

## An Analysis of Competency and Performance in English Writing of Thai Students

### การวิเคราะห์สมรรถนะและความสามารถในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนไทย

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#### Abstract

This research aimed to analyze the status of competency and performance in English writing of Thai students, and to find out the causes that might affect their writing skills. One hundred and twelve undergraduate students majoring in English were selected as a study group. The English Error Identification Test was given to the students to examine their language competency, and the Essay Writing was also given to test their writing performance.

There are two types of errors, based on Ellis's definition (1997), as Interlingual Errors (ITLR) and Intralingual Errors (ITRLR). There were more numbers of ITRLR (4,748, 89.24%), which are the type of the target language, than those of the ITLR (573, 10.76%) which are errors from student's mother tongue. The ITRLR were mainly syntactic forms or grammatical errors such as the Subject-verb agreement (23.27%), and the semantic form, such as the Word Form (17.36%), and the Word Choice (17.67%). At the same time, the ITLR were less in number of syntactic errors such as Omission of article, Infinitive, and Preposition (3.95%), and Word-by-Word Translation (2.96%) which reflected the error caused by the mother tongue interference. The research findings are useful for ESL teaching and acquisition.

**Keywords:** Error Analysis, Competency, Performance, English Writing, Intralingual Errors, Interlingual Errors

#### บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความรู้และความสามารถในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษา และหาสาเหตุที่ส่งผลกระทบต่อทักษะด้านการเขียนของพวกเขา ผู้วิจัยได้เลือกกลุ่มตัวอย่างจำนวน 112 คน ซึ่งเป็นนักศึกษาปริญญาตรีเอกภาษาอังกฤษ โดยใช้ข้อสอบวัดทักษะด้านไวยากรณ์เพื่อศึกษาความรู้ทางภาษา และการเขียนเรียงความภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อวัดความสามารถทางการเขียนของพวกเขา ข้อผิดพลาดจำแนกตาม 2 ประเภทหลักคือ ประเภทที่เกิดขึ้นจากการเรียนรู้ภาษาเป้าหมาย (Intralingual Errors) และประเภทที่เกิดจากการแทรกแซงของภาษาแม่ (Interlingual Errors) ซึ่งประเภทแรก

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มีมากถึง (4,748, 89.24%) ส่วนประเภทที่สองมีจำนวน (573, 10.76%) ข้อผิดพลาดที่เกิดจากการเรียนรู้ภาษาเป้าหมายนั้นส่วนใหญ่เกี่ยวกับโครงสร้างประโยค เช่น การใช้กริยาให้สอดคล้องกับประธาน (23.27%) และที่เกี่ยวกับคำและความหมาย เช่น รูปแบบการใช้คำ (17.36%) และการเลือกใช้คำ (17.67%) ขณะเดียวกัน จำนวนข้อผิดพลาดของโครงสร้างที่เกิดจากภาษาแม่มีจำนวนน้อยกว่า เช่น การละค่านำหน้านาม รูปกริยาที่เป็นนาม และคำบุพบท (3.95%) และการแปลแบบคำต่อคำ (2.96%) ซึ่งสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงข้อผิดพลาดที่มีสาเหตุจากการแทรกแซงของภาษาแม่ ผลการวิจัยครั้งนี้มีประโยชน์ต่อการสอนและผู้ที่เรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่สอง

**คำสำคัญ:** การวิเคราะห์ความผิดพลาด, สมรรถนะ, ความสามารถ, การเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ, ข้อผิดพลาดที่เกิดขึ้นจากการเรียนรู้ภาษาเป้าหมาย, ข้อผิดพลาดที่เกิดจากการแทรกแซงของภาษาแม่

## 1. Background

English is an international language which is widely used as an international language for both educational and occupational purposes. In the past, Pali and Sanskrit were taught in Thailand, but nowadays the number of people who studies those languages are decreasing. Nowadays, Pali and Sanskrit are the classical foreign languages in Thailand, but there are two foreign languages that have been widely taught in Thailand for a long period including English and French, English is the most widely studied modern language (Wangsotorn, 1982).

