

การเปรียบเทียบการพัฒนาโครงสร้างประโยคของนักเรียนมัธยมศึกษากลุ่มอ่อนและเก่งและ การศึกษาอิทธิพลของพุทธิปัญญาในการเรียนภาษาต่างประเทศ

สมศักดิ์ แก้วนุช¹

มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏพิบูลสงคราม

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บทความวิจัย

งานวิจัยครั้งนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อ 1) เปรียบเทียบการพัฒนาโครงสร้างภาษาของนักเรียนมัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 2 กลุ่มที่มีความสามารถสูงและกลุ่มที่มีความสามารถต่ำ 2) สำรวจลักษณะโครงสร้างภาษาที่ง่ายและยากสำหรับนักเรียนทั้งสองกลุ่ม 3) ศึกษาผลของทักษะเชิงพุทธิปัญญาที่มีผลต่อการพัฒนาโครงสร้างภาษาของนักเรียนทั้งสองกลุ่ม และ 4) ศึกษาลักษณะที่ยากทางโครงสร้างสำหรับนักเรียนทั้งสองกลุ่ม ผู้วิจัยสอนการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษให้กับทั้งสองกลุ่ม คือ กลุ่มที่มีความสามารถสูงและกลุ่มที่มีความสามารถต่ำ รวม 80 คนในสองภาคเรียนของปีการศึกษา 2556 ที่โรงเรียนองครักษ์ จังหวัดนนทบุรีโดยเน้นโครงสร้างประโยคและรูปแบบงานเขียนแบบไม่นำทาง 100 ชิ้นงานจากแต่ละกลุ่มโดยใช้แบบฟอร์ม 3 แบบ นอกจากนี้ยังสัมภาษณ์นักเรียน 10 คนจากแต่ละกลุ่ม ผลวิจัยพบว่านักเรียนทั้งสองกลุ่มพัฒนาโครงสร้างภาษาคล้ายกันในด้านโครงสร้างประโยค ทั้งสองกลุ่มผลิตวลีประเภทสองส่วนได้ดี แต่กลุ่มที่มีความสามารถต่ำผลิตวลีภาษาฯได้น้อยมากและเกือบจะไม่สามารถเรียงวลีให้ถูกต้องต่อตัวหน้าที่ได้เลย กลุ่มนักเรียนที่มีความสามารถสูงผลิตข้อผิดพลาดมากกว่าในขณะที่กลุ่มที่มีความสามารถต่ำผลิตเนื้อหาสำหรับการวิเคราะห์น้อยและผลิตลักษณะภาษาที่ไม่ใช่ภาษาอังกฤษมาก ลักษณะโครงสร้างประโยคที่ทำให้ทั้งสองกลุ่มผลิตข้อผิดพลาดจะเกี่ยวข้องกับการละคำ (omission) ลักษณะที่ไม่ใช่ภาษาอังกฤษ (non-English) กາລ (tense) การเพิ่มคำ (addition) ความสัมพันธ์ประบനและกริยา (subject-verb agreement) ประโยคไม่สมบูรณ์ (fragment) และ การเรียงคำผิด (misordering) ซึ่งทั้งหมดแสดงให้เห็นถึงความแตกต่างของภาษาที่ 1 และภาษาที่ 2 ทักษะเชิงพุทธิปัญญาที่มีผลต่อการผลิตโครงสร้างประโยคและวลีที่ถูกต้องและไม่ถูกต้อง จำกัดความประยุกต์และวลีที่ทั้งสองกลุ่มผลิตได้อย่างถูกต้องทั้งหมด กลุ่มที่มีความสามารถต่ำผลิตประโยคและวลีที่ถูกต้องได้ 28% และ 26% ตามลำดับ ในขณะที่ทั้งสองกลุ่มที่มีความสามารถสูงผลิตประโยคและวลีที่ถูกต้องได้ 72% และ 74% ตามลำดับ ในขณะที่ทั้งสองกลุ่มผลิตข้อผิดพลาดที่ไม่ภาษาอังกฤษ (non-English) มากถึง 37% จากข้อผิดพลาดทั้งหมดจากทั้งสองกลุ่ม โครงสร้างประโยคที่ยากคือโครงสร้างที่แตกต่างระหว่างภาษาไทยและภาษาอังกฤษ โดยเฉพาะโครงสร้างที่มีส่วนขยายกรรม (object complement) หรือมีกรรมรอง (indirect object) หรือโครงสร้างภาษาที่มีกฎพิเศษที่ไม่ปรากฏในภาษาไทย

คำสำคัญ: การพัฒนาโครงสร้างภาษา, นักเรียนชั้นมัธยมศึกษา, ทักษะเชิงพุทธิปัญญา, ลักษณะโครงสร้างภาษา

