

การวิเคราะห์ข้อผิดพลาดทางภาษา ในการเขียนประโยคภาษาอังกฤษ*

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาค้นคว้าครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ เพื่อศึกษาข้อผิดพลาดทางภาษาที่พบในการเขียนประโยคภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาไทย และเพื่อวิเคราะห์สาเหตุของข้อผิดพลาดดังกล่าว โดยได้ทำการศึกษาจาก นิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษชั้นปีที่ 4 ภาควิชาภาษาไทยและภาษาต่างประเทศ คณะศิลปศาสตร์และวิทยาการจัดการ มหาวิทยาลัยเกษตรศาสตร์ วิทยาเขตเฉลิมพระเกียรติ จังหวัดสกลนคร จำนวน 36 คน เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการเก็บข้อมูล คือการเขียนย่อหน้าที่มีคำแนะนำ และการเขียนย่อหน้าแบบอิสระ

ผลการศึกษา จากข้อผิดพลาดที่แบ่งตามกลุ่มความถี่ของข้อผิดพลาดจากงานเขียนทั้ง 90 ชิ้น และข้อผิดพลาดที่แยกเป็นรายบุคคล พบว่า ข้อผิดพลาดที่มีความถี่สูงที่สุดมี 4 กลุ่ม คือข้อผิดพลาดเกี่ยวกับคำนำหน้านาม ข้อผิดพลาดเกี่ยวกับคำนามเอกพจน์และพหูพจน์ ข้อผิดพลาดของโครงสร้างที่ไม่สมบูรณ์ และข้อผิดพลาดของการใช้คำบุพบท ในข้อผิดพลาดแต่ละข้อ พบว่ามีอัตรามากกว่าร้อยละ 80 ของงานเขียน นอกจากนี้ยังพบว่า สาเหตุของข้อผิดพลาดที่เกิดขึ้นในการเขียนส่วนใหญ่ เป็นผลมาจากการแทรกแซงของภาษาแม่ ซึ่งสามารถแบ่งออกเป็นข้อผิดพลาดที่เกิดจาก การแปลแบบคำต่อคำ การใช้โครงสร้างภาษาไทยในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ และการใช้คำคุณศัพท์เป็นคำกริยาหลัก

คำสำคัญ: การเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ, ข้อผิดพลาดที่มีอยู่, ข้อผิดพลาดทางด้านวากยสัมพันธ์, การแทรกแซงจากภาษาแม่

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An Analysis of Syntactic Errors in English Writing^{*}

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate persisted syntactic errors found in English writing by Thai students and to analyze the causes of those errors. The participants were 36 fourth-year students majoring in English, Thai and Foreign Languages Department, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Management Science, Kasetsart University Chalermprakiat Sakonnakhon Province Campus. Two writing tasks designed to collect the data were writing with prompts and free paragraph writing. 90 pieces of writing produced by the participants were analyzed according to the types of persisted syntactic errors including a group error and an individual error, ranging in percentage from the highest to the lowest. From the study, 1002 errors were found, and the four highest-frequency areas of the group persisted syntactic errors made by all the students in their writing were determiner errors, singular and plural noun errors, incomplete structure errors, and preposition errors respectively. In term of the individual errors found at the rate of more than 80 percent of the two writing tasks. The four highest-frequency areas of errors were slightly different from the group error results. Furthermore, it was found that the persisted errors in writing were mainly resulted from the mother tongue interference which could be categorized into word-by-word translation, the use of Thai structure in English writing, and the use of adjectives as main verbs.

Keywords: English Writing, Persisted Error, Syntactic Error, Mother Tongue Inference

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Introduction

Writing skills are an important part of communication for students throughout their academic life because it allows them to organize their feelings and ideas clearly as well as to convey meaning through well-constructed text. Nunan (2003) defines writing as both a physical and mental act. At the most basic level, writing is the physical act of committing words or ideas to some medium. On the other hand, writing is the mental work of inventing ideas, thinking about how to express them, and organizing them into statements and paragraphs. Bjork & Raisanen (1997) state that the importance of writing in all university curricula not only because it is immediate practical application, but because writing is a thinking tool for language development, critical thinking and, extension, for learning in all disciplines. Khan & Akter (2011) note in their study of teaching-learning context that writing skill is usually considered as a clear proof of whether learners learnt English well or not. Learners sit for different examinations and get scores on the basis of writing ability. Although other three skills are more or less practiced in the class, writing ability is often assessed for scores in the examination. Even after practicing writing for a long time, students face numerous writing problems when they join university for higher education.

