

Understanding EFL Students' Errors in Writing

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Abstract

Writing is the most difficult skill in English, so most EFL students tend to make errors in writing. In assisting the learners to successfully acquire writing skill, the analysis of errors and the understanding of their sources are necessary. This study attempts to explore the major sources of errors occurred in the writing of EFL students. It also investigates the types of errors and the linguistic level that presents the most errors in their writing. Forty narrative essays composed by Thai university students were collected and analysed. Results showed that the mostly frequent types of errors were translated words from Thai, word choice, verb tense, preposition, and comma. The errors derived from two sources: interlingual and intralingual. Interlingual or native language interference was found to be the dominant source of errors. This study provides pedagogical implications for EFL instructors. Instructors should pay attention to the influence of learners' native language.

Keywords: errors, error analysis, interlingual, intralingual, writing, English as a foreign language

1 Introduction

Mastering English writing skill is a very difficult task for the learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Most EFL learners tend to committed errors in writing regardless of a long period of English study (Wee, Sim, and Jusoff, 2009: 016). In fact, errors are considered as the important mark of the language development in language learning. According to Corder (1967), the errors made by the ESL/EFL learners are significant because "they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language" (p.167). James (1998) agreed with this idea by addressing that "the learners' errors are a register of their current perspective on the target language" (p.7). In the early period, the native language interference was identified as the only source of errors committed by language learners. Later, two major sources of errors have been recognised:

1.1 Interlingual errors:

Richards (1971:205) defined interlingual errors as the errors caused by the interference of the native language. These errors are the results of the learners' application of the native language elements in their spoken or written performances of the target language. When encountered with new language, people tend to consciously or unconsciously draw a connection between what they already know and what they do not. Learners carry over the existing knowledge of their native language to the performance of the target language (Ellis, 1997: 28). In most cases, it is inevitable to learn a foreign language solely without depending on some linguistic features of the language which has already acquired. At any rate, the interference can occur in various areas of linguistics components including phonology, morphology, grammar, syntax, lexis and semantics (Ellis, 2008:350). Furthermore, the influence presents in a degree to which both native language and target language differ or similar to each other. The influence is stronger where there are greater appearances of differences (Odlin, 1989:7). When the linguistic principles of native language are much differs from that of target language, the learners find it difficult to comprehend, and they begin to apply the rules and structures of native language in their learning process (Krashen, 1981:65).

1.2 Intralingual errors:

These errors are referred to the errors that occur because of the ineffective traits of learning such as faulty application of rules and unawareness of the restrictions of rules (Richards, 1971:206). The intralingual errors, therefore, are irrelevant to the native language interference, but led by the target language itself. In the language learning process, these errors normally occur when the learners have acquired insufficient knowledge (Kaweera, 2013:13). Also, Richards (1971) explained that developmental errors are the errors occur when "the learner attempting to build up hypotheses about the English language from his limited experience of it in the classroom or text-book" (p.209). It can be noted that errors in writing produced by EFL learners are the results of learners' incomplete knowledge of the target language.

1.3 EFL Writing:

Writing is a crucial component of language performances. English writing in both educational and professional settings is increasingly important in countries of non-native speakers of English (Leki, 2001:199). Most university students are required to write a variety of genres of writing, including business writing, summaries, internship report, and research proposal. EFL learners often find that writing is a difficult task. One reason is that a good writing requires a text with complexity of syntax and morphology, a wide range of vocabulary, and a good command over conventional forms and over the means of signaling the relation of the texts (Cumming, 2001:3). With all these details, the foreign language students find English writing is a difficult assignment. It is impossible not to make errors in writing.

In Thailand, students have faced with the writing problems chronically. Pawapatcharodom (2007:53) conducted the study aiming to investigate the strategies and problems in learning English language of Thai university students and reported that a majority of Thai students have a serious problem with writing skill. When comparing with others skills of English that Thai learners have acquired, writing seems to be the unsatisfied. As EFL Thai learners have encountered with the language requirement of the new century, the teachers and researchers have currently gained their interest on the study of writing to solve a crisis.

2. Objectives of the Study

The primary purpose of the research studies in the fields of the second language acquisition is to study how the second language is learned and to provide explanation on why some learners learn better than others (Lightbrown & Spada, 1993:115). According to Corder (1967: 165), errors can uncover a developing system of the learners' target language. Relatively, the objectives of the study include the followings:

1. To analyse the errors occurred in writing.
2. To investigate the linguistic level that presents the most errors in English writing of EFL students.
3. To examine the sources of errors occurred in English writing of EFL students.

