

An Analysis of Lexical Semantic Errors in English Writing by Thai EFL Learners

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Abstracts

This study examined the semantic lexical errors made by Thai undergraduate learners of English in their writing. A total of 462 writing tasks were analyzed, resulting in 1,256 errors, with an average of 2.72 semantic lexical errors per paper. The errors were classified into twenty categories based on James's (1998 : 9) lexical taxonomy. The most prevalent error was calque, accounting for 51.04% of total errors. The second highest number of errors was misselection of vowel-based forms, at 12.58%, closely followed by misselection of suffixes at 9.47%, preposition errors at 6.29%, and near synonyms at 3.98%. Notably, there were five categories of errors that did not occur at all, including overly specific terms, inappropriate co-hyponyms, arbitrary combinations, verbosity, and misselection of prefixes. The study found that calque errors, or errors resulting from direct translation from the learner's first language, were the most prevalent among Thai learners of English. These errors occur when Thai words are translated literally into English, without considering the subtle differences in meaning between the two languages. The study also found that Thai EFL writers often struggle with correctly adding suffixes to words, and that errors related to the use of preposition partners and semantic word selection were also prevalent. These error types, along with specific examples, were carefully examined and discussed in detail throughout the study.

Keywords: Semantic lexical Errors; interlingual errors; First language, Second language

Introduction

Writing an essay in a second language is a challenging skill to learn, since it requires other knowledge, such as vocabulary, language structure, and rhetorical organization. Writing is also considered an extremely complex activity because the writer has to show control of several variables simultaneously when they write (Nunan, 1989 : 87). Richards and Schmidt (2002 : 1) assert that writing is considered as the culmination of a series of complex preparation, drafting, reviewing and revising procedures. That is, when writers compose, they deliver to the undertaking expertise of the procedure of writing, and of the writing techniques they will use while composing. They also use the circumstance of the writing, its social and professional meaning, their knowledge of the reader's perceptions within the discourse context, and their background culture's styles, social contexts, genres, and expectations (Bruffee, 1986: 773-790; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993 : 9 ; Fairclough, 2001 : 87 ; Ivanic & Camps, 2001 : 3-33 ; Johns, 1997 : 141-151). Similarly, Canale and Swain (1980 : 1-47) stated that competence in various areas (e.g. grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence), is required in order to produce effective writing.

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Writing an essay in a second language can be a challenging task as it requires a mastery of various language components such as vocabulary, grammar, and organization. According to Matsuda (2003 : 87), effective L2 writing involves more than just linguistic proficiency; it also requires an understanding of the cultural and rhetorical conventions of the target language. Matsuda argues that L2 writers need to develop the ability to adapt one's writing to different rhetorical situations. This involves not only mastering the rules of grammar and syntax but also understanding the rhetorical strategies and conventions of the target language. One study by Liu and Kunnan (2016 : 43) found that second language writing proficiency involves knowledge of not only grammar and vocabulary, but also discourse, pragmatics, and culture. Additionally, Richards and Schmidt (2002 : 1) suggest that writing is the result of a series of procedures, including preparation, drafting, reviewing, and revising. This means that when authors compose, they draw upon their knowledge of the writing process, techniques for organization and structure, as well as an understanding of language's formal frameworks and discourse structure. Furthermore, writers must also consider the context of their writing, such as its social and professional significance, their audience's perspective, and the cultural norms and expectations of their background. Heo and Prescott (2021 : 1) also noted that proficiency in various areas, including grammar, discourse, and cultural and pragmatics knowledge, is necessary for effective writing.

According to Richards and Renandya (2002 : 7), second language learners must not only possess the aforementioned skills, but also have proficiency in the target language and the ability to express their ideas using correct language usage. Brown (1987) suggests that in second language learning, listening and speaking come first, followed by reading and writing, which are considered advanced skills. Weigle (2002 : 9) asserts that writing is the most challenging skill for ESL learners. Studies have shown that L2 writers tend to produce lower quality writing in comparison to their first language (L1) writing. These difficulties may result from various factors including limitation of L2 linguistic knowledge (Blau & Hall, 2002; Cumming, 2001 : 666-675, Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005 : 9 ; Leisak, 1989 : 2 ; Kleisar, 2005 : 167-172), lack of vocabulary knowledge (Laufer, 1989 : 316-323 ; Nation, 2011 : 316-323), writing apprehension or fear of writing (Stapa & Abdul-Majid, 2009), , and the influence from learner's L1 (Akbar et al.,2018).