¹ การติดต่อและการร้องขอบทความนี้ กรุณาร่วมต่ออาจารย์ ดร.สมศักดิ์ แก้วนุช สาขาวิชาการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ, คณะครุศาสตร์, มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏพิบูลสงคราม E-mail: noneandnone@live.com

A Comparison of Low and High Proficiency Secondary School Students' Syntactic Development: How Cognition Affects the Learning of a Foreign Language

Somsak Kaewnuch¹

Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University

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Research Article

This study aimed to 1) compare the syntactic development between high and low proficiency secondary school students, 2) explore the easy and difficult syntactic features for them, 3) examine the effect of cognition on their syntactic development, and 4) investigate features structurally difficult for them. For two semesters at Ongkharak School, Nakhonnayok, in the academic year 2013, the researcher taught English writing to two groups of eighty students, dubbed “low proficiency” and “high proficiency,” focusing the basic sentence patterns. The researcher collected 100 unguided writings from each group to analyze, using three forms and also interviewed ten students from each group. Both groups developed their syntactic ability similarly in terms of sentence patterns. Both groups were good at using two-part phrases, but the low proficiency group produced long phrases in relatively small numbers, and they were almost unable to arrange phrases of different functions into larger ones. The high proficiency group produced more errors and more kinds of error while the low proficiency group produced much less text, most of which was non-English. The syntactic features that caused both groups to produce errors were involved omission, non-English, tense, addition, subject-verb agreement, fragment, and misordering, all of which signified the differences between L1 and L2. Cognition plays a role in producing recognizable sentence and phrase patterns. Out of the total numbers of the correctly structured sentences and phrases identified, the low proficiency group produced 28% and 26% of them respectively, while the high proficiency group produced 72% and 74% respectively. While both groups produced almost numbers or errors, 54% for the low proficiency group and 46% for the high proficiency group, the former produced up to 37% of all errors in both groups that was recognized as non-English. The structurally difficult features for both groups were the structures Thai does not share with English, especially ones with an object complement or an indirect object and ones with a grammatical rule that does not exist in Thai.

Keywords: syntactic development, secondary school students, cognition, syntactic features

¹ Correspondence concerning this article and requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. Somsak Kaewnuch,

Department of English Education, Faculty of Education, Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University, Email: noneandnone@live.com

Background

The study of EFL (English as a foreign language) students' English syntactic development can be done at any phase of learning and with any group of learners. But as it is said that children learn language better than adults (Akmaijan, Farmer, Demers, and Harnish, 2001) and that there are parallels between acquiring the first language (L1) and learning the second language (L2), observations about learners' syntactic development should be made with young learners, and such an observation should be longitudinal.

Many kinds of observation about younger EFL students' syntactic development in the target language can be made. Students' knowledge about, for instance, parts of speech and how words are combined into phrases, clauses, and sentences can be investigated. A more complete study, however, should be a comparative study of the students' syntactic ability in their first language (L1) and that in their second language (L2). In addition, students can be interviewed about the difficulties they have using the target language, how they use the target language, and what affects their use of the target language. All those activities can provide evidence about the students' syntactic ability of the target language.

We can also compare syntactic development of different groups of learners. One hypothesis is that younger learners develop their target language faster. However, other factors such can play important roles too. In a school where the learning context is appropriate, younger learners probably learn faster than those in a school where the environment does not facilitate them. Cognitive ability, which is part of individual differences, also plays an important role in the success of studying a subject. One learner of a new language, therefore, thrives while another does not. That is a common fact, but it is interesting to examine the linguistic features produced by different groups of learners, those with high cognitive ability and those with low cognitive skill. As language learners, they are commonly considered to be high and low proficiency learners.

Thus, an appropriate study of syntactic development is one that is conducted with younger learners, and one that should explore the different features performed by different groups of learners. There are three assumable benefits of the current study. The primary benefit is that EFL teachers, especially those who teach writing at the secondary school level, can use the findings to prepare for their teaching. The findings will suggest how a course for a basic writing course appropriate for lower secondary school students may be designed. The secondary benefit is that the study will be part of a body of knowledge about

younger Thai EFL students learning English. The subjects of this study can represent the general students throughout the country. Elsewhere, in other countries, EFL students develop their syntactic ability differently, depending on the context. The development of English syntactic ability of Thai students is unique. Another benefit is that those interested in errors made by young Thai students will be more knowledgeable about foreign language errors. In courses offered at university, especially those related to error analysis, syntax, and applied linguistics, students and teachers can make use of the findings and discussions.

The present paper presents the findings and discussions from a research project conducted at a medium secondary school in a small district of a province not far from Bangkok. The research, designed to be an ethnographic/qualitative study rather than a quantitative one, investigated the features of syntactic development of lower secondary students (grade eight) who, with their social status and studying context, can represent the population of grade eight students studying English throughout the country. The sections below include the objectives, scope of the study, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, teaching implications, and conclusion.