3 Review of Literature

3.1 Errors in the Foreign Language Learning

Committing errors is an inevitable circumstance that occurs in human learning, including language (James, 1998:1). Errors used to be recognized as the undesirable problems which teachers tried to prevent. The conception of an error as a negative output of language learning was based on the behaviorist theory of learning. The behaviorist theory, lying on Skinner's model, suggests that learning is a habit formation process, resulting from reinforcement (River, 1968:73). Therefore, the external factors such as the teachers' input and the exposure to the native speaker environment played an important role in contributing to the learners' achievement in learning the TL. The reward for correct behavior and the punishment for mistake and error were employed in shaping the verbal behavior (Jones & Wheeler, 1983:326). Recently, errors are differently considered as the sign of learning progress. This perspective is influentially based on the discussion of Chomsky (1986:23), indicating that children's development in the language structures are innate. The current conception of the foreign language learning is that the learners conduct hypotheses about the systematic rules in of the TL, test those hypotheses against the perceived information, and make adjustment accordingly (Hadley, 2001:101). As a consequent, an error is perceived as the evidence resulting from the language learning process in which the learners use various strategies in learning a new language as well as test the hypotheses.

Basically, an error refers to an identifiable alteration of the grammatical elements of a native speaker, presenting the learners' competence in the target language (Brown, 2007:257-259). Errors are viewed as the non-native outcomes of the learners' inadequate linguistics knowledge. Corder (1973) defined an error as "those features of the learner's utterances which differ from those of any native speaker" (p.260). Lennon (1991) supported Corder's definition by referring an error to "a linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and under similar conditions of production would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers' native speakers counterparts" (p.182). In addition, errors in language learning occur systematically and repeatedly without any notice by the learners (Gass & Selinker, 2008: 102). The errors are identifiable only by teachers or others who possess an accurate knowledge of grammatical system.

3.2 Interlingual or Intralingual Errors

Efforts have been tremendously made to analyze and describe the errors in writing constructed by EFL learners. Several research studies were carried out to investigate errors made by the learners from different countries and found that the learners' native language was the main source of errors in writing. On the other hand, many studies emphasized on the intralingual sources of errors such as overgeneralization, incomplete application of rules, and false analogy. The reviews of the previous studies, therefore, are grouped into two categories as the follows:

3.2.1 Studies on Interlingual Sources

At the outset, Ridha (2012) investigated the errors in English essay writing of the EFL Iraqi college students. The errors were categorized according to the following taxonomy: grammatical, lexical, semantic, mechanics, and word order types of errors. The grammatical and the mechanical errors were the most serious and frequent ones. The most of the students' errors were led by the Arabic interference (Ridha, 2012:44). With respect to Chinese as the native language, Liu (2013) analysed syntactic errors made by Chinese university students in their English essays. The findings of the study reported that errors in tense, voice, and modality occurred most frequently, and the major sources of errors were student carelessness and the native language interference (Lui, 2013:188). In Thailand, Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013:67-78) analysed writing errors caused by the interference of the Thai language in three writing genres: narration, description, and comparison/contrast. The results revealed that interlingual errors fell into 16 categories: verb tense, word choice, sentence structure, article, preposition, modal/auxiliary, singular/plural form, fragment, verb form, pronoun, run-on sentence, infinitive/gerund, transition, subject-verb agreement, parallel structure, and comparison structure, respectively. The results of this study also reported that each writing genre had different numbers of error frequency. In sum, the analyses of written essays have pointed out that the native language still plays a negative role in writing of Thai EFL students. Empirical evidences have also demonstrated that the errors influenced by the learners' native language can be found at different levels of language ranging from lexicon to discourse and that the interlingual errors can be occurred in every type of texts.

3.2.2 Studies on Intralingual Sources

To begin with, Kim (2001:159-174) examined thirty samples of compositions produced by Korean EFL university students. The error analysis demonstrated that the majority of errors were resulted from intralingual sources. However, there were few error derived from the interference of the native language. Along the same lines, Sattayatham and Hansa (2007: 170-194) performed the analysis of errors committed by the first year medical students at the university in Thailand. The study reported that ten types of linguistic errors were found including order of adjectives, there is/are, subject-verb agreement, direct/indirect object, verbs of feeling, past tense, present perfect, reported speech, passive voice, and question tag (Sattayatham & Hansa, 2007: 184). The results of the study also revealed that the errors caused mainly by intralingual sources: overgeneralization, incomplete rule application, omission, and building of false concepts. The native language interference was found in a small proportion (Sattayatham & Hansa, 2007: 188).

