4.3 Data Analysis**

The errors were recorded and classified from their first draft writing. The findings of this research were interpreted by using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences program (SPSS) to investigate the most frequent errors.

### **5. RESULTS**

**Table 1. The percentage of error found in controlled writing from 106 first drafts**

<b>Error</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Verb tense	50.9
Capital letter	47.2
Full stop	41.5
Article	31.1
Miss spelling	18.8
Pronoun	17
Subject verb agreement	16
Part of speech	16
Missing an s for the plural	15.1
Preposition	14.2
Missing verb to be	10.4

Helping verb	7.5
Adjective possessive pronouns	6.6
Question mark	6.6
Prepositional verb	6.6
Over use verb to be	6.6
Word order	4.7

As shown in table 1 sorted by the most frequent to the least frequent error, Thai L2 writers had the problems of using the correct verb tense 50.9%, they did not use the capital letters for the proper nouns, first subject pronoun I and at the beginning of the sentence 47.2%, they did not use the full stop at the end of the sentences 41.5% and 31.1% of L2 learners did not use the correct articles. The participants missed spell 18.8% and used the wrong pronouns 17%, they had the subject verb agreement error and using the wrong part of speech 16% and followed by missing an S for the plural 15.1% and the preposition omitted or using the wrong preposition 14%. They also missed using verb to be with an adjective 10.4% and did not use the helping verbs for the interrogation 7.5% and 6.6% of subjects did not use the correct adjective possessive pronouns, omitted to use the question marks, did not used preposition of the phrasal verbs and over use verb to be with the main verb of the sentence. Only 4.7% of them wrote by using the wrong word order.

## **6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The result shown the weakness of L2 in controlled writing, even they had a model for their writing, they still had the errors. However the major errors seemed to be using the correct verb tense, the capital letters for the proper nouns, first subject pronoun I and at the beginning of the sentence, using the full stop to end the sentences and using the correct articles. Controlled writing may help them to notice and focus more on linguistic forms and then they can encounter free writing.

Noticing language is about focusing mental effort on the language. Barnawi (2010) describes noticing as the purposeful allocation of resources to linguistic input and output. Noticing is often synonymous with terms awareness or attention. Schmidt (1990), one of the leading advocates for the cognitive view of writing, argues that noticing is essential to second language acquisition. As stated, Schmidt (1990) and others (see Izumi, 2002; Hanaoka, 2007; Flower & Hayes, 1981;

Mackey, 2006) argues that learners need to notice or become aware of the language before learning takes place. Indeed, researchers argue that promoting awareness is essential because intake depends on it. This appears to be connected to a theory of consciousness which advocates that memory training facilitates learning. In this theory, memory can be seen as consisting of compartments; short term and long term. Schmidt's (1990) ideas are based on cognitive psychological research and the theory of conscious awareness in learning. Schmidt (1990) puts forward three levels of consciousness: perception, noticing and understanding. 1. Perception 2. Noticing; certain items are perceptions and focused on. A choice is made to select. 3. Understanding. Schmidt (1990) asserts that *without noticing and paying attention* to problems in their writing there will not be any intake, no 'conscious understanding of the target language' (Schmidt, 1990).

Other error found in this study was subject verb agreement. In Thai subject and verb do not have to agree; unfortunately, in English they do. English has irregular verb tenses, while Thai does not. Bootchuy (2008) also states that omission of verbs is an issue in Thai student writing. Bootchuy (2008) also explains the pro-drop nature of Thai. In Thai, the subject can be dropped if the context is inferable. In English, sentences require a subject in the relative clause. Thai has adjectival verbs, whereas English does not. In Thai, an adjective can follow a subject and act as a verb.

## **7. RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

What needs to happen next is an attempt to replicate this study. Hyland (2003), one of the leading experts in L2 writing, bemoans the fact that very rarely is there any attempt to replicate studies showing positive or negative results. Simply put, several studies that indicate negative results using the same methods and design as this study would be invaluable. Of course, studies that replicated this one and found similar results would also be extremely useful to L2 writing pedagogy and research. It is perhaps not surprising that studies are not replicated as most researchers have their heart set on doing something original, something which they can call their own. It seems to be a lot of work to just try and copy someone else's research. However, Hyland (2003) argues that this is what is needed in L2 writing research. In the hard sciences, such as chemistry and physics, studies are often replicated and results published which either support or undermine conclusions.

It might also be worthwhile to focus on free writing to see if Thai L2 has the same error between controlled writing and free writing. Perhaps just one group could be used in further studies.

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