

COMING TO UNDERSTAND THAI EFL STUDENT WRITERS' PROBLEMS

WITH VERB RELATED ERRORS

เหตุใดนักเรียนไทยที่เรียนการเขียนจึงมีปัญหาเรื่องการใช้กริยาในภาษาอังกฤษ

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บทคัดย่อ

เวลาที่นักเรียนไทยเรียนวิชาการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษนั้น ต่างก็พบกับปัญหาด้านไวยากรณ์ ซึ่งถือเป็นปัญหา ระดับmicro-level อันจะเห็นได้ชัดจากงานเขียนที่ขาดคุณภาพ เต็มไปด้วยข้อผิดพลาดทางไวยากรณ์จำนวนมาก และนักเรียนไทยประสบปัญหาอย่างมากกับการเลือกใช้กาลที่เหมาะสมและการใช้รูปแบบกริยาที่ถูกต้อง (Boonmoh et al., 2006; Thep-Ackrapong, 2005) โดยปัญหาเหล่านี้สามารถจำแนกได้เป็น4กรณีหลักๆตามการวิเคราะห์ของ Chatranonth (2008) และ Ratanakul (2000) ดังต่อไปนี้ 1) การเลือกใช้กาลที่ไม่เหมาะสมกับสถานการณ์ 2) การไม่ใส่กริยาช่วย (copula 'be') 3) การใช้คำกริยาที่ไม่สอดคล้องกับคำสรรพนามที่อ้างถึงในแง่บุรุษและพจน์ 4) การกระจายกริยารูปอดีตที่ไม่ถูกต้อง โดยในบทความนี้ ผู้เขียนนำเสนอว่าความแตกต่างกันอย่างมากระหว่างระบบไวยากรณ์ไทยและไวยากรณ์อังกฤษ เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของคำอธิบายว่าเหตุใดนักเรียนไทยที่เรียนการเขียนจึงมีปัญหาเรื่องการใช้กริยาในภาษาอังกฤษ บทความนี้จะช่วยให้ครูผู้สอนวิชาการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษที่ไม่มีพื้นความรู้ภาษาไทย ได้เข้าใจนักเรียนไทยมากขึ้น ทั้งนี้ในช่วงท้ายผู้เขียนได้ให้คำแนะนำเกี่ยวกับการสอนวิชาการเขียนโดยผู้เขียนมุ่งเน้นเรื่องความจำเป็นที่ครูผู้สอนเข้าใจและทราบถึงที่มาของปัญหาเรื่องการใช้กริยาเนื่องจากครูที่มีความเข้าใจเรื่องความผิดพลาดในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนในเรื่องนี้ จะช่วยให้เข้าใจผู้เรียนได้ดีมากยิ่งขึ้น

Key words นักเรียนไทย วิชาการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ ข้อผิดพลาดในการเลือกใช้กาล ข้อผิดพลาดในการใช้รูปกริยา

Abstract

Thai EFL learners encounter a vast array of micro-level problems when learning to write in English. It is reflected in the poor quality of their written assignments which contain many grammatical errors (Boonmoh et al. 2006; Thep-Ackrapong. 2005). According to Chatranonth (2008) and Ratanakul

(2000), Thai students have most difficulties with English verb tenses and verb forms. The verb related errors have been categorized in terms of Chatranonth's four categories: 1) wrong use of English tenses, 2) omission of copula 'be', 3) absence of subject-verb agreement, 4) incorrect formation of irregular verbs. In this article, it is argued that the sharp contrast between Thai and English linguistic systems may be one explanation for the difficulties Thai EFL learners face in producing grammatically correct verb tenses and verb forms. This study will take into account such difference in order to understand why Thai EFL learners produce verb related errors. This article will benefit English writing teachers who do not speak Thai. The author offers pedagogical implications which emphasize a need to understand how language teachers can best facilitate Thai students' acquisition of grammatical 'correctness' in their EFL writing in a manner which is sensitive to the linguistic similarities/differences between Thai and English.