Despite the fact that many research studies were conducted to offer insights into the possible errors occurred in EFL students' compositions, teachers face challenge when teaching English writing to EFL students. The problems in writing of EFL students still exist. As a result, the analyses of errors in writing are continuously needed to be carried out.

4 Research Methodology

4.1 Sampling

The students sample was recruited from second and third year undergraduates in the total of 40 students whose major is English Language. They were all native speakers of Thai at the age of 18 and 22 years. Additionally, they had studied English through regular Thai language instruction at school for at least twelve years before entering the university. The study took place in the student's regular writing class at a public university located in Songkhla, Thailand.

4.2 Methodology

Research instruments used in this research study consist of the written essays of 40 participants. The nature of topic given was narrative which allowed the participants to write freely. The participants were asked select one of three given topics. All topics were chosen because two English instructors approved that topic was appropriate to students' ages and their background knowledge. In data collection procedures, the participants were asked to construct writing paragraph approximately 300 words within a period of one hour. They were not allowed to use dictionaries.

The data from written works were gathered and analysed. Error detection was the first stage of the analysis (James, 1998:91). The errors in written essays were detected by the researcher and two experts who work with the researcher in the Department of Foreign Language (one is Thai who hold Master degree in linguistics, and another is the native English-speaking instructor). Each individual worked independently to determine types of errors, and categorised the errors into classifications.

5 Results and Discussion

Results of the analysis revealed that twenty-two types of errors emerged in writing essays composed by Thai EFL students: wrong verb tense; wrong verb form; pronouns (omission, addition or wrong choice); pronouns: inappropriate use; prepositions (omission, addition or wrong choice); articles; nouns; adjective (position);

adjective (comparison); conjunctions; infinitive and gerund; subject-verb agreement; sentence fragment; translated word from Thai; word choice; confusion of sense relations; collocation; question mark; comma; full stop; capitalization; and spelling (Note 1).

5.1 Explanations of Errors

Considering the errors led by Thai language interference, the errors occurred the most frequently were literal translation of Thai words, verb tense, and preposition respectively.

5.1.1 Literal translation of Thai words: One technique in which Thai EFL students use in acquiring English skills, including writing, is literal translation of Thai words into English words.

My father did not allow me to go to Malaysia, so I escaped to go there only one.

In this case, the writer wanted to convey that he went to Malaysia once without his father's knowing. The English word "escape" is equivalent to Thai word "หนี [Nee]" which mean escape, run away, and also go away without someone's knowing. However, the English definition of "escape" is to slip away from pursuit or to avoid capture. The sentence below exemplifies another use of literal translation of Thai into English word.

It is a time to decide that we will study where university is.

[มันเป็นเวลาที่ต้องตัดสินใจ ว่าพวกเราจะเรียนที่มหาวิทยาลัยไหน]

This sentence demonstrates word-by-word translation from Thai into English. In this case, the writer intended to say that "the students have to make a decision on which university they will select".

5.1.2 Verb tense: It came as no surprise that many sentences produced by Thai EFL students were identified using wrong verb tenses. Particularly, 130 errors were identified as the results of incorrect use of tense that does not exactly indicate the time of an action. Since there is no inflected form of past tense verbs in Thai language, these errors may be the results of the native language interference. The main problem was on the substitution of past tense form with a simple tense. For example,

She sends <sent> a message to me.

He wants <wanted> for us to get a scholarship.

I like <liked> to follow my mother and ask <asked> her many things.

In the system of English language, if the wrong tense is used, the text cannot convey the writers' intended meanings.

5.1.3 Preposition: The analysis of the collected data in this pilot study has uncovered that the errors in the use of prepositions accounted for omission, addition, and substitution. Furthermore, the prepositions are used in distinctively among a variety of languages. The same preposition can convey totally different meaning from one language to another. In the patterns of substitution, the following sentences represent the samples of errors in selecting a wrong preposition instead of the correct one.

I had been crying about <for> fifteen days.

In Thai, the preposition "about" means relate to, approximately, or almost. However, the preposition "for" is used to indicate the duration of an activity. In this case, the knowledge of Thai language hinders the learner's English writing. Moreover, the below sentence is the sample of error in omission of preposition.

