Improving Writing Skills of Thai EFL Students by Recognition of and Compensation for Factors of L1 to L2 Negative Transfer

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The purpose of this research is to utilize an experimental-education technique for improving the writing skills of Thai EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. This improvement of skills is sought by making the student-participants in this study consciously aware of those specific aspects of L1 (Language 1, meaning the mother tongue) to L2 (Language 2, meaning the second language under study) transfer that would appear to affect their English writing products in a very direct and negative way. It was thought that instilling a conscious awareness of certain aspects of L1 to L2 negative transfer would help to mitigate the effects of that transfer. Twenty-four participants took part in this study, which lasted one semester. Purposive selection was employed. The research instrument consisted of ten tests/worksheets, administered to the participants three times over a one-semester period. Each test/worksheet contained ten sets of sentences. In each set, one sentence was written in grammatically-correct English and the second in Thai-L1-influenced "English". Students were asked to select the correctly-written sentence. During the period between each of the three tests, the instructor devoted at least 15 minutes of teaching time, per weekly course-period, to address the same type of L1 to L2 influence-issues as had appeared in the test/worksheets. Quantitative analysis was largely employed to analyze the test-results data in terms of frequency, linear regression, average, percentage and standard deviation. Qualitative analysis was also used, though to a lesser extent. The results of this research would suggest that making students consciously aware of negative (L1 to L2) transfer has resulted in a mitigation of certain aspects of that transfer, hence, yielding a degree of improvement in writing skills.

Keywords: Thai EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, EFL writing skills, L1 (Language 1, meaning the mother tongue) to L2 (Language 2, meaning the second language under study) transfer, L1 negative transfer, RERU (Roi-Et Rajabhat University), error analysis, EFL quantitative analysis, EFL grammar

Introduction

Rankin (1926) noted that adults spend at least 11% of communication time in writing. Wilt (1950) came up with the figure of 11%. Though neither study was in specific context of Asia, few would disagree that writing plays an important role in communication and educational processes generally.

Much has appeared in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) literature about problems faced generally by Asian students in terms of learning and developing English writing-skills (Fujioka, 2001; Shih, 1999; Takagi, 2001). Some writers have taken a special interest in problems encountered by Asian students who undertake English academic writing in particular (Hirayanagi, 1998; Newfields, 2003).

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More pertinent to this research is the issue of L1 (Language 1, meaning the mother tongue) to L2 (Language 2, meaning the second language under study) transfer, sometimes, referred to in the literature as "cross-linguistic influence". Put simply, L1 to L2 transfer refers to the influence of the mother tongue (here: Thai) on secondary language (here: English) acquisition. When this influence directly affects the quality of an L2 product, for instance, mistakes in terms of word order or aspects of tense, then this influence is called "negative transfer". Many writers have concluded that L1 to L2 transfer is common (Lado, 1957; Selinker, 1972; Ellis, 1994), when students begin learning a second language. Other writers disagreed, contending that transfer effects are very limited (Vainikka & Young-Scholten, 1994). Liu (2008) stated with respect to Chinese students learning to write English that "language transfer is inevitable in L2 writing". Hu and Bodomo (2009), after analyzing written compositions of high school students in Harbin, China, concluded that "The common errors made by high school learners of English in Harbin are mainly due to the influence of their native language (Mandarin)" (p. 230). They also concluded that less-pronounced L1 to L2 transfer took place with students who demonstrated higher proficiency in English. This latter point is echoed frequently in the literature (Chen, 2006; Ringbom, 1987; Mohle, 1989; Poulisse, 1990; Cenoz, 2001).

Yoshimura (n. d.) writing on the subject of L1 effects on the acquisition of inflectional morphology by Japanese EFL students, concluded that the "examination of 30 compositions by the Japanese EFL learners of the lower and higher proficiency groups reveals that L1 effects affect L2 learners' production of inflection morphology".

There can, therefore, be little doubt that L1 can and does affect L2 product to varying degrees.