A growing mass of research has offered valuable insights into the significance of this skill for academic success. Many researchers have studied on students' writing problems. In their research, Khan & Akter (2011) identified undergraduate students' word and sentences level mistakes in English writing. In this regard, they suggested, in the training curriculum, aims and objectives should be appropriately designed and utilized to make sure it is effectively linking the praxis of writing which is inevitably essential in today's English teaching and learning context. Various studies have been carried out focusing on error analysis of EFL learners in different language and culture contexts. Ahmed (1999) found that Bangladeshi students are seriously prone to make mistakes in English articles. He pointed out that mistakes occurred because of the differences between Bengali and English language. In another study, Corson (1997) identified Norwegian undergraduate students' common errors in their academic essay writing. Different types of errors found in her study were spelling, punctuation and organizational problems. She recommended that more intensive English courses should be there before they took their major course of their respected area. After doing research on Chinese students Darus & Ching (2009) showed that the four most common errors made by the Chinese students were the mechanics of writing, tenses, prepositions, and subject-verb agreement. Therefore, it is obvious that many researchers have

found that writing in a second language poses many problems for the majority of English as a foreign language learner.

In Thailand, there also were studies focusing on errors in English writing committed by university students during the past decade. Hinnon (2014), reviewed the studies on common errors in English writing of Thai university students, and she concluded that the three main errors found from the studies are grammatical-lexical errors, first language interference and writing organization errors. Sattayatham & Honsa (2007) investigated the grammatical errors in English paragraph writing of first year medical students at Mahidol University. Forty-four percent of the medical students were asked to translate thirty-two sentences and one paragraph from Thai to English. They were also required to write an opinion paragraph towards the reading that they had read. Most errors found from the students' tasks were wrong choice of words, articles, punctuations, spelling, connectors and conditional sentence. Nonkukhetkhong (2013) investigated grammatical errors made by first year English major students at Udon Thani Rajabhat University, found out that the errors made by the students were the errors of verbs, nouns, possessive case, articles, prepositions, adjectives, adverbs, sentence structure, ordering, coordination/ subordination, capitalization, spelling, punctuations, word selection, word formation, ambiguous communication and miscommunication.

The errors detected from grammatical-lexical error analysis carried out by Thai university students are mostly syntactic errors, lexical errors and semantic errors. In addition, most scholars agree that limited second-language knowledge and the differences in both vocabulary and the structures of mother tongue and the target language (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; Selinker, 1985; Corder, 1985) are the main causes of language errors.

English writing skill is certainly required by students, especially university students as a tool for acquiring knowledge. Also, since an analysis of errors in writing is believed to be one way to improve students' writing skills, this study aims to find out percentage of each type of persisted syntactic errors made by English major undergraduate students at Kasetsart University Chalermprakiat Sakonnakhon Province Campus. As it can be the indicator of the achievement in language learning, this study is also intended to share some recommendations how students can overcome those syntactic problems in their English writing.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate persisted syntactic errors frequently made by students in their English writings.
2. To analyze the causes of those errors in the process of writing.

Methodology

1. Participants

Data were taken from 36 undergraduate students from Kasetsart University Chalermprakiat Sakon Nakhon Province Campus. To ensure that the students were not the beginning learners and their language should reflect syntactic variations of English users, all of the students were the 4th year students majoring in English with levels of an average grade that were not less than 2.0, and had already completed almost all English writing courses taken at the university. The students were studying in the first semester of the academic year 2016 and were selected by systematic sampling.

2. Instruments and Procedure

In order to encourage the students to produce data identifying various types of syntactic errors, they were assigned to finish two writing tasks. The first task involved writing with prompts which included two sub-tasks: picture description and Thai to English translation. A set of English words and phrases were provided as prompts in the picture and translation sub-tasks. The second task was a free writing (approximately 100-150 words for each) in which the students were asked to write at least one paragraph on a topic of their interests. Documents and dictionaries were not allowed and each task must be finished within one hour.

Two types of writing tasks were designed. In order that the students could concentrate on their writing, they were assigned to do the tasks in three separate sessions, which took place on different days within three weeks.

3. Data Analysis

To examine persisted syntactic errors frequently made by students and analyze causes of the syntactic errors, the study carried out the following steps of data analysis. First, underline a sentence containing a syntactic error, then mark a type of each syntactic error. After that record the frequency of persisted syntactic errors, and finally rank the frequency and group persisted syntactic errors from the highest to lowest.

Result

The results of the analysis are divided into four parts. The first part summarizes the participants' personal data. The second part investigates the persisted syntactic error frequency, including group error and individual error frequency. The features of the persisted syntactic errors are demonstrated in the third part. The fourth part analyses how language transfer affects the students' writing.