I was too lazy to search <for> more information.

"For" is used to present the object of intention in English whereas there is no preposition used in Thai in this pattern. Lastly, the prepositional errors were identified in according with adding a preposition where none is required.

We came back to home.

There is no preposition required prior to home because it is an adverb of place, not a noun. However, home is considered as a noun, not an adverb of place, in Thai language. The writer applied linguistic rule of the native language and committed a propositional error.

Regarding the errors derived from intralingual sources such as overgeneralization, faulty application of rules, and ignorance of rule restrictions, the errors in word choice, verb form, and spelling, were found as the most frequently types of errors.

5.1.4 Word choice: Apparently, many sentences contained inappropriate or inaccurate vocabulary which deviated the meaning of the written text.

He has a joke <a good sense of humor>.

While a joke means something done to cause laughter, a good sense of humor is a characteristic of being able to say or do the humorous. In this sentence, a good sense of humor is appropriate phrase that conveys the accurate meaning.

This is another sample of using a wrong word choice.

They are lovely <nice> to me.

Lovely refers to a beauty inside and outside of a person. It is not the meaning the writer wanted to convey. In this case, nice, a good quality, is a better selection of word.

5.1.5 Verb form: In English, there are five forms of verbs: base, the third person singular (s), past tense, past

participle, and -ing forms. The participants' errors in using an incorrect form of verbs can be seen in the following sentences.

He graduate <graduated> from school.

The writer of this sentence used the base form to indicate past tense of the verb, which is incorrect.

It is hard to decided <decide>.

On the other hand, the writer of this sentence made the error by using the past tense form of verb for infinitive.

5.1.6 Spelling: The spelling errors were identified in different categories. First of all, the errors occurred by the learners' adding or omitting space in a single word. The followings are the exemplified sentences.

Somefriend <Some friends> are fun to be with.

Every one <Everyone> has several reasons.

You are in my heart for ever <forever>.

The errors were occurred by the learners' insertion of an extra letter to the certain words.

He huges <hugs> me.

Everythings < Everything> was not easy as I thought.

The errors in the absence of a letter in particular words were identified.

We alway <always> love him.

It can work again <against> you.

I felt relive <relieve> at that time.

From the analysis, the majority of spelling errors found in the pilot study were the results of using a substitution or an incorrect letter.

We decised <decided> to separate.

It was my dicision <decision>.

The office contected <contacted> me back.

I asked for advise <advice> from many people.

In examining the linguistic levels which presented the most errors, the errors were analysed by distinguished into three linguistic levels of English language: grammar, lexis, and writing mechanics. Grammar was found as the most difficult linguistic level presented the most frequently errors (Note 2).

Additionally, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was conducted in order to determine whether the means of errors in writing of Thai EFL students differ between the three linguistic levels: grammar, lexis, and mechanics. The results of the analysis show that there is statistically significant difference on the errors in three linguistic levels [Sig = .000 at alpha level ($\alpha = .05$)] (Note 3).

In comparison of average value of each pair, The results of Turkey post-hoc test indicate that errors in grammar is significantly different from errors in lexis, and errors in grammar is significantly different from errors in writing mechanics at the 0.05 level (Note 4.).

Furthermore, a Paired-Sample t-test was run to compare two sources of errors committed by the participants. As the independent variable is writing, the dependent variables are two sources of errors: interlingual and intralingual. As the results, the participants committed the interlingual errors (M= 20.12, SD = 1.84) and intralingual errors (M= 12.51, SD = 1.71). The p-value is .000 which is less than the significance level ($\alpha=0.05$). Therefore, the statistical evidence to suggest that there is a significant difference among the two sources of errors: interlingual and intralingual (Note 5).

6. Pedagogical Implications

Some pedagogical implications can be drawn from this study. First of all, the errors students made can be the sign of students' progress in their language learning process. Errors can be used in checking what have been learnt and what have been missed. Writing instructors can identify language developmental stage of the EFL learners based on the errors they committed in their productions of writing, so they can prepare teaching materials and strategies accordingly. Secondly, the study provides instructors the information on the area of linguistic difficulties which EFL learners have face in learning writing. More specifically, instructors are realized that grammar is still a problematic area for EFL learners. In EFL writing classroom, learners' limited knowledge of grammar has caused learners difficulty in composing an effective writing. Being aware of the linguistic elements of difficulties can help writing instructors to figure out ways to overcome such problems. Finally, instructors should pay attention to the interference of learners' native language. Understanding the influences of learners' native language that hinder EFL learning allows writing instructors to mark their teaching that helps EFL learners to overcome learning problems.