Research has shown that learners from different L1 backgrounds and proficiency levels can make different kinds of errors. For example, Chen and Ge (2020) conducted a study on the impact of L1 transfer on lexical semantic errors in the writing of Chinese EFL learners. The researchers found that L1 transfer had a significant influence on the use of English collocations by Chinese learners, leading to overuse of some Chinese collocations and underuse of some English collocations. Similarly, Saeidi and Saeidi (2020) investigated the effect of L1 transfer on the use of synonyms and antonyms by Iranian EFL learners, and found that learners tended to use L1-based synonyms and antonyms that were not appropriate in English. Another study by Mirzaei and Vahidi (2021) examined the effects of L1 transfer on the choice of English vocabulary by Kurdish EFL learners, finding that learners often used inappropriate synonyms and antonyms and made incorrect word choices. Direct translation is another common issue in L2 writing that can negatively impact the use of idiomatic expressions. Tian and Zhao (2020 : 535-546.) investigated the effects of direct translation on the writing of Chinese EFL learners, and found that this approach had a negative effect on the use of idiomatic expressions in learners' writing. Prepositional errors are also common in L2 writing and can be influenced by

L1 transfer. Keshavarz and Atai (2019 : 27-41) found that L1 transfer significantly affected prepositional errors in L2 writing, and emphasized the need for learners to be aware of the differences between their L1 and L2 regarding prepositions.

Similar to other contexts, Thai writers also make errors in their English compositions. Thep-Ackrapong (2005 : 248-276), for example, suggests that direct translation of Thai words was the major problematic of Thai writers in English writings. This is a problem that has been confirmed by multiple researchers such as Sermsook, Liamnimitr, and Pochakorn. (2017 : 79-100), who have identified that the most frequent source of errors in English writing by Thai learners is interlingual transfer. They found that errors at the word level, such as literal translations from Thai, were the most common. Additionally, Syarinpuddin (2015 : 139-153) and Iamsiu (2014 : 144-154) concur that the source of errors made by Thai learners is the influence of their first language, Thai. When second language learners rely too heavily on their first language, which is different from the target language, errors are more likely to occur. Waelatech et al (2018) examined the English writing errors produced by 15 Thai undergraduate learners in essay writing. The study found that lexical errors were the second most errors found after syntactic errors. Suvarnamani (2017 : 1-14) investigated tense, fragment, and collocation errors in descriptive writing by Silpakorn University first-year Arts students. The study found that first language interference was the main cause of the fragment errors.

In conclusion, previous research has revealed that interlingual errors are a prevalent type of error in L2 writing. Transfer from L1 into L2, particularly regarding lexical choices, collocation, and words and phrases literally translated from L1 into L2, as well as applying L1 linguistic rules to the target language, are all common error patterns. However, these studies have largely focused on grammatical and syntactic features, while semantic errors, which appear to be more essential, have received little attention from researchers. Therefore, further research is needed to investigate lexical semantic errors in second language acquisition.

Research Objective

1. To examine lexical semantic errors in Thai EFL learners' English writing

Research Methodology

Data Source

The data for this study consisted of written texts produced by Thai students from a university in the Northeast of Thailand and an institutional language testing center. The texts were specifically chosen to provide comprehensive information about negative L1 transfer, which was the focus of the analysis. The texts were collected from English for Local Tourism classes during the 2021 academic year, with a total of 262 papers. An additional 200 texts were taken from test papers provided by the institutional language testing center, all written by Thai test-takers on various topics from the 2020 academic year. To be included in the study, the texts had to be longer than 100 words, as per the guidelines established by Biber (1990 : 257-269, 1993 : 243-257). The total number of texts used in the study was 462.

Procedure

In this study, 462 essays on four different topics (Songkran festival, Loy Krathong Day, Khao Pansa Festival, and Traveling) were analyzed. The analysis was conducted by both the researcher and a coder (a native speaker of Thai). The coder corrected 60% of the manuscripts, while the researcher analyzed the remaining 40%. In cases where the classification of errors

was difficult, the coders were asked to provide additional explanations for specific sentences, phrases, or words. The researcher used a simple frequency method to count the errors and calculate their percentages. Other types of errors such as syntactic and spelling errors were also found in the manuscripts, but they were not considered in this study as they were not relevant to the research scope. The errors were classified into sub-types under two main categories: formal and semantic features. Each error was assigned to a single category, although it was sometimes possible to categorize an error in more than one way.