Odlin (1989) observed that:

> There is some discussion of the pedagogical implications of certain investigations, but it seems to me that relatively little is known about the best ways to make use of transfer research in the classroom—hopefully, more teachers and teacher trainers will begin to think about what those ways are… (p. xi)

Most students at RERU (Roi-Et Rajabhat University) have problems with writing skills, even at basic sentence level. In keeping with the spirit of Odlin's advice, this researcher has attempted to mitigate these problems by teaching students to consciously recognize and deal with ten types of L1 to L2 transfer (see Table 1).

Table 1

Ten Types of L1 to L2 Transfer

	Type	Example
1	Use of "have/has" instead of "there is/there are"	Roi-Et has storm.
2	Use of Thai word-order for nouns and adjectives	The girl beautiful is here.
3	Avoidance of use of plural indicators ("s", "es")	I have many friend.
4	Misuse of definite article with place-names	I live in the Bangkok.
5	Avoidance of use of "be"	She here now.
6	Using simple present in lieu of present continuous	They eat now.
7	Avoidance of indefinite articles	It is cow.
8	Misuse of possessive pronouns	May I borrow my soap?
9	Misuse of reflexive pronouns	We saw myself in the mirror.
10	Avoidance of "will"	I see you tomorrow.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to develop and test an experimental-education technique for improving the writing skills of Thai EFL students. It is accomplished by making the student-participants in this study consciously aware of specific aspects of L1 to L2 transfer that would appear to affect their English writing products in a direct and negative way. The specific aspects in question are exemplified in Table 1. It was thought that if students are consciously aware of these L1 influences, they would be able to reject them more easily and make an improvement in the quality of their English writing.

Methodology: Sampling, Research Instrument

Twenty-four participants took part in this study. Purposive sampling was used. The duration of the study was one semester. The participants were all second-year students majoring in English Education and attending the RERU course Writing II, taught by this researcher.

The research instrument consisted of ten tests/worksheets, administered to the participants three times over the one-semester period. Each test/worksheet contained ten sets of sentences. In each set, one sentence was written in grammatically-correct English and the second in Thai-L1-influenced "English". Students were asked to select the correctly-written sentence. On each of the ten test/worksheets, the problem-type order was sequentially identical. For example, the first sentence-set always concerned the use of "have/has" in lieu of "there is/there are"; the second sentence-set always concerned the use of Thai word-order for nouns and adjectives; the last (tenth) sentence-set always concerned the avoidance of "will"; etc., and in accordance with the sequence shown in Table 1.

Test/worksheet No. 1 is reproduced below. The reader may compare the sequence of the problem-type order with the sequence in Table 1. In either instance, the order is identical. The same applies to all ten tests/worksheets. This sequential problem-type order was universally applied in order to facilitate later statistical analyses.

Unlike the reproduction below, the original tests/worksheets were written in a larger font size (Times New Roman 16). It was done to insure easy and quick reading, especially with regard to sight-impaired students who can not afford glasses, or otherwise, refuse to wear them for cosmetic purposes.

> Reproduction of Research Instrument, Test/worksheet No. 1
>
> Writing Skills Test-Worksheet No. 1
>
> Instructions: Check the grammatically-correct sentence.
>
> 1. ___Roi-Et has storm. ___There is a storm in Roi-Et.
>
> 2. ___The girl beautiful is here. ___The beautiful girl is here.
>
> 3. ___I see many cloud. ___I see many clouds.
>
> 4. ___She likes the Bangkok. ___She likes Bangkok.
>
> 5. ___They here now. ___They are here now.
>
> 6. ___He is eating the food now. ___He eats the food now.
>
> 7. ___It is a cow. ___It is cow.

8. ___She brushed my teeth. ___She brushed her teeth.

9. ___They saw themselves in the mirror. ___They saw myself in the mirror.

10. ___I will see you tomorrow. ___I see you tomorrow.