It is undeniable that English plays an important role in Thai educational system. Thai students are forced to learn both English speech and writing from their kindergarten to advance education. For Thai learners of English as a foreign language, writing in English tends to be more complex and official than speech because the learners need to learn English grammatical structure, vocabulary, and idioms. Wang and Shaw (2008) confirm by saying, when we learn another language that is subsequent to the first language, we have to learn both grammatical correctness and idiomatic preference. In these days, most students are still weak in English skills: listening, reading, speaking especially in writing because written language requires grammatical skills which are difficult and complex. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to sentence structure are used. It is also important to be able to write sentences that are acceptable and grammatically correct (Norrish, 1983).

It is generally accepted that writing in English is a complex process for learners who learn English as a foreign language, and it is not wondering that errors in writing are found as an inevitable part of writing. Most of Thai students face main problem in English language usage of grammatical structure with regard to English writing because the language they use in daily life is Thai, not English. The major problem in an English writing of Thai students arise from their mother tongue interference, Thai, into the

target language. When the students produce English writing, they have the cognitive process in Thai and usually translate direct from Thai into English. If Thai students would like to further their study in higher education, or those who will study abroad, they must pass standard proficiency tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL or IELTS. The test of error identification and essay writing are parts of these tests.

## 2. Methodology

Firstly, the researcher sent a formal letter to the dean of the faculty of humanities of universities in asking for permission for students to be participants of this study. The sample in the research is 112 students who were studying for a bachelor degree in English major, in the academic year 2015, Faculty of Humanities in some universities. These students were chosen because they had fundamental knowledge that met the objectives of the study. Also they had taken many courses about writing in English.

The instrument used in collecting data is the English writing test. The test is categorized into two parts: Error Identification, there are sixty questions which were designed to evaluate the grammar skills and sentence structure. All questions consisted of six types of intralingual errors which are based on James' model (1998); *overgeneralization, misanalysis, incomplete rule application, exploiting redundancy, overlooking co-occurrence restriction, and system simplification*. Another part is Essay Writing on the topic "People I Respect The Most". This part was created to analyze intralingual errors and interlingual errors.

After the data was gathered, the researcher and an English native speaker checked the grammatical construction sentences in order to ensure the correctness of error data. After all errors were identified, the frequency of each type of errors was calculated in percentage.

## 3. The Findings

The findings of this study derived from the quantitative and qualitative analysis and the results are as follows: (1) different types and frequency of errors in English writing (2) Error Identification Test (3) Essay Writing Test (4) examples of intralingual errors and interlingual errors.

### 1. Different Types and frequency of Errors in English Writing

Table 1 shows the overall errors based on different types of errors obtained from both the test of Error Identification and Essay Writing.

**Table 1***Overall Errors based on Different Types of Errors*

Types of error	Numbers of errors	Percentages
1) Interlingual errors		
- Omission of article, infinitive, and preposition	210	3.95
- Word-by-Word Translation	156	2.93
- Expletive	15	0.28
- Past Tense	192	3.60
2) Intralingual errors		
2.1) Overgeneralization		
- Subject Verb Agreement	1,238	23.27
2.2) Misanalysis		
- Pronoun	887	16.67
- Relative Pronoun	9	0.17
2.3) Incomplete rule application		
- Word Order	238	4.47
2.4) Exploiting redundancy		
- Unnecessary Word	513	9.64
2.5) Overlooking co-occurrence		
- Word Form	923	17.35
2.6) System simplification		
- Word Choice	940	17.67
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,321</b>	<b>100.00</b>

From Table 1, 573 errors (10.76%) were caused by interlingual errors, and 4,748 errors (89.24%) were caused by intralingual errors. There are six types of intralingual errors; *overgeneralization*, *misanalysis*, *incomplete rule application*, *exploiting redundancy*, *overlooking co-occurrence*, and *system simplification*. One thousand four hundred thirty errors (23.27%) were caused by overgeneralization, 896 errors (16.84%) were caused by misanalysis, 238 errors (4.47%) were caused by incomplete rule application, 513 errors (9.64%) were caused by exploiting redundancy, 923 errors (17.35%) were caused by overlooking co-occurrence, and 940 errors (17.67%) were caused by system simplification.