Error Classifications

Previous research on lexical errors has employed various error classifications, most of which have limited categories. For instance, Duskova (1969 : 8) only used four categories while Engber (1995 : 87) used nine. The use of these simplified systems to describe learner errors can result in vague boundaries and arbitrary categorizations, and the vague definition of error categories can prevent a full analysis. Despite the challenge of overlap between categories, a more in-depth examination of error types is necessary. This study's framework for lexical error classification was primarily inspired by James's (1998 : 9) taxonomy, which was derived from previous studies. The framework was adapted to include two types of meaning from Leech (1981 : 9). James categorizes lexical errors into formal and semantic features, based on Richards' (1976 : 77-89.) classic word knowledge framework which suggests seven essential knowledge components for knowing a word, including pronunciation and spelling, syntactic behavior, collocations, semantic values, secondary meanings, word associations, and frequency of use. The current error classification includes two main categories from James's Lexical Taxonomy and a third category, semantic redundancy. The latter, as stated by Lui and Xiang (2018 : 28-41), refers to repetitions of meaning in words or phrases, often due to repeated or entailed content words. This category was included as it was discovered in a pilot study. A summary of error types can be found in Figure 1.

1. Misselection of prefix type
2. Misselection of suffix type
3. Misselection of vowel-based type
4. Misselection of consonant-based type
5. Misselection of false friends
6. Borrowing
7. Coinage
8. Calque
9. General term for specific one
10. Overly specific term
11. Inappropriate co-hyponyms
12. Near synonyms
13. Semantic word selection
14. Statistically weighted preferences
15. Arbitray combinations
16. Preposition partners
17. Connotation errors
18. Verbosity
19. Underspecification
20. Semantic redundancy

Figure 1 Types of lexical errors

Data analysis

Error Analysis was used to explain the errors (EA). The errors were examined using four techniques taken from Corder (1974 : 9), namely (1) error detection, (2) error counting, (3) error categorization, and (4) error description and explanation.

Research Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the hypothesis that errors in second language writing may be influenced by the writers' first language (L1) background and their proficiency levels in the second language (L2). In particular, we will focus on lexical semantic errors, which will be classified according to James' (1989) lexical taxonomy. This framework will enable us to identify and analyze the types of errors that are most prevalent among Thai learners of English, with a particular focus on calque errors, misselection of vowel-based errors, errors in the use of suffixes, preposition partner errors, and semantic errors resulting from the inappropriate use of synonym.

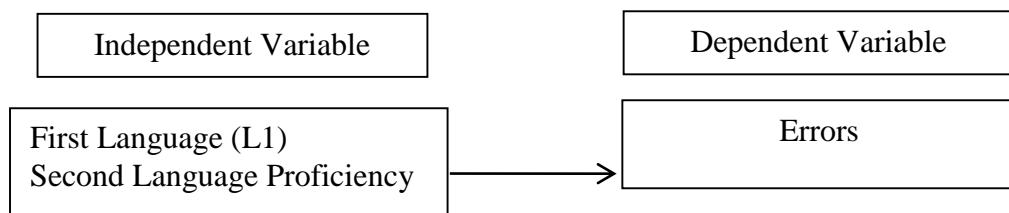


Figure 2: Conceptual framework

Research Results

The errors identified in this study were classified into twenty categories based on James' (1989:76) lexical taxonomy, namely, formal misselection, formal misformation, confusion of sense relations, collocation errors, connotation errors, stylistic errors, and an additional category of redundancy. As shown in Table 1, the 462 writing tasks produced by different individuals yielded 1,256 errors, resulting in an average of 2.72 errors per paper. The most prevalent error among Thai writers was calque, accounting for 51.04% of total errors. The second highest number of errors was misselection of vowel-based forms, at 12.58%, closely followed by misselection of suffixes at 9.47%, preposition errors at 6.29%, and near synonyms at 3.98%. Notably, there were five categories of errors that did not occur at all, including overly specific terms, inappropriate co-hyponyms, arbitrary combinations, verbosity, and misselection of prefixes.

The most frequent error types among Thai-speaking learners of English in their writing, included calques, misselection errors on suffixes, misselection of vowel-based forms, errors in the use of preposition partners, and semantic word selection errors. These error types, along with specific examples, were carefully examined and discussed in detail throughout the study.