Methodology: Adjunct Teaching

During the period between each of the three tests, the instructor devoted a minimum of 15 minutes of teaching time per weekly course-period, to address the same "type" of L1 to L2 influence-issues as had appeared in the individual tests/worksheets. It should be emphasized here that the test/worksheets were never corrected in class, and students had no idea of their scores. The ten L1 to L2 problem-types were, when teaching, always addressed by way of other contextual examples. For instance, an example type-equivalent to problem-type 2, which concerns word order in terms of the adjective-noun relationship and appears in Test/worksheet No. 1 as "The girl beautiful is here" vs. "The beautiful girl is here", was exemplified in classroom-teaching in other contexts, including "The man fat arrived" vs. "The fat man arrived" and "The market has fruit delicious" vs. "The market has delicious fruit".

Analysis Procedure

Quantitative analysis was largely employed to analyze the raw data in terms of frequency, linear regression, average, percentage and standard deviation. Qualitative analysis (observation) was also used, though to a lesser extent. Graphics were used to facilitate explanation of the data analyses.

Analysis Results

Class average scores showed a steady progression when comparing Tests 1, 2 and 3. The class average score for Test 1 was 82%, and this figure rose to 89% by Test 3. Figure 1 depicts this progression. Linear regression (trend) is also shown.

Consistent with the class average-score progression is the steady improvement in class-average SD (Standard deviation), as shown in Figure 2. Class-average SD for Tests 1, 2 and 3 were 1.1, 0.91 and 0.76 respectively.

Low-score class averages produced further evidence of progress. Figure 3 shows the low-score class average for Tests 1, 2, and 3 along with a linear regression line. Whereas the low-score class average for Test 1 was 65%, by Test 3 this figure rose to 77%.

Further Analysis Results and Discussion

The results depicted in the Figures 1, 2 and 3 for class-average scores, class-average standard deviations and low-score class averages are ostensibly impressive in their capacity as supporting evidence for progress. But these are general, overall results and, though informative, do not tell the whole story. It is necessary to examine "frequency" data in terms of "error analysis" for each of the ten types of L1 to L2 transfer problem-areas summarized in Table 1 and represented in each of the ten tests/worksheets. In other words, did the research participants, generally, progress equally with respect to each of the ten L1 to L2 transfer problem-areas? Figure 4 would suggest that this is not the case.

Figure 4 clearly shows that most progress (decrease in errors) occurred specifically with the types of negative transfer represented in test/worksheet sentence-sets 1-6. Insignificant or no progress was evident regarding sentence-sets 7-10.
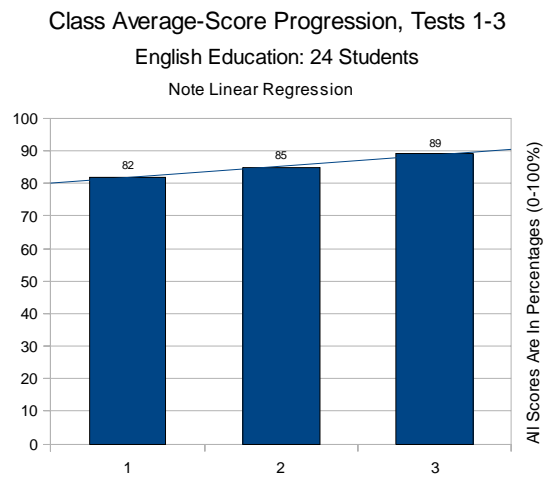
Class Average-Score Progression, Tests 1-3
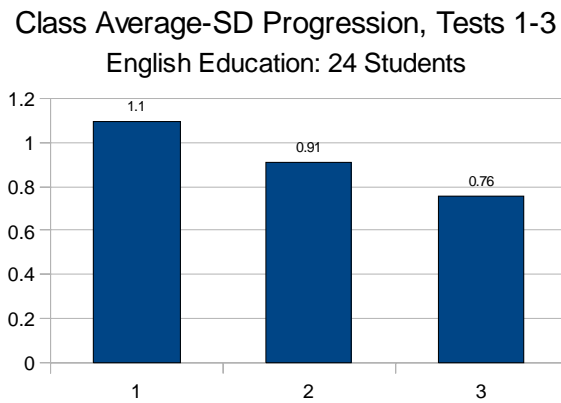
English Education: 24 Students

Note Linear Regression

Figure 1. Class average-score progression, Texts 1-3 English education: 24 students note linear regression.