Keywords Thai EFL learners, English writing, verb tense errors, verb form errors

Introduction

One of the difficult skills for EFL learners to develop is writing (Kim; & Kim. 2005; Shen. 2007; Yan. 2005). Nunan (1999: 271) considers it a significant challenge to construct "a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing" in one's second language. In line with Yan (2005) and Nunan (1999), Abu Rass (2001) and Kroll (1990) further add that writing presents a challenging task for both native and non-native speakers of English because writers must master several elements such as organization, spelling, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, and mechanics. As Tribble (1996: 16) states, "written texts are not just spoken text written down". Students need to overcome their unfamiliarity with English writing conventions (Ammon, 1985), and they have to understand how different linguistic components namely knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, orthography, genre structures are combined and integrated into a cohesive and coherent texts (Ramirez. 1995). However, this article is not going to focus on the whole or macro text problems. Rather, it concerns errors at the micro level, i.e. grammatical errors focusing particularly on verb tense and verb form errors.

As noted by many researchers, the learning of the English verb tenses and verb forms is a stumbling-block for many language learners particularly Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Thai students (Boonpattanaporn. 2008; Chatranonth. 2008; Charoenroop. 2006; Chen. 2006; Lush. 2002; McCarthy. 1991; Ratanakul. 2000). Against this background, it is necessary that teachers, at an initial stage, understand why students make the errors they make so that they can help students

overcome grammatical features that the students have difficulties with. Such knowledge and understanding will enable them to plan suitable lessons, teaching techniques, and materials to enhance their students' writing proficiency.

This study aims to utilize the contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) to elaborate on the differences and similarities between English and Thai which may hinder the students' use of appropriate verb tenses and verb forms. CAH has been used as a way to predict difficulties or to explain errors. As noted by White (2003) and Selinker (1992), beginner and intermediate L2 learners are strongly influenced by their L1 and they are likely to conduct L1& L2 comparison when confront difficult grammatical forms. Mahmoud (2002) similarly indicates that relying on the native language is a strategy that is easily available to the learners to compensate for the inadequacies when attempting to communicate in the foreign language. According to Odlin (1989), studies about language transfer and a focus on CAH not only provide a better insight into the nature of language acquisition for students in a particular linguistic context, but they also help teachers pinpoint the linguistic features that may be problematic for students (Odlin. 1989). It provides an understanding of why some grammatical features are more difficult than others and helps teachers take sensible approaches to teaching those problematic features.

Types of verb tense and verb form errors

Unlike less serious errors such as article errors, incorrect preposition choice, or spelling errors, verb related errors are the errors that directly interfere with students' communication of ideas (Reid. 1998). Boonpattanaporn (2008) did a comparative study of difficulties encountered by 272 Thai fourth-year English major students in writing English language essays. She found that using verb tenses was the most difficult aspect for Thai students to master. In the same vein, Chatranonth (2008) analysed the errors made by 55 Thai EFL university students who took an English composition course. She reported that the students had difficulties in the use of English verb tenses and verb formation the most. With regard to types of verb related errors, Chatranonth (2008) provided a list of verb tense and verb form errors made by Thai university students. It includes 1) wrong use of English tenses, 2) omission of copula 'be', 3) absence of subject-verb agreement, 4) incorrect formation of irregular verbs. I will use Chatranonth's (2008) as guidelines in providing plausible explanation for the verb related errors.