Table 1: Rank-order frequency of lexical errors

Error types	No of errors	%
Calque	641	51.04
Misselection of Vowel-based	158	12.58
Misselection of Suffix	119	9.47
Prepositional Partner	79	6.29
Near Synonyms	50	3.98
Semantic Word Selection	49	3.90
Misselection of Consonant-based	46	3.66
Borrowing	32	2.55
Underspecification	30	2.39
Redundancy	26	2.07
Coinage	17	1.35
False Friends	3	0.24
Statistically Weighted Preferences	3	0.24
Connotation Errors	2	0.16
General Term for Specific One	1	0.08
Overly Specific Term	0	0.00
Inappropriate Co-hyponym	0	0.00
Arbitrary Combinations	0	0.00
Verbosity	0	0.00
Misselection of Prefix	0	0.00
Total	1,256	100

In this study, it was found that calque errors, or errors resulting from direct translation from the learner's first language (L1), were prevalent among Thai learners of English. These errors occur when Thai words are translated literally into English, without considering the subtle differences in meaning between the two languages. The analysis revealed that Calques were the most frequent error type, accounting for 51.04% of all errors identified. Examples of calque errors include phrases such as "*have importance*," which should be "*is important*," to express the level of significance or relevance of something, or "*go to make business*," which is intended to express "*to do business*." Other examples include "*Buddhist Lent Day 1 year will have 1 time*," which could be corrected to "*Buddhist Lent Day occurs once a year*," and

"Songkran festival *directly* on April 13-15," which should be "Songkran festival *falls* on April 13-15," to express when an event or holiday takes place on a specific date. The most frequent expression found was "To play Songkran water," which is intended to express "to celebrate Songkran festival" or "to splash water" during the festival. These examples demonstrate the importance of considering the nuanced meanings of words and phrases and avoiding direct translation from the L1.

The second highest number of errors identified in the study is misselection of vowel-based errors, which occurred when speakers of the second language chose words that appear and sound similar to one another, instead of the correct word. The study revealed that this type of error occurred with a total of 158 frequencies, accounting for 12.58% of all errors identified. Examples of this error include phrases like "All of *this* are important of Buddhist," which should be rephrased as "All of *these* are important for Buddhists" to indicate that the things being referred to are important for people who follow Buddhism. Another example is "when villagers do *rise* farming," which should be rephrased as "when villagers do *rice* farming" to indicate that the villagers are engaging in farming activities related to the cultivation of rice. Additionally, "from *boat* Thai and foreign tourists" is not grammatically correct and should be rephrased as "both Thai and foreign tourists" to indicate that the tourists are from different countries. Another error is "*sent* pagoda," which should be "sand pagoda" to indicate a pagoda made out of sand. In this case, the writers mispronounce the word and assume that "*sent*" can be used as "*sand*." Another example of the misselection of vowel-base error is "*pepole*," which Thai learners use instead of "*people*" to indicate a group of individuals.

Furthermore, Thai EFL writers often struggle with correctly adding suffixes to words. One common error is the selection of synonyms with similar forms, such as using "*Buddhism*" instead of "*Buddhist*" in the sentence "*I am Buddhism.*" Buddhism refers to a religion originating from South Asia, which teaches that personal spiritual development leads to liberation from suffering. Buddhist, on the other hand, refers to a person who practices Buddhism. In this context, the correct sentence would be "*I am a Buddhist,*" indicating that the person believes in Buddhism." Another example of misselection of suffix type can be seen in the sentence, "*for example listening to a sermon, make merit, offer food to the monks, donate, the candlelight procession.*" The writer has failed to maintain parallel structure. This sentence describes activities that Buddhists typically do during the Khao Pansa or Buddhist Lent festival. All the words "make, offer, donate, and procession" should be changed to the "ing" form. Thus, the sentence should read, "*for example listening to a sermon, making merit, offering food to the monks, donating, and participating in the candlelight procession.*" These errors may result from a lack of understanding of English grammar rules."

Preposition partners errors refer to the inappropriate use of prepositions by L2 learners. This can include omitting a preposition when it is needed, adding one when it is not, or using the incorrect preposition. Examples of incorrect usage include "learning to school," "in the same time," and "...and warn to you." As demonstrated, "learning to school" and "in the same time" indicate a substitution of preposition, where "learning at school" and "at the same time" are required. Additionally, "...and warn to you," used instead of "...and warn you," indicates the unnecessary addition of a preposition." Furthermore, these errors are closely related to the semantic errors that are caused by mistreatment of synonyms.

In terms of semantics, it is important to note that it is difficult to find two synonymous terms or sentences that have exactly the same meaning. This study found that Thai EFL learners often make errors when treating certain terms as synonyms and using them interchangeably.

Specifically, many errors occurred when the meaning of the synonym used and the appropriate synonym were not exactly identical, resulting in the intended meaning not being accurately expressed. For example, in the sentence "*is celebrated around Thailand*," the intended meaning of "*around*" should have been "*across*." Another example of a near-synonym error was in the phrase "*a temple event*," where the intended meaning was "*a temple fair*." In this case, the student failed to distinguish the difference between "event" and "fair." These errors highlight the importance of understanding the nuanced meanings of words and using them appropriately in context.