Table 2 shows the overall errors based on kinds of writing test obtained from both the test of Error Identification and Essay Writing.

**Table 2**

*Overall Errors based on Kinds of Writing Test*

Types of writing test	Numbers of errors	Percentages
Error Identification 112	3,895	73.20
Essay Production 112	1,426	26.80
The finished essay (107)	1,426	26.80
The unfinished essay (5)	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,321</b>	<b>100.00</b>

From Table 2, there were 3,895 errors (73.20%) students made in error identification and 1,426 errors (26.80%) in the essay production. There were five pieces of the unfinished essay which had no errors. The students in the unfinished writing an essay could not finish the writing in the limited time, it cannot be concluded that they might make a great essay because the less the students write, the less errors occur.

2. Error Identification Test

Table 3 shows the results of intralingual errors obtained from only the test of error identification.

**Table 3**

*Identifying Intralingual Errors*

Intralingual Errors	Numbers of errors	Percentages
1) Overgeneralization		
- Subject Verb Agreement	766	19.67
2) Misanalysis		
- Pronoun	671	17.23
3) Incomplete rule application		
- Word Order	162	4.16

**Table 3** (continued)

Intralingual Errors	Numbers of errors	Percentages
4) Exploiting redundancy		
- Unnecessary Word	513	13.17
5) Overlooking co-occurrence		
- Word Form	892	22.90
6) System simplification		
- Word Choice	891	22.88
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,895</b>	<b>100.00</b>

For Table 3, there were overall 3,895 intralingual errors. Seven hundred sixty six errors (19.67%) were caused by overgeneralization, 671 errors (17.23%) were caused by misanalysis, 162 errors (4.16%) were caused by incomplete rule application, 513 errors (13.17%) were caused by exploiting redundancy, 892 errors (22.90%) were caused by overlooking co-occurrence, and 891 errors (22.88%) were caused by system simplification.

### 3. Essay Writing Test

Table 4 shows the results of intralingual errors and interlingual errors obtained from only the test of essay writing.

**Table 4**

#### *Identifying Intralingual Errors and Interlingual Errors*

Intralingual Errors and Interlingual Errors	Numbers of errors	Percentages
1) Interlingual errors		
- Omission of article, infinitive, and preposition	210	14.73
- Word-by-Word Translation	156	10.94
- Expletive	15	1.05
- Past Tense	192	13.46
2) Intralingual errors		
2.1) Overgeneralization		
- Subject Verb Agreement	472	33.10

**Table 4** (continued)

Intralingual Errors and Interlingual Errors	Numbers of errors	Percentages
2.2) Misanalysis		
- Pronoun	216	15.15
- Relative Pronoun	9	0.63
3) Incomplete rule application		
- Word Order	76	5.33
4) Overlooking co-occurrence		
- Word Form	31	2.17
5) System simplification		
- Word Choice	49	3.44
<b>Total</b>	1,426	100.00

For Table 4, the errors in subject verb agreement had the highest percentage (33.10%) of intralingual errors in the type of overgeneralization. The second highest percentage was possessive pronoun (15.15%) of intralingual errors in the type of misanalysis. The omission of article, infinitive with to, and preposition were the third highest percentage (14.73%) of interlingual errors. The rest were errors in past tense (13.46%), word-by-word translation (10.94%), word order (5.33%), word choice (3.44%), word form (2.17%), expletive (1.05%), and relative pronoun (0.63%), respectively.

#### 4. Examples of Intralingual Errors and Interlingual Errors

As previously mentioned, this study purpose to explore and analyze each type of errors found in the English writing test of Thai undergraduate students who are studying for a bachelor degree in English major. The errors were found and classified into types, and the results of the study revealed that there were altogether eleven types of errors mostly found regarding the two main types of intralingual errors and interlingual errors:

##### *a) Subject verb agreement*

Subject verb agreement is the type of error in overgeneralization which were found the most problematic. For example:

“The standards on which the metric system are based have been found to be slightly inaccurate.”

