# The Analysis of Errors in Written English Essays: A Case Study

Thawatchai Bunjantr[1*] and Sichabhat Boonoon[2]

[1,2]Kasetsart University Chalermphrakiat Sakonnakhon Province Campus
*Corresponding author, E-mail: tbunjantr@gmail.com

## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the errors of the written English essays of 22 final-year undergraduate English-major students at Kasetsart University Chalermphrakiat, Sakonnakhon Province campus. These students are non-native speakers of English and come from similar backgrounds, with weak English writing skills. Error analysis consisted of: collection of samples of learners' writing, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors, and evaluation of errors. In this study, the students were divided randomly into 4 groups. They were asked to write an essay using specific grammatical features. The errors that occurred were analyzed and classified as *grammatical*, *syntactic*, and *lexical* errors. It was found that errors occurred in students' essays involved: use of articles, use of prepositions, subject-verb agreement, word order, verb tense, singular and plural forms, fragments, and the use of irregular verbs. In general, the systematic errors in learners' target language and learning strategies are responsible for the increase or decrease in the number of written errors. The mother tongue interference was the main factor responsible for the cause of errors in students' writing. It can be concluded that students faced problems in acquiring the rules of English language. The writing errors and problems faced by students can be identified by error analysis so that students become aware of these errors and pay attention to them.

***Keywords:*** *Error Analysis, the First Fanguage, the Target Language, Interlingual, Thai Interference*

**บทคัดย่อ**

การวิจัยนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาข้อผิดพลาดในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของนิสิตภาษาอังกฤษชั้นปีที่ 4 มหาวิทยาลัยเกษตรศาสตร์วิทยาเขตเฉลิมพระเกียรติ จังหวัดสกลนคร จำนวน 22 คน นิสิตทั้งหมดเป็นนิสิตที่พูดภาษาไทย และมีพื้นฐานภาษาอังกฤษไม่ดี การศึกษาทำโดยการเก็บข้อมูลจากเรียงความภาษาอังกฤษ และทำการวิเคราะห์ข้อผิดพลาด อธิบายลักษณะข้อผิดพลาด และประเมินปัจจัยที่ก่อให้เกิดข้อผิดพลาด งานวิจัยนี้ทำโดยการสุ่มแยกนิสิตออกเป็น 4 กลุ่ม นิสิตเขียนเรียงความภาษาอังกฤษในหัวข้อที่มีลักษณะทางไวยากรณ์ที่แตกต่างกัน ข้อผิดพลาดที่เกิดขึ้น จะถูกนำมาวิเคราะห์และจำแนกเป็น ข้อผิดพลาดทางไวยากรณ์ ข้อผิดพลาดทางวากยสัมพันธ์ และข้อผิดพลาดในการใช้คำศัพท์ ผลการวิจัยพบว่าข้อผิดพลาดในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษหลายอย่าง เช่น การใช้คำนำหน้านาม การใช้บุพบท ความสอดคล้องระหว่างประธานและกริยา การใช้ระบบกาล การใช้พจน์ของคำนาม การเปลี่ยนรูปคำกริยา เป็นต้น การเพิ่มขึ้นหรือลดลงของข้อผิดพลาดในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ เกิดจากระบบที่ใช้วิเคราะห์ข้อผิดพลาด ในการเรียนภาษาและการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ รวมถึงกลวิธีต่าง ๆ ที่ใช้ในการเรียนการสอน ในงานวิจัยนี้ปัจจัยสำคัญที่ก่อให้เกิดข้อผิดพลาดในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของนิสิตคือ การนำความรู้ไวยากรณ์ภาษาไทยมาใช้กับการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ จากข้อผิดพลาดดังกล่าว สรุปได้ว่า นิสิตมีปัญหาในการจดจำกฎเกณฑ์ที่ใช้ในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ อย่างไรก็ตามการวิเคราะห์ข้อผิดพลาดทำให้นิสิตเข้าใจสิ่งเหล่านี้และระมัดระวังไม่ให้เกิดข้อผิดพลาดอีก

***คำสำคัญ:*** *การวิเคราะห์ข้อผิดพลาด ภาษาที่หนึ่ง ภาษาเป้าหมาย ภาษาระหว่างกลาง อิทธิพลของภาษาไทย*

## 1. Introduction

Writing English is a complex process for students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL); thus errors in writing are unavoidable. Consider the following examples.