Objectives

The research was aimed

1. To compare the syntactic development between high and low proficiency secondary school students,
2. To explore the easy and difficult syntactic features of lower secondary school students,
3. To study how Thai lower secondary school students' cognition affects their development of syntactic structures, and
4. To investigate features which are structurally difficult and prevent lower secondary school students from learning English successfully.

Scope of the Study

The research was a longitudinal study making use of ethnographic and qualitative methodologies. In two semesters, the researcher studied the development of syntactic abilities of two groups of grade eight students. The first group, thirty-eight students, was dubbed "low proficiency," while the second group, forty-two students, was hailed as "high

proficiency.” Through observations, interviews, and text analyses, the researcher compared the syntactic features produced by both groups and the development of those features among them. Using knowledge from the fields of generative grammar, language acquisition, and error analysis, the researcher also discussed how the students’ cognition affected the development of syntactic abilities in both groups and investigated the syntactic features easy and difficult for lower secondary school students.

Hypothesis and Framework

The researcher expected to use various knowledge to explain the syntactic features produced by the students, such as Chomsky’s generative grammar, syntactic knowledge, and theories from areas of language acquisition and error analysis.

It was hypothesized that the two groups of students developed their syntactic abilities differently; the high proficiency students developed faster. It was expected, too, that, using the above theories, the researcher would be able to categorize and describe the different kinds of syntactic features produced by both groups, explain how cognition affects their syntactic development, and predict the easy and difficult syntactic features or structures for the students.

Literature Review

It is believed that all humans share a universal grammar (Akmajian, Farmer, Demers, and Harnish, 2001). Noam Chomsky (cited in Akmajian, Farmer, Demers, and Harnish, 2001), who develops “generative grammar,” points out that each healthy child possesses a language acquisition device (LAD), or the universal grammar, to acquire the first language and then other languages (ibid.). Thus, with the knowledge about the syntactic patterns of the universal grammar, one should find it easy to learn a new language. In generative grammar, Chomsky uses tree diagrams to show classes of words and how they are combined into phrases, clauses, and sentences. Generative grammar is greatly useful in that it visibly teaches the different parts of the sentence, starting from the word level.

The universal grammar explains syntactic categories, such as nouns, verbs, noun phrases, adjective clauses, and so on, all of which are shared by languages, and learners can use this knowledge to learn a new language. Sentence patterns such as Subject + Intransitive Verbs (The bird flew from my window), Subject + Be + Prepositional Phrase (The box is on the floor), Subject + Transitive Verb + Direct Object (The boy kicked the

ball), and Subject + Linking Verb + Adjective (The food tastes bad) appear in both English and Thai. Many phrase patterns are also shared by the two languages, such as Preposition + Noun (in China), Verb + Adverb (walk slowly), Noun + Prepositional Phrase (the man in the meeting room), and Adverbial + Noun (three times a day). In some sentence patterns, the ordering of the main words in the two languages is the same, although there may be an addition or exclusion of a grammatical word or words. For example, in “Water is useful to humans,” all three lexical words (water, useful, and humans) are in the same order as the Thai words within an equivalent Thai sentence. Most key words in the two languages also function and mean the same. Thus, it could be said that the universal grammar are useful.

However, although there is a universal grammar in all children, they normally produce errors in the target language. Every language has its own grammar. Deviations from the standard, from the grammatical rules, are errors, which are categorized into syntactic, phonological, lexical, and semantic.

This research focuses on syntactic development. The word “syntax” as used in this paper refers basically to the grammatical arrangement of words in sentences (Crowther, Kavanagh, and Ashby, 1999). The English syntax is usually explained in three main levels: phrase, clause, and sentence (cf. Kaewnuch, 2011). Words put together can create a phrase (blue cars), a clause (where I live), or a sentence (I found it). There are many types of phrases, clauses, and sentences. For phrases, there are noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and prepositional phrases. English clauses are recognized as adjective, adverb, and noun clauses, while English sentences are classified into simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. Thus, because there are many syntactic categories, Thai students can produce numerous syntactic errors. For example, “two boys” belongs to a syntactic category called “noun phrase.” “Two boy” is recognized as a phrase error involving a disagreement between a determiner and a head noun. The students may translate a Thai sentence literally into English without recognizing the grammaticality of each part, such as *“They no like oranges,” in which the speaker uses “no,” which is a determiner or an adverb, as a word meaning “don’t” in Thai. Therefore, the knowledge about syntactic categories is necessary for discussing syntactic development, which is unavoidably involved with errors.