“Sometimes he close the shop and go to the field.”

The following examples are the most frequent types of agreement errors are subject verb agreement. In the first example, the students fail to analyze that *the standards* is the plural subject of sentence, so they use plural verb. The correct subject of the sentence is *the metric system* which is singular subject, so “is based” is the correct singular verb must be used in the sentence as the basic principle; singular subjects need singular verbs, and plural subjects need plural verbs.

**b) Word Choice**

A wrong word has been used in a sentence which is error type in system simplification. For example:

“Even during economic booms, there is a small number of unemployment.”

“I have met many people in my life, they are all variety.”

The correct word from the first example should be *amount* because the word *number* is used in reference to count nouns, but *unemployment* in the sentence is uncountable nouns.

The second example, the correct word should be *different* because of the subject is *they*, so *variety* is not go together to the context. Those similar words are always troublesome to the students.

**c) Word Form**

A wrong part of speech has been used in a sentence. This error type is in overlooking co-occurrence of intralingual errors. For example:

“Psychologists generally agreement that a certain stimulus must be present each time a habitual action is carried out.”

“I really respect her strong, and I want to be ...”

Both examples show the wrong form of verb and noun occurred because the students might fail to observe that adverb is not supposed to be followed directly by a noun, they might not be sure part of speech of the word they use, or may be the reason that the students have insufficient knowledge about using word form correctly.

**d) Pronoun**

The errors in pronoun were quite frequently found in the students’ English writing test especially in the part of essay production because it’s the personal essay, and the students used a lot of personal subjects about themselves as well as pronouns. Pronoun is the error type in misanalysis. For example:

“Every man and woman should vote for the candidate of their choice.”

“She would spend time on it trying hard to do it by her own.”

In the first example is caused from the wrong concept of target language rule, possessive adjective is not pronoun, but rather determiners which are similar form to the possessive pronoun, occur before the noun they modify. The indefinite pronoun *every* is always singular, therefore, require “his/her”.

In the second example shows pronoun that emphasizes the subject of the clause, therefore, the correct pronoun is “herself” can be placed at the end of the clause, or immediately after the subject of the clause.

#### ***e) Omission of Article, Infinitive, and Preposition***

The study found that the preposition, article, and infinitive with to missed in many sentences. These types of error were caused by mother tongue interference. For example:

“Not only does she teach me \_\_\_ a good person but she also teaches me \_\_\_ love other people and \_\_\_ understand them.”

“My brother is \_\_\_ oldest brother, so he gave everything to ...”

“She can do everything for me and I can rely on her when I get \_\_\_ trouble.”

Omission was possibly due to mother tongue interference. There is no article in Thai language, and preposition is much less being used. The first example shows the omission of infinitive, to + infinitive after the verb *understand*, and object + to + infinitive because of the different rules of the two languages may cause the students fail how to use infinitive in their English writing.

#### ***f) Past Tense***

Because of the differences between the Thai and English languages are significant of the use of tenses in English. In Thai, there is no tense to specify the past action in different time, but the use of tense in English is necessary. For example:

“In every aspect of my life, my mother continuously pushes me to excel.”

“... , but I was scolded because I doing wrong ...”

From the following examples, errors occurred in the use of tenses, and the use of time tense markers. The students seem confused about the use of past simple tense, these errors are still problematic reflected their English proficiency in grammar.

**g) Word – by – Word Translation**

The students directly translate from Thai words into English, this error found in the lexical interference. For example:

“He always be my bank.”

“She teaches me about being a good man, I will remember this sentence in my heart.”

Both examples show that the students produced an English sentence by translating word-by-word from Thai into English. When the students produce English writing which included a lot of complicated ideas, they may think in Thai and translate word-by-word the sentences into their English writing that causes mother tongue interference errors.