(1) Japan can speaked Japanese.

(2) You can are a good person.

From the examples, students have problem with the forms of verbs used after modalities. These problems happened to some of English major students who are weak in English structure and writing courses at Kasetsart University Chalermprakiat, Sakonnnakhon Province campus. The problem is reflected on the other courses of their requirements.

There are three purposes of studying Error Analysis (EA) firstly, it can be used to determine the level of language proficiency that a learner has reached; secondly, it can be used to obtain information



Rangsit University

about common difficulties in language learning; and thirdly, it can yield insight into how people learn a language. From the examples (1) and (2), it is found that students are confused with the form of verbs. This is the area of difficulties for Thai students studying EFL.

According to Corder (1967), EA has two objects: one theoretical and the other applied. The theoretical object is to understand what and how a learner learns when he studies the second language (L2). Hence, it is necessary to investigate the problems in examples (1) and (2) and find the remedial procedure to evaluate the students' level and lesson.

Mitchell and Myles (2004) showed that error study can reveal the developing system of the students' L2 language. In addition, students should learn that errors are a natural part of language acquisition that needs time, effort, and patience to overcome (Ferris, 2002).

Consider the following example.

(3) It have some person said.

From the example, the student wants to say "*Someone says that*.." or "*It is said that*". He knows the sentence structure but the errors are from the agreement system and tenses. According to Selinker (1974), there are five different strategies adopted by learners in inter-language building, as potential sources of errors.

However, Ellis (1997) notes that fossilization of learners' grammar does not occur in first language (L1) acquisition, but is unique to second language (L2) acquisition.

Look at the following example.

(4) She named Pely.

The student wants to say that "*Her name is Pely*". But she uses the wrong forms of pronoun. This is because the differences of pronoun between the first and the second language, so the pronoun feature of the first language is direct translated to L2. James (1998), thus, exposed three main diagnosis-based categories of error: *interlingual*, *intralingual*, and *induced* errors.

According to Richards (1972), there are four main types of intralingual errors, namely: overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized.

Inference of the mother tongue is one of the factors affecting English language proficiency; the level of interference in the learning of English language is correlated to the types and amount of errors made by the students. Therefore, Brown (2000) states that there are two main sources of errors: namely, interlingual and intralingual. Interlingual (interference) errors are those traceable to first language interference. Intralingual errors result from faulty or partial learning of the target language, rather than problems with language transfer.

## 2. Objective

The objective of this study is to identify the kinds of errors made by undergraduate English major students in their written work. In addition, this study wants to investigate the most common error factors affecting students in their written essays**.**

## 3. Materials and methods

Data were collected from written English essays of 22 final year undergraduate English major students, Kasetsart University Chalermphrakiat, Sakonnakhon Province campus. The students were divided randomly into 4 groups. They were asked to write an essay using a specific grammatical feature on the following topics:

1. My Friend (present tense)
2. My Future Career (future tense)
3. My Impression of a Past Event (past tense)
4. If You Could Change Your Past, What Would You Do?

Substance errors and text errors that occurred in the students' essays were classified as grammatical errors, syntactic errors, and lexical errors**.**

Grammatical errors are the errors of common usage of grammar. The most common grammatical errors are omission of ***s*** in singular verb form, lack of subject-verb agreement, incorrect form of irregular

Rangsit University

verb, inappropriate plural ending, incorrect form of pronoun, inappropriate form of auxiliary, confusion in use of prepositions, and confusion in use of articles.