Respectively, the future research studies should focus on exploring the particular and effective ways to lessen the errors in writing influenced by the learners' native language. Findings of the future research should assist the EFL students in acculturating themselves into new linguistic forms without depending on their native language.

7. Conclusions

Most of EFL students have learned English since they were in primary school; however, their English proficiency, especially writing, is still unsatisfied. Error analysis has been widely used as a means to gain understanding on how writing skill is learnt. This study was an effort to systematically investigate the types and sources of errors in writing. It also explored the linguistic feature in which the students made the most errors. The procedures of the error analysis were employed. The results suggested that EFL students had grammatical difficulties in writing. They also had faced with a problem in selecting the appropriate words that convey the writers' intended meaning. The results of this study confirmed that learners' native language has played a major role in English learning among Thai students. Addressing students' areas of difficulties, instructors are able to make the right judgment in material selection and preparation.

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Notes

Note 1.

Table 1 Errors in writing

Sources of Errors	Classification of Errors	Frequency
Interlingual	I. Grammatical Errors	
	1. Wrong verb tense	130
	2. Pronouns: Omission, addition or wrong choice	29
	3. Prepositions: Omission ,addition or wrong choice	125
	4. Articles	79
	5. Nouns	68
	6. Adjective: Position	8
	7. Subject-verb agreement	32
	II. Lexical Errors	
	8. Translated word from Thai	141
	III. Errors in Writing Mechanics	
9. Comma	108	
10.Full stop	23	
11. Capitalization	61	
	Total Interlingual Errors	804
Intralingual	I. Grammatical Errors	
	12. Wrong verb form	90
	13. Pronouns: Inappropriate use	35
	14. Adjective: Comparison	5
	15. Sentence fragment	28
	16. Conjunctions	37
	17. Infinitive and Gerund	48
	II. Lexical Errors	
	18. Word choice	131
	19. Confusion of sense relations	23
	20. Collocation	13
III. Errors in Writing Mechanics		
21. Question mark	8	
22. Spelling	88	
	Total Intralingual Errors	506
	Total Errors	1,310

Table 1 reports the types and total numbers of the errors the participants committed in their written texts. Twenty-two types of errors emerged in writing essays composed by Thai EFL students: wrong verb tense; wrong verb form; pronouns (omission, addition or wrong choice); pronouns: inappropriate use; prepositions (omission, addition or wrong choice); articles; nouns; adjective (position); adjective (comparison); conjunctions; infinitive and gerund; subject-verb agreement; sentence fragment; translated word from Thai; word choice; confusion of sense relations; collocation; question mark; comma; full stop; capitalization; and spelling.

Note 2.

Table 2 Mean and Standard Deviation of Linguistic Levels

Levels	N	M	SD
Grammar	40	17.85	3.81
Lexis	40	9.32	2.33
Mechanics	40	7.20	2.17

The descriptive analysis shows that the errors in grammar contained the mean value (M=17.85, SD=3.81), lexis (M=9.32, SD=2.33), and writing mechanics (M=7.20, SD=2.17) respectively.

Note 3.

Table: 3 Comparisons of errors by linguistic levels

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2541.517	2	1270.758	154.187	.000
Within Groups	964.275	117	8.242		
Total	3505.792	119			

Writing was the independent variable, and three categorical dependent variables were grammar, lexis, and mechanics. The analysis shows that there is statistically significant difference on the errors in three linguistic levels [Sig = .000 at alpha level ($\alpha = .05$)].

Note 4.

Table: 4. Multiple comparisons of errors by linguistic levels

Levels	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05		
		1	2	3
Mechanics	40	7.2000		
Lexis	40		9.3250	
Grammar	40			17.8500
Sig.		.000	.000	.000

Table 4 indicates that at least one linguistic level is different from the other levels is retained.

Note 5.

Table 5 Comparisons of errors by sources

<i>Sources of Errors</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Interlingual	40	20.12	1.84	15.747	30	.000
Intralingual	40	12.51	1.71			

Table 5 shows that the participants committed the interlingual errors ($M= 20.12$, $SD = 1.84$) and intralingual errors ($M= 12.51$, $SD = 1.71$). The p-value is .000 which is less than the significance level ($\alpha=0.05$). Consequently, there is a significant difference among the two sources of errors: interlingual and intralingual.