Kaewcha (2010) and Humphries (2010) identify two kinds of errors: global and local. Global errors can cause communication breakdowns. They make it impossible to decipher

the message. They, it could be said, indicate severe cognitive deficiencies. Cognitive ability varies from person to person. Arthur Jensen (1969, as cited in Rushton and Jensen, 2005) points out that heredity results in individual differences; that is, persons are not equally intelligent because of heredity. Those who are more intelligent have better cognitive ability, ability to understand complex matters and to perform well. Students who produce many global errors are supposedly cognitively deficient and as a result develop their syntactic abilities slowly. For Thai students, literal translation could be thought of as a sign of cognitive deficiency. Inability to think of clear parts of sentences, which results in the production of errors such as “In the book has three chapters*” and “In this chapter, it reveals that...” is also a sign of cognitive deficiency. On the contrary, local errors do not distort the communication. Not adding the morpheme –s after a singular verb, for instance, does not prevent the reader from understanding the message. Local errors may be due to hurriedness, carelessness, and physical conditions; they do not necessarily signify low cognitive ability.

Students’ errors can explain their syntactic development, but because syntax is a huge body in a language, the completeness of the explanation depends on the scope of study. For example, Jenwitheesuk (2009)’s research, which was mostly directed to local errors in the categories of determiners, subject-verb agreements, prepositions, and tenses in 46 papers, cannot give a full picture of the students’ syntactic development.

Thus, it is advisable that all types of syntactic category and all types of error be incorporated in order to explain syntactic development clearly. Previous research is useful in understanding students’ syntactic development. For example, Darus (2009)’s research reveals 15 types of errors, nine of which are clearly syntactic, that is, plural-singular form, verb tense, preposition, subject-verb agreement, word order, article, word form, verb form, and missing word. Bennui (2008) studies L1 interference in Thai third-year English-minor students and discovers six features of L1 syntactic interference, that is, word order, subject-verb agreement and tense, infinitives, the verb “have,” prepositions, and noun determiners. Earlier studies that mention the causes that may slow down students’ syntactic development resulting from L1 interference include Thep-Ackrapong (2005), Pongpairoj (2002), Likittrattanaporn (2001), and Hung (2000). Next, Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) identify four kinds of syntactic errors: phrase structure errors, clause errors, sentence errors, and intersentence errors. Finally, according to Sudsanoh (2007), phrase structure errors are

the most frequent errors because this category can be classified into several kinds: noun phrase errors, verb phrase errors, adverb phrase errors, adjective phrase errors, and preposition phrase errors. All types and causes of error explored by those studies can explain students' syntactic development.

However, a complete description about students' syntactic development can go beyond the description of how students use syntactic categories and how they produce errors. The description can incorporate students' ability in using infinitives, gerunds, subject complements, object complements, objects of prepositions, and countable and uncountable nouns. These have specific uses that do not appear in Thai language. In fact, the success of analyzing the development requires not just the knowledge about basic grammatical categories but also deep knowledge in the language. For example, sentence structures may be simple or complex. The pattern "Subject + Transitive Verb + Direct Object," as in "My father ate an apple," is universal and thus easy to acquire. On the contrary, "Subject + Transitive Verb + Direct Object + Object Complement," as in "I saw Tim jumping down from the window," is complicated for Thai students; they have to remember that the verb after the object needs to be a present participle or an infinitive.

In investigating students' syntactic development, apart from mentioning how students apply syntactic categories, memorize them, and use them in their writing, we also need some theories to help explain the development. Studies on language acquisition usually portray the development of a child learning his or her mother tongue. In terms of syntax, they reveal how words are combined from short structures to longer ones. In common sense, children learn lexical words (e.g. book, house, dad) before grammatical words (e.g. some, am, can). Haynes (2007) points out the five stages of second language acquisition are that are similar to those of the first language: preproduction, early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency, and advanced fluency. These stages can certainly help explain the syntactic development of a foreign language.

Next, studies in the field of error analysis give terms that may be useful in explaining errors and syntactic development. One traditional theory in this field is called "Contrastive Analysis." This theory was developed and practiced in the 1950s and 1960s (Bennui, 2008). Based on the notion that there are both similarities and differences between L1 and L2, CA practitioners compare the two linguistic systems and use several technical terms in their analyses and descriptions, including "mother tongue interference," "language transfer,"

“intralingual interference,” “approximative system,” “interlanguage,” “learner language,” and “overgeneralization.”

The term we use most in explaining errors and syntactic development is mother tongue interference, or L1 interference, which refers the interference of L1 features in the use of L2. L1 features may or may not cause errors (Sampson and Richards, 1984). Interference from one language to another is recognized as language transfer. In fact, some features or structures in two languages are the same. The interference resulting in correct language production is called positive transfer. When the features or structures of the two languages differ, the interference causes errors and is called negative transfer (David’s English; What is the Role). Transfer from L1 to L2 is various, and it can be identified in all linguistic areas—syntax, semantics, phonology, and morphology.