1. Demographic Information of the Participants

The information of the participants regarding their sex, educational background, age, and the number of years studying English is summarized in table 1. Yet the information serves simply to provide some general background of the participants, not for comparative analysis.

Table 1 Demographic information of the participants

Demographic information		Number (N=30)	
		Frequency	Percent
Sex	Male	9	25
	Female	27	75
Year of study	Fourth year	36	100
Program	English	36	100
Average age		21.7	N/A
Average number of years studying English		12.7	N/A

As shown in Table 1, the total number of the participants was 36. While 9 of the participants were male, 27 were female. As for educational background, all participants were English-major undergraduate students and were all in the fourth year of their study. The average age of all the participants was 21.7, and the average number of years studying English was 12.7.

2. Persisted Syntactic Error Frequency

There were 90 pieces of work written by the students. Table 2 shows the percentages of all syntactic errors collected from the writings. Yet the errors were not run in ascending order with the most frequent mistakes to the least frequent.

Table 2 Frequency of all syntactic errors found in the students' writings.

	Error categories	Frequency (Places)	Percent
1	Subject/Verb Agreement	95	9.48
2	Pronouns	8	0.79
3	Prepositions	112	11.17
4	Conjunctions	11	1.09
5	Determiners	177	17.66
6	Tenses	65	6.48
7	Infinitives and Gerunds	54	5.38
8	Auxiliary Verbs	16	1.59
9	Incomplete Structures	122	12.17
10	Run-On Sentences	7	0.69
11	Word Orders	38	3.79
12	Punctuations	90	8.98
13	<i>There-be</i>	19	1.89
14	Possessive Structures	3	0.29
15	Singular and Plural Nouns	128	12.77
16	Relative Clauses	15	1.49
17	Participial Phrases	42	4.19
	Total	1002	100.00

Regarding the first research question, “What are the four highest-frequency areas of persisted syntactic errors found in Thai students' writings?”, all the writings were analyzed according to the types of persisted syntactic errors which include a group error and an individual error. Table 3 shows the

percentages of group errors, or all errors made by all the students as participants. The group errors were run in ascending order with the most frequent mistakes to the least frequent.

Table 3 Frequency of group errors made by all students.

Error categories	Frequency	Percent
1 Determiners	177	17.66
2 Singular/Plural Nouns	128	12.77
3 Incomplete Structures	122	12.17
4 Prepositions	112	11.17
5 Subject/Verb Agreement	95	9.48
6 Punctuation	90	8.98
7 Tenses	60	6.48
8 Infinitives and Gerunds	54	5.38
9 Participle Phrases	42	4.19
10 Word Order	38	3.79
11 <i>There-be</i>	19	1.89
12 Auxiliary Verbs	16	1.59
13 Relative Clauses	15	1.49
14 Conjunctions	11	1.09
15 Pronouns	8	0.79
16 Run-On	7	0.69
17 Possessive Structures	3	0.29
Total	1,002	100

As shown in Table 3, the four highest-frequency areas of the group persisted syntactic errors found in the students' writings were determiner errors, singular and plural noun errors, incomplete structure errors, and preposition errors.

Table 4 shows the percentage of individual errors or the errors found at the rate of more than 80 percent from the two writing tasks. These errors were found in each student's writing tasks. The errors were run in ascending order with the most frequent mistakes to the least frequent.

Table 4 Frequency of errors made by individual student.

Error categories	Frequency	Percent
1 Determiners	8	22.22
2 Subject/Verb Agreement	5	13.88
3 Prepositions	5	13.88
4 Infinitives and Gerunds	4	11.11
5 Incomplete Structures	4	11.11
6 Punctuations	4	11.11
7 Singular /Plural Nouns	4	11.11
8 Tenses	2	5.55
Total	36	100.00

As shown in Table 4, the four highest-frequency areas of the individual persisted syntactic errors found in the students' writings were determiner errors, subject/verb agreement errors and preposition errors, Infinitive and gerund errors, incomplete structure errors, punctuation errors, and singular and plural noun errors, and tense errors.

3. Persisted Syntactic Error of Features

From the aforementioned results, the features of each error category have been analyzed as follows.

1. Subject/Verb Agreement

Five features of the subject/verb agreement errors were found in the students' writings; the suffixes –s or –es are left off a verb for the third person singular subject in the present simple tense, the suffixes –s or –es are left of a verb for a singular noun: a word that names one person, place, or thing, in the present simple tense, the verb form does not agree with its subjects, and the verb in a relative clause does not agree with the noun that the relative clause modifies.