1) Inappropriate use of English tenses

Researchers have given a great deal of attention to the causes of tense errors and ways to fix them (Hinkel. 1997). According to Chappel and Rodby (1983); Guiora. 1983; Riddle (1986), a failure to use the past tense when it is required and the use of present tense when past tense is expected seems to be a persistent problem amongst non-native speakers. According to Chappel and Rodby (1983), students' tense-related errors have an enormous impact on the overall comprehensibility of the text, but students seem to select verb tenses arbitrarily because of the lack of understanding of the impact of tense on text. Many of verb tense and verb form errors could be explained by a major difference between the Thai and English verb system. Thai verbs are not conjugated to reflect time relations as the concept of time is expressed by the use of adverbs and other implicit and contextual assumptions (Chatranonth. 2008). According to Baker (2002), Thai students, even highly proficient learners, seem to have problems using and distinguishing past simple and present perfect (Baker. 2002). Thai does not have the same distinction between past simple and present perfect like in English and Thai verbs are not inflected which make English tense and aspect marking on verbs cumbersome and complicated for Thai learners (Baker. 2002). The differences in how the concepts of time are expressed in the two languages probably explain why language learners have serious difficulties in dealing with English tenses (Gonzalez et al. 2001; Riddell. 1986; Coppetiers. 1987; Hinkel. 1997). Even though a source of verb tense and verb form challenge stems from the morphological differences between English and Thai, another important source of confusion seems to arise from complexities of the grammatical features in English (Scovel. 1974). For instance, the use of -ing forms are found to be particularly confusing to foreign students (Scovel. 1974). One explanation for this is proposed by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) who explain that in English one grammatical form can carry multiple meanings. They give an example of the present progressive tense. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) list the following sentences (p.111):

- a) I am eating breakfast at the moment.
- b) I am flying from Auckland to London next week.
- c) You are not exercising these days.

They explain that in sentence a), the present progressive form represents an ongoing action, and in sentence b) and c), the form represents planned future action and critical comment respectively.

The problem is that one grammatical form has more than one meaning which can cause confusion for EFL students, particularly whose native language has no tense system, have problems using appropriate English verb tenses and verb forms.

2) Omission of copula 'be'

Errors in subject-verb agreement refer to the lack of agreement in number between the verb and the subject of the sentence. According to For Thai EFL learners, the reason for this ill-formed pattern can be attributed to first language influence or interlingual transfer. Unlike English, Thai permits sentences with no verbs. Adjectives simply occur after the noun they modify and they function like verbs. Thus, it can be that students produced incorrect sentences like “*She beautiful.” because they copy the Thai feature of ‘no copula’ onto English where a copula verb is required. According to Gonzalez et al. (2001) and Huang and Hatch (1978), the lack of the copula ‘be’ is the kind of error which is commonly found amongst L2 learners. This is because of the fact that there exist some languages (e.g. Russian, Arabic, Thai) which have no copula or equivalent of the English verb to be which suggests that the English copula carries very little meaning. Hence, the lack of actual meaning of copula verbs may have caused the students to tacitly view them as redundant when writing and omit them as they serve no semantic purpose (Hurford. 1994). However, it is also possible that such errors occur due to the lack of awareness of when the copula ‘be’ is needed.

3) Lack of subject-verb agreement

Flowerdew (2001) indicates that the lack of subject-verb agreement is one of the common surface errors in papers submitted by non-native writers of English. This type of error occurs when a verb is not conjugated to agree with its subject. For instance, “*She wear a red hat.” Dulay et al. (1982) comment that the morpheme –s (third person marker) is a grammatical morpheme that a language learner, particularly for a student whose mother tongue does not have this feature, typically omits. In a similar vein, Shaughnessy (1977) explains that the –s morpheme in the third person singular present tense is often omitted by students whose first language lacks inflection as these learners perceive the –s morpheme as redundant and not important.

Shaughnessy (1977) posits that EFL learners whose mother tongue does not have inflectional features have difficulty remembering them because the inflection (particularly the morpheme –s for third person singular present tense) carries little meaning and it is considered redundant. This seems to be the case for Thai students.

As mentioned previously, the rules of Thai verbs are considerably less complex than that of English. In Thai, “there are no tenses to indicate present and past events nor is there an obligatory connection between a subject and a verb in a sentence” (Abdulsata. 2000: 54). That is Thai verbs do not change with person, tense, voice, mood or number. Consequently, Thai verbs do not need to agree with subjects like in English and they are considered separate elements. Schachter (1974) observes that L2 learners make grammatical errors because they are sometimes reluctant to produce certain L2 features that are very different from the comparable L1 features. Therefore, it may be that the students are still preoccupied by the rules of their mother tongue and have some misunderstandings regarding the rules of agreement which explains why the students have problems conjugating the verbs to agree with the subject.