Another important term in error analysis is “interlanguage” (IL), sometimes referred to as “learner language.” Ellis (1997) explains that an interlanguage refers to a linguistic system contains both L1 and L2 features. This system is situated between the mother tongue and the target language and develops as the novice learner hypothesizes the rules of the target language. The more correct hypotheses the learner makes, the better chance he or she will achieve the native speaker’s competence. However, if the learner’s hypotheses are wrong, he or she will produce interlanguage errors. When the learner knows that a hypothesis is incorrect, he or she will try another one. Therefore, that an interlanguage system is characteristically unstable.

Overgeneralization refers to a phenomenon in which the learner produces errors in their IL by extending an L2 grammatical rule across all members of a grammatical class (Wei, 2008; Ellis, 2000). An overgeneralization is made when the learner extends a grammatical rule in an environment where he or she thinks it would apply, but where it does not (Selinker, 1984). For instance, when students learn that the *-ed* is a morpheme indicating past tense, they apply this rule to all verbs they use to talk about the past; therefore, the morpheme is added to all present simple verbs, e.g. *thinked*, *swimed*, and *bringed*. Overgeneralizations are not limited to grammatical rules only. An overgeneralization may cause learners to make a wrong word choice. For example, a learner may apply the verb “drive” to all vehicles.

Finally, second language learners can produce syntactic errors in many ways. They may add, omit, misplace, or misuse words (Ting, Mahadhir, and Chang, 2010). Their errors

may occur due to “intralingual interference” (Richard, 1971). Intralingual interference occurs when students have to deal with the restrictions of rules and structures of the target language that cause difficulties in learning the target language. This kind of errors shows that students hypothesize about the rules and structures of the target language. The hypotheses made correspond neither to the mother tongue nor the target language. Richards found that intralingual interference is involved with overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and semantic errors. Thus, not adding the verb inflectional morpheme *-s* to a present singular verb, as in “She go* to school,” and not using an auxiliary verb, as in “I *not like coffee” are examples of intralingual interference.

To sum up, all mentioned above are the universal grammar, syntactic categories, types of error, and theories that can help explain learners’ syntactic development.

Methodology

The research was conducted at Ongkharak School, Nakhonnayok, 80 kilometers from Bangkok, in the academic year 2013. The researcher taught English, focusing on writing, to two classes of grade eight students. Based on the school’s classification, one of the two classes (42 students) represented a high proficiency group, and the other (38 students) a low proficiency group. The researcher taught sentence patterns and parts of speech and had the students practice writing. The students also studied from a book called *Bridge 2*, a commercial book in which they saw different types of sentences: simple, compound, and complex. The activities included writing individual sentences, translating Thai into English both at the sentence and paragraph levels, and writing paragraphs. The researcher collected the students’ unguided writings during the two semesters. In the end the researcher had 100 writings from each group to analyze. The 100 writings from each group were collected at four different times, 25 at the middle of the first semester, 25 at the end of the first semester, 25 at the middle of the second semester, and 25 at the end of the second semester. From the two groups, there were 200 writings altogether to analyze. Each piece of writing was about 7-10 sentences long. The writings were analyzed using the tables shown in the findings section below. The researcher used the tally method, counting each sentence type, phrase type, and error type one by one. Words and phrases are often classified differently. For example, “yesterday” is an adverb, but to be more specific, it is an adverb of time. The researcher counted all kinds of adverb together in the “adverb” heading. In this study, the researcher looked for only the basic and common types of sentence, clause, phrase and error, believing that these give a holistic picture of the students’ syntactic ability.

Finally, the data from the written texts were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively and presented in numbers, percentages, and descriptive discussion.

Findings

The students' syntactic ability was studied in three areas: sentence ability, phrase ability, and errors. The tables below reveal the students' syntactic ability in those areas. To understand the findings, it is necessary to know what all the abbreviations stand for in each table. Refer to Appendix A for the abbreviations in the tables.

Table 1 The students' sentence ability

Type	Example	Number Found in	
		HP	LP
S + Be + Adj	Mat is tall.	144	20
S + Be + Prep P	My school is in Nakhonnayok.	20	0
S + Be + SC	Sammy is a student.	286	100
S + VI	The bird flew from a big tree.	614	120
S + VT + DO	Tom ate the cake.	835	640
S + VT + IDO + DO	Sally gave me a pen.	0	0
S + VT + DO + OC	Ashley calls me "The Brighton."	22	0
S + LV + Adj	Ann looks old.	87	0
S + LV + SC	They remain friends.	0	0
Expletives	It is hot today/There is a book on the table.	106	53
CPS	Tim is old, but Kate is young.	92	45
CPLS	When I saw him, I smiled at him.	122	8
NC	I know <u>where he lives</u> .	0	0
Adv C	<u>When I saw him</u> , I smiled at him.	122	8
Adj C	I ate the food <u>that my mother cooked</u> .	1	1
Passive	The dog was killed.	1	0
Totals and percentages		2452	955
		72%	28%

To explain the students' syntactic development in the above table, a few notes from the research should be given as part of the findings. These general observations apply to, or explain, all findings the two tables below. First, the low proficiency students were not motivated or inspired in studying English. They did not do the homework and were unwilling to do activities. Thus, the students progressed very slowly during the two-semester study. Second, the students in both groups produced mostly the syntactic patterns that were

emphasized and taught explicitly in the classroom. Thus, it may be noted that there is no near natural acquisition of English in most schools throughout the country. Third, the students' syntactic development was parallel with the natural first language acquisition. Sentences with fewer parts were acquired before ones with more parts. They acquired action verbs before linking verbs, corresponding to the natural first language acquisition.