Syntactic errors are the errors of sentence structure. The most common syntactic errors are tense errors, omission of verb *BE*, omission of the main verb, and incorrect word order.

Lexical errors are concerned with the choice of words. Errors can happen in term of formal misselection, confusion with sense relation, and distortion.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The research results are presented in tables showing number of errors, examples of errors, and possible causes.

### 4.1 Grammatical Errors

Grammatical errors focus on the usage of rules of grammar such as omission of ***s***, lack of agreement between subject and verb, confusion use of preposition. The finding of errors is divided into 4 tables according to the topic of essays written by student.

**Table 1** My friend

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| She help me. | 1.Omission of *s* in singular verb form | She helps me. | Thai interference |
| It have some person said. | 2.Lack of subject-verb agreement | Someone says that..<br>It is said that.. | Thai interference |
| When I was 15 year old. | 3. Inappropriate plural ending | When I was 15 years old | Thai interference |
| She named Pely. | 4. Incorrect form of pronoun | Her name | Thai interference |
| I will always take care of me. | 5. Incorrect form of pronoun | I will take care of myself. | Intralingual interference |
| I get understand | 6. Inappropriate form of auxiliary | I can understand | Intralingual interference |
| We sit in the chair. | 7. Confusion in use of prepositions | We sit on the chair. | Thai interference |

**Table 2** My future career

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| There are money. | Lack of subject-verb agreement | There is a lot of money. | Thai interference |
| Japan can speaked Japanese. | Incorrect form of irregular verb | People from Japan can speak Japanese. | Intralingual interference |
| There are weekend. | Inappropriate plural ending | There are weekends. | Thai interference |
| I will love they. | Incorrect form of pronoun | I will love them. | Intralingual interference |
| You can are a good person. | Inappropriate form of auxiliary | You can be a good person. | Thai interference |
| There are weekend. | Confusion in use of prepositions | There are on weekends. | Thai interference |
| The future of the our nation. | Confusion in use of articles | The future of our nation. | Intralingual interference |

**Table 3** My impression of a past event

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| when he smile I will smile too. | Lack of subject-verb agreement | when he smiles I smile too | Thai interference |
| There were three round for the test. | Inappropriate plural ending | There were three rounds for the test. | Intralingual interference |
| I like to watch he do everything | Incorrect form of irregular verb | I like to see him doing everything. | Thai interference |

Rangsit University

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| make him teeth to be good. | Incorrect form of pronoun | It makes his teeth look good. | Intralingual interference |
| Second round was written test | Confusion in use of articles | Second round was a written test | Thai interference |
| I'm the one in it. | Confusion in use of prepositions | I was one of them. | Thai interference |

**Table 4** If you could change your past, what would you do?

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| I didn't paid attention at study. | Incorrect form of irregular verb | I don't pay attention to my study. | Thai interference |
| I can to got better result. | Inappropriate form of modal auxiliary | I can get a better result. | Intralingual interference |
| It must get points more than a half. | Incorrect form of pronoun | I must get my points in every subject more than 50 %. | Thai interference |
| It is not same Thai language. | Confusion in use of prepositions | It is not the same as Thai language. | Thai interference |
| I was not pay attention enough to study | Inappropriate form of auxiliary | I did not pay enough attention to study | Intralingual interference |

Tables 1–4 indicate that the grammatical errors can be attributed to two sources: the interference of Thai language and the intralingual interference. Intralingual errors reflect the general character of learning, such as faulty overgeneralization, incomplete application of rules, and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply. Thai interference in learning English is evident in students' writing of a sentence "*we can **are** a good person.*" In this example, students used the verb "*are*" where they should not use it, because it is a literal translation of what is said in Thai, as the primary meaning of verb BE.

An example of intralingual error is a sentence "*I did not **paid** attention at study*." Here, the verb *paid* is mistakenly used, instead of the verb *pay*. This kind of error cannot be attributed to interference of the mother tongue, since the student knows how to use *did* as past tense, but does not understand the use of correct verb form. However, the grammatical errors are mainly from the interference of the mother tongue.