Conclusion

This study identified several common errors made by Thai EFL learners when writing in English, including calque errors, misselection of vowel-based errors, suffix errors, preposition partner errors, and semantic errors. The prevalence of calque errors emphasizes the importance of avoiding literal translations from the L1 and considering the subtle differences in meaning between the two languages. Misselection of vowel-based errors and suffix errors may result from a lack of understanding of English grammar rules. Preposition partner errors are closely related to semantic errors that are caused by mistreatment of synonyms. The study found that it is important to understand the nuanced meanings of words and use them appropriately in context to avoid semantic errors. Overall, this research highlights the importance of understanding the language and culture of the target language when learning a second language to improve the accuracy of written communication.

Discussion

The study found that Thai EFL learners commonly make calque errors, which occur when they directly translate words or phrases from their first language into English, resulting in errors in grammar, vocabulary and meaning.

These errors can make the meaning of a sentence unclear or even incorrect and can be confusing for native English speakers. Examples of calque errors such as "have importance," "go to make business," "Buddhist Lent Day 1 year will have 1 time," and "Songkran festival directly on April 13-15" demonstrate how these errors can make the meaning of a sentence unclear or even incorrect. This is in line with Thep-Ackrapong (2005 : 248-276) who pointed out that the direct translation from Thai and breaking down certain collocation rules while writing in English lead to confusion for readers. The study suggests that more attention should be paid to addressing this issue in language instruction by providing learners with opportunities to practice using English vocabulary and grammar in context, and by encouraging them to think critically about the meaning of words and phrases. Additionally, teaching strategies such as translation and contrastive analysis can help learners understand the differences in meaning between words and phrases in their L1 and English. These type of errors are caused by linguistic interference from the learner's mother tongue (Richards, 1971 : 1 ; Thep-Ackrapong, 2005 : 248-276) and lack of knowledge of word families (Schmitt and Zimmerman, 2002 : 145-171).

The result of misselection of vowel-base errors found in this study is that it is one of the common types of errors made by Thai EFL learners. This error occurs when Thai learners incorrectly select the vowel sound in a word, which can cause confusion and make the sentence difficult to understand. This type of error is often found in words that have similar vowel sounds, such as "pepole" instead of "people" or "sent" instead of "sand". It is suggested that this type of error is prevalent among Thai EFL learners, and it is likely caused by a lack of understanding of the English language's phonetic system and the difficulty of distinguishing between similar vowel sounds. Unlike English, Thai has a relatively small vowel system with only 9 vowels. This difference in vowel systems can lead to errors in English writing, as Thai learners may transfer the vowel sounds of their L1 into English words. For example, Thai learners may pronounce the English words "send" and "sand" with the same vowel sound, as the Thai language does not make a distinction between the "e" and "a" sounds. Additionally, the influence of the learner's first language, Thai, which has a different phonetic system, may also contribute to this error. It implies that more emphasis on phonetics and pronunciation instruction is necessary for Thai EFL learners in order to improve their English language skills. It may be helpful to provide examples of common vowel-base errors and have learners practice correcting them. It is also important to note that this type of error is not limited to Thai learners, learners from other L1 background may also face similar challenge while learning English. Therefore, it is important to provide adequate guidance to help learners to overcome this challenge.

The findings also indicate that Thai EFL learners often struggle with the appropriate use of prepositions and near synonyms. In terms of prepositions, learners may omit them when needed, add them when not needed, or use the incorrect preposition. In terms of near synonyms, learners may treat certain terms as interchangeable, leading to errors in meaning and difficulty in conveying the intended message. To address these issues, learners should be provided with opportunities to practice using prepositions and near synonyms in contextually appropriate situations. This can be achieved through activities such as comparing and contrasting meanings and engaging in communicative tasks. The study also highlights the difficulty of prepositions in language learning and that even young native speakers may take years to fully understand and use them correctly (Durkin, Shire, & Beeman, 1985 : 261-280). These types of errors are not limited to Thai learners and learners from other L1 backgrounds may also face similar challenges while learning English.

Implication

Based on the findings of a recent study, there are several potential implications for further research. Firstly, investigating the specific linguistic characteristics of the Thai language that may contribute to the errors identified in the study can provide a better understanding of the root causes of such errors. Secondly, exploring the relationship between error types and proficiency levels can help identify the most common errors among learners at different stages of language development. Thirdly, conducting a similar study with a larger and more diverse sample size can provide more generalized findings and determine if error patterns are consistent across different groups. Finally, incorporating the use of technology such as AI or NLP tools in identifying and correcting errors can be studied to determine its effectiveness in improving language proficiency.

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