Table 1 contains data about the syntactic development and sentence patterns easy or difficult for groups of students (Research objectives 1, 2, and 4). The syntactic development of the two groups corresponded to the natural first language acquisition (cf. Richards 1971); that is, they acquired action verbs before static or linking ones, concrete nouns before abstract ones, and easy patterns before difficult ones. The two-part structure (S + VI) and the three-part structure (S + VT + DO) were produced in large numbers because they exist in Thai. These phenomena correspond to the explanations about positive transfer (David's English). They produced the S + Be + SC and S + Be + Adj patterns and expletive structures quite a lot because these are not a cognitive burden, because they are easy to find in texts, and because they had been learning them for years. The table shows that few students had acquired the S + VT + DO + OC pattern, for it consists of many parts. The S + LV + Adj structure has the same structure as an equivalent Thai sentence structure, so some students produced them, but not in a large number because they had not acquired many linking verbs. Compound sentences and complex sentences were produced in quite large numbers but most of them contain the easy patterns of the simple sentence. The S + LV + SC structure, complex sentences with a noun clause and an adjective clause, and the passive were almost not produced, probably because they had not learned the linking verbs for the pattern and the linking words to construct noun and adjective clauses. Some of them must have tried to produce noun and adjective clauses but ended up producing non-English, as shown in Table 3. As for the passive, the students did not produce it because the structure does not appear in Thai. Thai does not require a grammatical rule (be + past participle) to form a passive.

As for the comparison of the two groups' sentence skills, both groups were similar as to the sentence patterns that they used to produce sentences. The patterns that they used most often were S + Be + SC, S + VI, S + VT + DO, and Expletives. The S + Be + Adj structure was used a lot too, but in a much larger number by the high proficiency group. However, the numbers of sentences produced by both groups greatly differ in some patterns

because the low proficiency students produced much less content and much of their writing was non-English, as shown in Table 3. In addition, the sentences of the high proficiency group were more complex, or showed that the students were more cognitively competent. For example, they used a gerund phrase as a subject complement or a direct object, as in “I love dancing.” They used “and” to show a series of nouns or verbs, as in “I cooked my food, watched TV, and went to bed.” Or they used an infinitive phrase as an adverbial phrase, as in “I went to Chonburi to visit my grandmother.”

Finally, the total numbers of correct sentences produced at the bottom of the table show that the high proficiency group was more than twice more cognitively competent than the low proficiency group, 72% and 28% respectively (Research objective 4).

Table 2 The students' phrase ability

Type	Example	Number Found in	
		HP	LP
—and—	ate food, watched TV, and read a book	238	40
Det + N	a man, these boys, all people	569	405
Det + Adj + N	a tall man, those young boys, all poor people	16	0
Adj + N	young boys, beautiful girls, bad milk	137	80
Adv + Adj	very much, very young	181	20
Prep + N	at home, to school	92	60
Prep + Det + N	near the field, in a box	196	143
Prep + Det + Adj + N	in the small box, with those nice tools	10	0
Prep + Adj + N	by good people, with cold water	11	0
Adv + Prep	everywhere in the town	55	12
VI + Adv	walk slowly, sit silently	135	72
VI + Prep P + (Prep P)	sleep in the room, lie on the floor	506	30
VI + PP + TP	work in this room every day	9	0
VT + DO + Adv	ate the cake quickly	104	39
VT + DO + Prep P	ate the cake with my friends	341	18
VT + DO + PP + TP	ate the cake in the meeting room yesterday	0	0
N + Prep P	the back of the car, trees in Nakhonayok	60	20
Infinitive	to read a book, to play football	68	3
Totals and percentages		2728	942
		74%	26%

Table 2 contains data to serve the first three research objectives. It compares the development of syntactic ability at the phrase level, reveals easy and difficult phrase structures for both groups, and shows how better at phrases the high proficiency group was

than the low proficiency group. It demonstrates that the students in both groups had acquired different kinds of phrase, especially ones that consist of two parts. The reason might be that two-part phrases often work as a part in simple sentences. For example, the Det + N phrase appears in almost all sentences. Both groups produced the two-part phrases Det + N, Adj + N, Prep + N, and VI + Adv in quite big numbers. The students must have learned a lot of Det + N and Adj + N phrases. The Prep + N, and VI + Adv phrases have equivalent structures in Thai. It should be noted that the students in both groups had acquired the Prep + Det + N structure. This means that when they used a preposition, they tended to use a determiner, mostly a and the, before they placed a noun. Surprisingly, both groups tended not to use an adjective in a prepositional phrase. (Consider the Prep + Det + Adj + N and Prep + Adj + N phrases in the table.)