4.2 Syntactic Errors

Syntactic errors focus on the use of tenses, the omission of verb BE, and the misplace of word orders. The finding of errors is divided into 4 tables according to the topic of essays written by student.

**Table 5** My friend

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| for everything she helping | Tense error | for everything she has helped me. | Intralingual interference |
| Her named Pely. | Omission of verb *BE* | Her name is Pely. | Intralingual interference |
| who is the most friend important in my life. | Incorrect word order | who is the most *important* friend in my life. | Intralingual interference |

**Table 6** My future career

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| I ever passed in my life. | Tense error | I have ever done many things in my life. | Intralingual interference |
| All I want to speak English fluently. | Omission of verb *BE* | All I want is to speak English fluently. | Intralingual interference |
| If my life to find that… | Omission of the main verb. | In my life, If I find that.. | Intralingual interference |
| I have goal a lot. | Incorrect word order | I have a lot of goals. | Intralingual interference |

Rangsit University

**Table 7** My impression of a past event

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| I shy for anybody | Omission of verb *BE* | I was very shy. | Thai interference |
| Finally round | Incorrect word order | The final round | Intralingual interference |
| I was chosen are the agent of the youth of the northeast. | Tense error | I was chosen to be the representative of the youth of the Northeast. | Thai interference |

**Table 8** If you could change your past, what would you do?

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| to take care more of my health | Incorrect word order | to take more care of my health | Intralingual interference |
| If I aimed more and more I will receive a good grade. | Tense error | If I work harder, I will get a good grade. | Intralingual interference |

Tables 5–8 indicate that errors in terms of syntax arise from the process of studying the target language. In most cases the confusion in using tense is a result of intralingual factor from the target language itself. This means that the students don't understand when and how they can use each tense.

The sentence "*Her named Pely"* is analyzed as the omission of verb BE. Although there are a lot of errors in this sentence, the intension of the writer is to tell the name of her friend. *Named* is considered to be a misspelling.

From Table 6, the sentence "*I ever passed in my life*" is literately translated. The student wants to say "*I have a lot of experience*". The student knows past tense as shown in the form of verb *passed* and knows that *ever* is used with perfect tense, but it is not very clear. This is why he wrote the sentence with his own grammar.

From Table 7, the sentence "*I was chosen* are *the agent of the youth of Northeast*" is analyzed as a tense error because the student used *was* and *are* as the finite verb. This sentence, according to his understanding, is "*I was chosen to be the representative of the Northeastern*". In his writing, he meant to say " *I was chosen, and now I am the representative of the youth of the Northeastern*". He knows the rule of passive in English. He also understands present tense. What he does not know is how to write a correct sentence. Therefore he creates his own rule of writing the sentence.

From Table 8, the sentence "*If I aimed more and more, I will receive a good grade*" is also an instance of confusion in the use of tense. The student wants to talk about what he did in the past that affects his study in the present, which he wants to change. The sentence can be like "*If I worked hard, I would get a good grade* or *If I work harder, I will get a good grade*". The student used a rule in English with his Thai meaning in his writing.

4.3 Lexical Errors

The errors happened by using the wrong words, wrong collocation and wrong meaning is analyzed in this section. The result can be seen as follows.

**Table 9** My friend

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| She seems member of my family | Wrong lexical items | She is a member of my family | Thai interference |
| Patchara likes to joke and see series | Wrong collocation | to make joke and see series | Intralingual interference |
| She is some special. | Distortion | She is someone special. | Intralingual interference |

In Table 9, the verb *seems* is used instead of *is* in a sentence "*She seems member of my family"*. This is because the inference of Thai language. The sentence "*She is some special*" is not translated from



Rangsit University

Thai. In Thai meaning, this sentence is "*She is man special*". Thus, it is not the inference from Thai language. The learner created his own word from the knowledge of his target language.