2. Pronouns

Two features of the pronoun errors were found in the students' writings. One is the use of incorrect forms of reflexive pronouns, and the forms of possessive pronouns have been omitted inappropriately.

3. Prepositions

Three features of the preposition errors were found in the students' writings. The errors were the incorrect and unnecessary use of preposition of place and location, the incorrect and unnecessary use of preposition of time, the use of incorrect prepositions combined with other words in structures of prepositional phrases.

4. Conjunctions

Two features of the conjunction errors were found in the students' writings. One was the forms of coordinating conjunctions have been inappropriately omitted, and another was the overuse of subordinating conjunctions.

5. Determiners

Four features of the determiner errors were found in the students' writings. These were the lack of the three articles, the incorrect use of the three articles, the instable use of the three articles, and the incorrect use of quantifiers.

6. Tenses

In this study, there were 65 (6.48%) tense errors. Two features of the tense errors were found in the students' writings. The first one was the use of incorrect verb forms that did not agree with the sentences' time expression. The second features were the time expressed in a relative clause and the times expressed in a main clause were disagreeable.

7. Infinitives and Gerunds

Five features of the infinitive and gerund errors were the missing of an infinitive when necessary and the incorrect use of an infinitive, the unstable use of an infinitive with to mixed up with a gerund, causing an incorrect parallel structure, the verb was not appeared in a gerund form when used as a noun or an object of a sentence, the verb was not appeared in a gerund form when used as an object of a preposition, and the gerund was unnecessary use.

8. Auxiliary Verbs

Three features of the auxiliary verb errors were found in the students' writings. There were the use of be instead of is, am, are in the present tenses, the incorrect use of the modal auxiliaries or modal structures, and the missing of the modal auxiliaries or modals when necessary.

9. Incomplete Structures

Six features of the incomplete structures were found in the students' writings. They were the missing of a subject of a sentence, the missing of a verb of a sentence, the missing of direct and indirect objects, the overuse of verbs in a sentence, the missing of subject, verb, and object complements, and the unnecessary use of subject and object complements.

10. Run-on Sentences

In this study, there were 7 (0.69%) run-on sentences. Some of the illustration found in the students' writings such as I enjoy watching movies when I am free especially zombie movie is my favorite movie.

11. Word Order

Three features of the word order errors were found in the students' writings, an adjective that modifies a noun is incorrectly placed, the question structure is incorrectly used in an affirmative sentence, a modifier, a possessive adjective, and a compound noun are incorrectly placed.

12. Punctuations

Four features of the punctuation errors were found in the students' writings. The errors were a period (.) was left off the end of a sentence. A comma (,) was used to separate all item series in a sentence but it was left off in the last two items. A comma (,) was left of a transition, or a connecting word in a sentence. And a comma (,) in a conditional sentence was missing.

13. There-be

One feature of the there-be errors was found in the students' writings. That has the incorrect use of a verb have instead of there-be.

14. Possessive Structures

Two features of the errors in possessive structures were found in the students' writings. One is the incorrect use of a possessive form for a singular noun: an apostrophe (s'). Another is the possessive form of is not used when needed.

15. Singular and Plural Nouns

Four features of the singular and plural noun errors were found in the students' writings. They were the suffixes –s or –es are left off a plural noun when the plural noun is preceded by quantifiers, the suffixes –s or –es are added to a noun when the noun is preceded by quantifiers for a singular noun, an uncountable noun is incorrectly used as a countable noun by adding –S, and the suffixes –s or –es are left off a countable noun that is generally in a plural form.

16. Relative Clauses

Three features of the relative clause errors were found in the students' writings. The relative pronouns used as the subject of a relative clause do not agree with a modified noun in a main clause, the relative pronouns used as the subject of a relative clause are omitted, and there is not a noun in a main clause that is modified by a relative clause.

17. Participial Phrases

Two features of the participial phrase errors were found in the students' writings; the use of incorrect verb forms when reduced from an adjective clause to an adjective phrase, and other incorrect structures using present and past participial forms.

4. How Language Transfer or Mother Tongue Interference Affects Students' Writing

Regarding the second research question, "By what are the persisted syntactic errors caused?", it was found that the persisted syntactic errors made by students in their English writings mainly resulted from the mother tongue interference. In this study, the features of the mother tongue interference errors could be found in three categories, word-by-word translation, the use of Thai construction in English writing, and the use of adjectives as main verbs.

According to word-by-word translation, this problem occurs because students tend to directly translate Thai to English without concerning its correctness or appropriateness. The examples of the word-by-word translation and the use *of have* instead of *there-be*.