The biggest difference between the two groups was, however, the lengths and functions of the phrases that they used. The low proficiency students were not good at arranging phrases of more than one kind together. For example, while the high proficiency group used the VI + Prep P + (Prep P) and VT + DO + Prep P phrases 506 and 341 times respectively, the low proficiency group used them only 30 and 18 times respectively. This means that the writing of the former was more complex, more detailed, while the latter, not knowing how parts were connected to each other, produced more non-English structures, as shown in Table 3. The ability to use phrases of different kinds together helped the former group to write better. The use of infinitives and series of words with the same function connected with “and,” for instance, allows one to say more.

Table 3 The students' syntactic errors.

Type	Example	Number Found in	
		HP	LP
Subject-verb agreement	Mat are* tall.	248	77
Addition	I am* go to school every day.	270	20
Tense	I see* him last week.	432	58
Plurality/Singularity	I have two book*.	149	40
Omission	He ^ tall very much.	818	700
Misordering	I am <u>a boy tall</u> *.	160	80
Misinformation	I saw he* in the room.	136	55
Non-English/severe error	<u>In the room not see my friend will sleep</u> *	630	2,511
Fragment	My book and my pen	207	20
Totals and percentages		3050	3561
		46%	54%

Table 3 specifically serves research objective 3, the investigation of the effect of cognition. The students in both groups actually produced many more kinds of errors than the ones in Table 3. The ones in Table 3, however, are the basic ones that represent the students' holistic syntactic development. Both groups produced large numbers of error. The high proficiency group made more errors in almost all kinds of error. This is because the low proficiency group wrote much shorter texts for analysis, signifying their lower cognition. In addition, most texts produced by them were non-English. They did not use recognizable structures, and the counts rose up to 2,511. This fact is cross-confirmed by the findings in Tables 1 and 2; the students in this group produced much fewer recognizable sentences and phrases.

Table 3 shows that most of the students' errors were involved with using unrecognizable sentence and phrase structures, omitting necessary words, adding unnecessary words, using wrong tense, and not making the subject and verb agree. The students, especially those in the low proficiency group, misplaced words because they had not acquired the standard sentence and phrase patterns. The universal grammar, it may be claimed, is not useful with students with low cognitive ability in terms of learning English after their L1 is stable. Misplacing words causes misordering errors and non-English errors. Next, most omission and addition errors were caused by omitting or adding grammatical words (e.g. articles and prepositions) in sentences. The students used lexical words in recognizable patterns. There were many more omission errors than addition errors, probably because Thai does not have some grammatical words with specific use such as be, do, and articles. Next, the students made tense and subject-verb agreement errors because Thai does not have special use for tense and subject-verb agreement.

The five most frequent kinds of errors explained in the above paragraph and other kinds of error, of course, are caused by three phenomena, that is, literal translation, overgeneralization, and L1 interference, which were explained above in the literature review. All three phenomena caused many of the students to write, "Nid is girl small" (misordering), "Boon have car big one" (overgeneralization and misordering) and "Boon saw have happy" (literal translation). L1 interference might have also caused the students to produce fragments of recognizable patterns because, as Thep-Ackrapong (2005) states, Thai has no sentence border and is often spoken and understood with some sentence parts omitted. In written Thai, in addition, there is not punctuation mark that signals the end of a sentence.

Conclusion

The researcher would like to conclude the study based on its objectives. First, it discovered that both the low proficiency students and high proficiency students developed their syntactic ability similarly. That is, their syntactic development corresponds to the natural acquisition of the mother tongue, proving that there exists the universal grammar and positive transfer (cf. Akmajian, Farmer, Demers, and Harnish, 2001; Richards, 1971)). Both groups heavily used the patterns S + Be + SC, S + VI, S + VT + DO, and Expletives, partly because they had learned these a lot and because they are universal patterns. However, the sentences of the high proficiency students were more complex or detailed. On the contrary, the low proficiency students progressed much more slowly, as evidenced in the numbers of recognizable patterns they produced in Table 1, the complexity of phrase patterns they exploited in Table 2, and the frequencies of their non-English production in Table 3. Another important point about the low proficiency group is that they were lowly inspired to study, causing them to progress much more slowly.