**Table 10** My future career

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| I would like to be one of development the future. | Wrong lexical items | I want to be someone who can contribute for the future of the nation. | Thai interference |
| I have to stable working. | Distortion | I want to have a permanent job. | Thai interference |

Table 10 shows that *one* which is pronoun is used instead of noun. The sentence is correct in terms of syntax. However, the use of *one* is not good enough to give a full meaning of sentence. The use of *to stable working* instead of *permanent job* is also the result of Thai interference.

**Table 11** My impression of a past event

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Did you had love at first sight? | Wrong lexical items | Did you fall in love at the first sight? | Thai interference |
| I'm a talk a lot. | Wrong collocation | I talked a lot. | Thai interference |

The phrase *had love* is used for the meaning of *fall in love* in Table 11. It comes from the inference of Thai language as in Thai the phrase *had love* means *fall in love*. The phrase, *a talk a lot* is also an error from Thai interference. It makes student confused the use of *a talk* or *to talk a lot*.

**Table 12** If you could change your past, what would you do?

| Identification of errors | Types of errors | Explanation | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| I couldn't test a final examination | Wrong lexical items | I could not take the final exam. | Thai interference |
| Because I had to ride seriously when I studied. | Distortion | Because I had to ride to the class very fast. | Thai interference |

The word *test* in English has a different meaning in Thai. It can mean you are tested by someone or something. Thus the phrase *test a final examination* means you are tested in the final exam. The main source of error therefore comes from Thai interference.

The clause *"Because I had to ride seriously when I studied."* is not from Thai interference. Students know the verb *ride* and adverb *seriously*. However, he does not know that *seriously* does not mean *very fast*. The errors should be from Intralingual interference.

Table 9–12 indicate that students use their mother tongue in writing the sentence in English. A sentence like "*Because I receive less grade*" is directly translated from Thai to English. It is similar to the sentence "*We like not knowing*" which also comes from the interference of mother tongue.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of this study show that the learners are not aware of rules of English writing. The students fill in the gaps in their competence of the target language with an interim language structure. In general, the systematic errors in learners' target language, and learning strategies could be responsible for the increase or decrease in the number of the written errors.

Therefore, several other sources are responsible for occurrence of errors. Sources of error could be: interference of the mother tongue of the students, complexity of the English language, and students' incomplete knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of English writing.

The types of errors found in this study revealed that many students did not know the correct rules of English writing. The vocabulary used in their writing was also not sufficient. They need more practice in the areas indicated by the types of errors observed, with sufficient exercises to increase their knowledge of English writing rules, and reduce the incidence of error. Teachers can focus their teaching at the point of error, focusing on those items that students find most difficult.

Rangsit University

**6. Suggestions**

We can see from the analysis that teachers must see errors as the key of understanding and solving accuracy problems of English writing. It is a good idea for teachers to examine what grammatical level students can understand, or could be confused. For example, they should give students written English essays using a variety of tenses.

It is also important for students to understand errors in their writing. In order for students to achieve improvement in their written English, they should always be encouraged to do remedial exercises.

There are relationships between errors committed by students, methods of teaching, and the effect of error correction strategy on students' errors. It is very helpful for the researcher to find the best methods of teaching English composition that can minimize the errors.

**7. References**

Brown , H.(2000). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.

Corder, S. P. (1967). *The significance of learners' errors*. International Review of Applied Linguistics, 5(4), 161-169.

Ellis, R. (1997). *Second language acquisition*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Ferris, D. (2002). *Treatment of error in second language student writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

James, C. (1998) *Errors in Language Learning and Use*. London: Longman.

Mitchell, R. and Myles, M. (2004). *Second language learning theories*. New York: Hodder Arnold

Richards, J. (1972). A non-contrastive approach to error analysis. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 25(3), 204-219.

Selinker, L. (1974).'Interlanguage'. In Richards, J. (Ed.). *Error analysis: Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition*. 31-54. Essex: Longman.

Rangsit University