**h) Word Order**

A set of word has been incorrectly placed. Word order error is the type of error in incomplete rule application. For example:

“During the 1600’s, skilled shoemakers scarce were in what is now the United States.”

“We all were happy and stressed at the same time.”

In the first example shows word order errors appear because of misplacement of adjective modifiers. The student place the adjective before the verb, they probably are confused of misplaced modifiers, *were* is a helping verb, and *scarce* is an adjective modifying shoemakers, even though Thai and English structures are alike. Adjectives regularly go before the words they are modifying, or after with helping verbs.

In the second example shows word order errors appear because of misplacement of quantifier *all*. This may be because of word-by-word translation.

**i) Expletive**

The results of the study revealed that there aren’t many of expletive errors on the essay part because the students hardly used *there is* and *there are*. This type of interlingual error can be described as the syntactic interference. For example:

“She taught me to be calm when has a problem.”

“If be no king in Thailand may not be as flourishing and not be as accepted ...”

This kind of interference error occurs because the differences of this structure’s rules between the two languages causing the students to negatively transfer the Thai structure in the English sentence. The *there + be* structure is an expletive subject, so it may cause difficulties to ESL students. Thai students

might transfer the Thai structure in the English sentence by omitting *there* structure because “there” structure in Thai means /mi/, so they always use *has/have* instead of *there + verb to be*.

#### **j) Relative Pronoun**

A wrong relative pronoun has been used in connecting a clause or two sentences to introduce a relative clause, such as *who*, *whom*, *which*, *what*, *where*. Relative pronoun is the type of error in misanalysis.

“Father told me I was the first child whom is very lovely.”

“There are many people who you have known in your life.”

The correct relative pronoun in the first example is “*which*”, refers to the clause before in order to tell more about the person is mentioned in the sentence.

In the second example shows the function of relative pronoun as the object of a verb or preposition, therefore, require “*whom*”.

#### **k) Unnecessary Word**

Words with the same meaning have been used in one sentence. Unnecessary word is kind of error in exploiting redundancy. For example:

“Greatly high production costs, together with serious health and safety concerns, have reduced the number of nuclear power plants being built today.”

“Because helium is so too light, it constantly escapes from the atmosphere and drifts into space.”

Words with the same meaning included unnecessarily occurred probably because the students do not omit redundant words. If they look carefully, they will find that those often are not necessary, the words *greatly* and *so* should be eliminated from the sentence. The students may think the more complex words, the more a great sentence, however, they need to consider whether they need every word.

### **4. Findings of the Research**

Regarding the objectives of the study: to analyze errors by using the test of error identification in order to examine the students’ competency, their performance by using the test of essay writing, and to investigate the causes that might affect their writing skill. The results indicated that the use of word form, a wrong part of speech has been used in a sentence which was found the most problematic of the students’ competency in the test of error identification, followed by the use of word choice, a wrong word has been used in a sentence, such as the words “*number*” which is used with plural nouns, things can be counted,

and “*amount*” which is normally used for nouns that can’t be counted, the students always are confused with these words. The results from the two tests can be concluded that the students made more errors on error identification than essay writing because most Thai students are weak in grammatical construction knowledge of the language, but in the test of essay writing, the students are lack of language usage skill. As Canale and Swain (1980) mention that Chomsky uses the terms “competence” as the grammar and “performance” as the psychological factors involved in memory limitation.

The findings of the study of Ayurawatana (2002) revealed that the errors found at the sentential level were the punctuation, the subject-verb agreement, the fragment and run-on, the singular and plural nouns, the tense, the passive voice, the participial phrase, and the relative clause. The results showed that the most frequent errors occurred in punctuation, followed by subject-verb agreement. Ayurawatana’s results are in line with the findings of the present study. In this study findings from the two tests showed the highest production of errors in the target language, the researcher did not focus on punctuation involves, and the use of subject-verb agreement was the most frequently found. Therefore, it can be concluded that grammatical errors by undergraduate students majoring in English in the present study reflected their English competency and proficiency in grammar. Similarly, many previous studies indicated that most errors arise from intralingual errors; that is to say, errors dealing with overgeneralization or incomplete rule application (Ellis, 1997).