4) Incorrect formation of irregular verbs

Examples of incorrect formation of irregular verbs include “*teached”, “*spended”, and “*waked”. According to Lococo (1976), these deviant verb forms are considered intralingual errors, i.e. incorrect application of the target language rules such as overgeneralization and ignorance of rule restrictions. Thus this type of errors appears to arise because students do not grasp the rules regarding conjugation of English irregular verbs for past tense. It seems that students overgeneralize the past tense rule for regular verbs by applying them to irregular verbs – which is incorrect. Such errors suggest the student’s limited knowledge of the target language rules and that they partially learn verb inflectional rules and the rules are inappropriately applied (Broughton et al. 1978). According to Gass and Selinker (1983), the learning of the second language is maximal when the features of the new language resemble the features of the mother tongue. In this case, it could be argued that Thai students have a hard time formulating appropriate irregular verb forms because in Thai past tense is expressed through context, as in common with other Southeast Asian languages (Hinkel. 1992).

In sum, this above discussion is the beginning of a better understanding of why Thai students have difficulties with English verb tenses and verb forms. We can also see that a relatively high degree of difference between the Thai and English verb systems coupled with the complicated usage of the features themselves (e.g. the vast variation in inflections and tense markers in English) appear to hinder the students' ability to use appropriate forms. The lack of similar linguistic features in the students' L1 means they have no linguistic resource to draw on in constructing appropriate forms in English. This explains why students produce deviant English verb forms that reflect features of Thai verb formation rules. However, it is important to note that even though this analysis provides more insights towards understanding the challenges faced by Thai students in developing the appropriate use of grammatical verb tenses and verb forms, writing teachers should not neglect problems that the students may encounter at the discourse level.

Pedagogic implications

The shift from the traditional teacher-centered approach to teaching to the student-centered one has paved the way to the need to understand “how” the students learn and “why” they perform in a certain way. This article aims to help English writing teachers who do not speak Thai to understand why Thai students struggle with English grammar. From the discussion above, there are a number of significant teaching issues should be addressed. First, writing teachers need to be aware that the students' appropriate use of English verb tenses and verb forms is likely to be affected by the linguistic differences between Thai and the English language. As Bada (2001) explains, the degree of similarities and differences between the target language and the mother tongue can determine the ease with which different features of the target language are acquired. Thai and English verb systems are sharply different. English displays great morphological complexity compared to Thai which has no inflectional morphology (Odlin. 1989). Therefore, the teachers should take into account such differences in the understanding the challenges which face Thai students in using appropriate verb tenses and verb forms.

Second, insufficient knowledge of the second language grammatical rules forces students to fall back on the rules of their first language and transfer the rules of their first language to express something in their second language (Prins. 2006). It is common that students transfer the habits of their mother tongue when producing written texts (Kellerman. 1984). The influence of L1 transfer is

not negligible and indeed a real and central phenomenon that must be considered in second language learning process (Gass; & Selinker. 1983; Danesi; & Pietro. 1991). From this point of view, writing teachers should accept errors as an essential part of learning process and they should encourage their students to practice writing and view errors as a natural part of their writing development.

Lastly, in helping students construct appropriate English verb tenses and verb forms, writing teachers should recognize the similarities and differences between Thai and English. Understanding the impact of differences between L1 and L2 helps writing teachers understand students' learning difficulties and the linguistic resources they have at their disposal. The differences between Thai and English grammatical features can offer potential explanations why students have difficulties using appropriate forms. Therefore, the teachers can use such knowledge in reinforcing features that are problematic for students and providing supplementary grammar lessons in order to help the students overcome grammatical features that the students have difficulties with so that they have strong a foundation for the macro level.

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