In public park **have** a big tree.

There is a big tree in the public park.

Another feature of the mother tongue interference errors is the use of Thai construction in English writing. In Thai construction, a verb of a sentence does not have to be changed in order to be agreed with

a subject of the sentence; moreover, the Thai language has not got word expressions used to identify tenses. For examples,

1. It scare(s) me.
2. It make(s) me happy.
3. She forget(s) to bring her son his bag.

There were two features of the tense errors found in the students' writing.

1. The use of incorrect verb forms that did not agree with the sentences' time expression. For example, *Several days ago, heavy snowfall makes (made) the many roads white.*

2. The time expressed in a relative clause and the time expressed in a main clause were disagreeable. For example, *I heard that there will be a new campus which is located (will be located) in the East.*

In addition to the word-by-word translation and the use of Thai construction in English writing, the other mother tongue interference found in the students' writing is the use of adjectives as main verbs. In English, verb to be is used with an adjective; however, there is no form of verb to be used with an adjective in Thai. For example, *I like to sing country songs because the country songs beautiful and impress.* The correct sentence is *I like to sing country songs because the country songs are beautiful and impressive.*

Conclusion

In conclusion, regarding the first research question, "What are the four highest-frequency areas of persisted syntactic errors found in Thai students' writings?", all the writings written by the students were analyzed according to the types of persisted syntactic errors which include a group error and an individual error. The results of this study revealed that the four highest-frequency of the persisted syntactic errors were determiner, singular and plural noun, incomplete structure, and preposition.

Regarding the second research question, "By what are the persisted syntactic errors caused?", it was found that the persisted syntactic errors made by students in their English writings mainly resulted from the mother tongue interference. The features of the mother tongue interference errors could be categorized into word-by-word translation, the use of Thai construction in English writing, and the use of adjectives as main verbs. Furthermore, the study found that the persisted errors in writing were also

resulted from the false hypothesis and the ignorance of the correct sentence patterns of English structures, together with the lack of grammatical knowledge.

Discussion

The results of the error analysis found that most persisted syntactic errors were caused by the false hypothesis and the ignorance of the correct sentence patterns of English structures, together with the lack of knowledge in syntactic/grammatical rules. In this study; however, the mother tongue interference appeared to be the most cause of all error categories. The feature of mother tongue interference could be categorized into word-by-word translation, the use of Thai construction in English writing, and the use of adjectives as main verbs.

When compared to the study of Khamput (2004), it indicated that the errors found in 55 pieces of students' English writings could be grouped into interference errors, intralingual errors, developmental errors, and uncategorized errors which accounted for 23.16%, 72.49%, and 4.33% respectively. In her study, the interference errors were classified into (1) using adjective as main verbs (2) using Thai constructions in English (3) using word-by-word translation (4) telling times. Consequently, there appeared to be some similarities in the features of interference errors between these two studies.

In addition, Nopjirapong (2011), studying about article errors, revealed that the errors found in 20 pieces of students English writings were caused by mother tongue interference. The highest ranked errors, the omission of the before noun which accounted for 28% was categorized as interference or interlingual errors. Furthermore, Patramongkorn (2005) who studied the errors in essay writing of undergraduate and graduate students at Ramkhamhaeng University also supported that the errors found in both undergraduate and graduate students' English writings resulted from mother tongue interference. Word for word translation, a method employed by students, was one evidence of errors causes by the influence of native language,

According to the studies mentioned above, mother tongue interference is one important cause of errors in students' English writings. Students of the same language background need not to have the same interference errors. Also, the same student may have different interference errors each time he/she writes and one form of the first language transfer may cause more than one error in the second language as Suwatthee (1981) mentioned. Therefore, further studies regarding other aspects of mother tongue interference are still needed.

Suggestions for Further Research

1. The participants of this study were only 36 undergraduate students. In fact, there should be more participants in order that the findings will be more reliable and there will be more syntactic variations of English use.
2. There should be a similar study with student in different English skill background in order to compare the results and investigate other errors which may be caused by mother tongue interference.
3. In order to prevent students from producing sentences having too serious syntactic errors and being unable to be classified into error category, the participants of the study should be users of English who have studied the four English skills extensively – listening speaking, reading, and writing, especially during the period of their study at the university, and users of English who have either upper-immediate or high level of English knowledge and skills, only those who with an average grade over 3.5 for all English language subjects.
4. There should be in the interview session regarding students' errors in the research methodology in order to find the real causes and other factors.
5. After the certain errors that seemed to be the main problems for students were identified, there should be a further study to explore the way to correct these errors.

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