Class Average-SD Progression, Tests 1-3

English Education: 24 Students

Figure 2. Class average-SD progression, Tests 1-3 English education: 24 students.

Low-Score Average Progression, Tests 1-3

Note Linear Regression
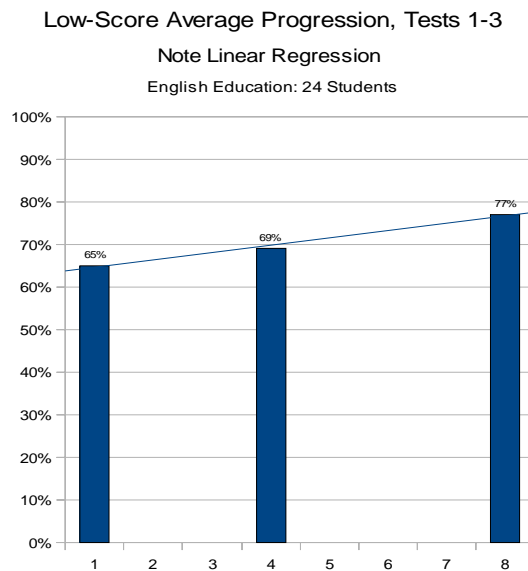
English Education: 24 Students

Figure 3. Low-score average progression, Tests1-3 note linear regression English education: 24 students.

Note: 100% = Total 240 possible errors for each question.
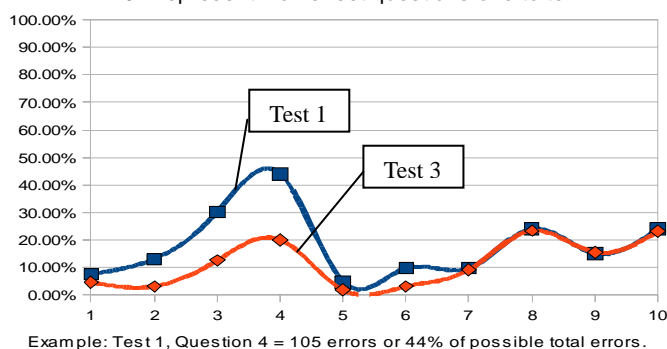1-10 Represent worksheet questions one to ten.

Example: Test 1, Question 4 = 105 errors or 44% of possible total errors.

Figure 4. Frequency in terms of error analysis, Test 1 vs. Test 3.

Conclusions

The results of this research would suggest that making the research participants consciously aware of negative (L1 to L2) transfer has resulted in mitigation of certain aspects of that transfer, hence, yielding a degree of improvement in writing skills. Virtually all of that progress has, however, occurred in context of the problem types represented in test/worksheet sentence-sets 1-6. The types of negative-transfer problems encountered in sentence-sets 7-10 would appear to require more time to overcome than a one-semester timeframe, at least for the participants in this study.

Discussion and Implications

A test/worksheet + adjunct-teaching approach, similar to that used by this researcher, could be tried by others for the purpose of researching the improvement of writing skills in different language contexts. Assuming that the L2 in question is English, and the context is, therefore, ESL (English as a Second Language) or EFL, the L1 could conceivably be Finnish, Korean, Vietnamese, Arabic, etc.. In the opinion of this researcher, a non Indo-European L1 would generally produce more profound results with this type of research approach than another Indo-European language that shares extensive grammatical/syntactical commonalities with English.

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