However, the main cause of interlingual errors was not word-by-word translation because the most frequent errors found which were caused by mother tongue interference were omission of article, infinitive, and preposition, while past tense ranked second, word-by-word- translation ranked third, and expletive ranked fourth. These results are consistent with the findings of many previous studies (Chownahe, 2000; Ubol, 1981; Bootchuy, 2008; Angwatanakul, 1975) that found omission of subject, object and complement. The present study’s findings agreed with these previous studies that these types of error occurred due to the differences between English and Thai sentence structures.

Overall errors caused by overgeneralization were the inconsistency between the verb and subject. Overall errors caused by overlooking co-occurrence were the using of wrong form of noun and verb. Overall errors caused by incomplete rule application were misplacement of adjective modifier and misplacement of quantifier. These results agree with many research studies (Iamsiu, 2014; Banlomchon, 2006; Ayurawatana, 2002).

In conclusion, there were 11 types of errors found in the students’ English writing tests both error identification and essay production. There were two main types of errors: intralingual errors and interlingual errors. With respect to intralingual errors, overgeneralization/false analogy were the subject

verb agreement, misanalysis were the possessive pronoun and the relative pronoun, incomplete rule application was the word order, exploiting redundancy was the unnecessary word, overlooking co-occurrence was the word form, and system simplification was the word choice. Regarding interlingual errors, the errors found in the lexical interference were the word-by-word translation, the past tense and the omission of article, infinitive with to, and preposition. The errors found in the syntactic interference was the expletive, these types of errors were the finding of the differences between the Thai and English languages. As for the appearance of type of errors found in this study, the major cause of errors in English writing is intralingual errors. Overgeneralization is frequently found in the subject verb agreement errors for both error identification and essay production. Richards (1984) suggests that there are seven factors may affect and identify these second language learner systems: language transfer, intralingual interference, sociolinguistic situation, modality, age, successions of approximative systems, and universal hierarchy of difficulty. The research concluded, based on the data from error analysis, that the intralingual errors were the main causes of students' weakness of English language competency, and their writing performance are at the low level.

The evidence from the analysis of the error identification and essay writing of the students are that a main source of problems for Thai students in English writing. These errors make the writing of the students confusing which have an effect on the students' ability to use English effectively in communication. However, the errors found in the students' writing are basic problems, at the level of writing phrases and sentences, therefore, educational strategies in teaching English writing as a second language should be explored and developed.

## **5. Recommendation for the Study**

The researcher hopes that the findings of this study will be advantageous to learners who study English as a foreign language. Learners can learn from being aware errors, how to fix them, and provide a better understanding of target language. This study will encourage learners to overcome their errors and study advanced English more effectively. In addition, the different types of errors made by Thai undergraduate students should be corrected, teachers should give feedback to students encourage them to understand more grammatical rules in order to reduce their errors and master English usage in every level. The findings of the study will be the guidelines to correct the learners' error, teachers can adjust or find new teaching methods that are appropriate to the learners, and plan suitable lessons to help their students learn how to produce complete grammatically correct sentences as well as see the differences between the

structure rules of English and Thai. Moreover, the knowledge of cultures need to be integrated into language course.

## 6. Recommendations for Further Research

According to the findings of this study, the following recommendations for further research concerning error analysis can be made: First, this study included only documents, that is, writing tests. Therefore, new techniques and instruments should be developed for analyzing writing errors of Thai students such as translation paper and composition on variety of topics.

Second, the samples of this study were only 112 English major students, there was a small amount of participants in the study. A bigger sample would bring in distinctive conclusions in order that the results will be more reliable.

Third, there should be an interview part in order to gain more in-depth and interesting information about the causes of errors, what they were thinking when they made writing errors, and other factors that lead to their errors. This may help the researchers to better understand what the students intend to write.

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