Second, the easy sentence patterns for both groups were S + Be + SC, S + VI, S + VT + DO, and Expletives. Compound sentences and complex sentences with adverb clauses were used in quite big numbers. The phrase patterns applied frequently were Det + N, __ and __, Adj + N, Adv + Adj, Prep + N, Prep + Det + N, VI + Adv, VI + Prep P + (Prep P), VT + DO + Adv, VT + DO + Prep P, N + Prep P, and infinitives. The difficult sentence structures were S + VT + IDO + DO, S + VT + DO + OC, passive, and complex sentences with noun and adjective clauses, probably because they had not been taught these specifically and explicitly, although they appeared in the course book occasionally. For the low proficiency students, phrases with more than two parts were difficult. They also were not good at arranging phrases of different kinds into larger ones.

Third, this study has discovered that cognition greatly affects the students' ability to recognize sentence parts, to arrange them grammatically, and to use modifiers. The influence of heredity on the capacity of learning is not suspected (cf. Rushton & Jenson, 2005), but in term of Thai students' learning English, this influence is reflected in high numbers of syntactic errors, especially high numbers of non-English; the low proficiency students produced up to 2,511 instances recognized as non-English. They also produced recognizable sentence patterns in relatively smaller numbers, as shown in Table 1. With low cognitive ability, some students even were not able to arrange two kinds of phrase into

recognizable larger phrases. When coupled with Selinker (1984)'s claim that only 5% of adult learners of a second or foreign language can achieve the native-like competence, we can assume that students with low cognitive ability will never be successful studying a foreign language. Students with low cognitive ability might have a short memory span, causing them to forget information in long stretches of text and to fuse sentence parts together in ungrammatical ways.

Fourth, Table 1 shows that sentence patterns that consist of more than three parts such as S + VT + IDO + DO and S + VT + DO + OC are difficult to acquire. These may or may not have equivalent structures in Thai, but they normally are rule governed. For example, an OC can be a present participle, as in "I saw Tim walking." Students should progress easily through universal patterns such as S + VI and S + VT + DO, but when there is a specific rule, such as the use of a gerund after a preposition, it becomes difficult for them. Sentences with universal patterns are easy, but those that are not universal, for example "I was left waiting for a long time" is structurally and semantically difficult. Table 2, in addition, shows that phrases with modifiers or those subsumed with smaller ones are difficult for low proficiency students.

All three tables show that the theories about the universal grammar, positive and negative transfer, and error analysis (cf. Akmajian, A., Demers, Farmer, and Harnish, 2001; Bennui, 2008; Ting, Mahadhir, and Chang, 2010) are useful in explaining the syntactic development of young learners of a foreign language. This study has shown the similarities and differences of syntactic development between a low and a high proficiency group and also the easy and difficult syntactic features and structures for both groups. It also shows how cognition influences the learning of syntax of both groups.

Teaching Implications

Now, what about teaching English writing to lower secondary school students? The findings above confirm the fact that the acquisition of a foreign language, though with a much slower pace, is parallel with that of the first language; that is, the students acquired lexical words before grammatical words, and there is positive transfer from L1 to L2 in terms of universal sentence and phrase structures. Teachers should, therefore, teach, explicitly as this study has discovered, the universal sentence and phrase structures first. The lowly inspired must be taught sufficiently, with activities to engage them. The study also has

found that natural learning plays a very little role in acquiring the target language; therefore, the teaching of writing to younger students, which involves teaching rules, must be overt. Of course, it could be combined with a reading class, with funny activities such listening to songs and conversations on YouTube, but time must be spared for teaching rules.

Next, the teaching of difficult features or structures should come after the teaching universal structures. The use of attributive adjectives in the patterns Det + Adj. + N and Prep + Det + Adj + N should be easy with drills. The use of infinitive phrases in the patterns VT + DO + Infinitive and VT + DO + TP + Infinitive should also be easy. However, the teacher must select these one by one and teach it explicitly. Low proficiency students should learn specifically from inductive methods; in this case, from learning smaller parts to combining them into larger parts and finally into complete sentences. The teacher can teach the phrase patterns in Table 2 before the sentence patterns in Table 1. This should help solve the problem of non-English in Table 3. In addition, explicit teaching of phrases should help reduce omission, addition, misordering, plurality/singularity, and misinformation errors in Table 3. Activities such as error detecting and correcting can help. Finally, the teaching of patterns with specific rules such as “S + VT + DO + Past Participle” and “S + VT + Gerund” should be done only after the universals have been taught.

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Appendix : Abbreviations

HP = high proficiency group	LP = low proficiency group
S = subject	Be = be, is, am, are, was, were, or been
DO = direct object	Adj = adjective
IDO = indirect object	Prep P = prepositional phrase
SC = subject complement	OC = object complement
VI = intransitive verb	VT = transitive verb
LV = linking verb	Adv = adverb
Det = determiner	CPS = compound sentence
CPLS = complex sentence	NC = noun clause
Adj C = adjective clause	Adv C = Adverb clause
PP = place phrase	TP = time phrase
N = noun	