Error Analysis of English Inflection among Thai University Students

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Abstract—The linguistic competence of Thai university students majoring in Business English was examined in the context of knowledge of English language inflection, and also various linguistic elements. Errors analysis was applied to the results of the testing. Levels of errors in inflection, tense and linguistic elements were shown to be significantly high for all noun, verb and adjective inflections. Findings suggest that students do not gain linguistic competence in their use of English language inflection, because of interlanguage interference. Implications for curriculum reform and treatment of errors in the classroom are discussed.

Keywords—Interlanguage, error analysis, inflection, second language acquisition, Thai students.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE English language is widely recognized as the most-commonly used language in the world today. As a result, it is very important for people who travel, conduct business, do academic and scientific research or study in an international setting to be able to use it correctly. Although many people spend a large amount of time studying English in the classroom, a large number of them continue to have significant difficulties using the language correctly while communicating with others in real-life situations. These errors in accuracy are often related to the system of English language inflections.

In order to understand how and why these types of errors occur and to find ways to alleviate this problem, research into errors of English language inflection should be conducted. The findings can then be used to reduce the number and frequency of errors in inflection and to make the use of the English language more correct and accurate. Ultimately, revised methods of instruction and error correction could be applied to English language teaching programs.

The primary purpose of this research study, therefore, was to investigate how well university students in Thailand who are majoring in Business English are able to use the noun, verb and adjective inflections of English. Another aim was to discover how much the students know about English inflection in four linguistic elements, namely morphology, phonology, syntax and syntactic meaning.

The goal of the study of second language acquisition is the description and explanation of the learner's linguistic or communicative competence [1]. Furthermore, he defines second language acquisition as how and by what processes individuals acquire a second language.

There are several theories that have been developed regarding second language acquisition [2]. The behaviorist view was one of the first views of second language acquisition, in which foreign language learning (FLL) is believed to consist of learners copying what they hear and then developing patterns in using the foreign language through routine practice. In this view, the learners are thought to relate what they know about their first language (L1) to what they recognize in the second language (L2). A "positive transfer" is caused by similarities between the L1 and the L2, because the patterns used in the L1 are then easily transferred to the L2. In contrast, a "negative transfer" is the result of differences between the L1 and the L2, because errors result from applying habits from the L1 while using the L2.

One problem with the behaviorist view of FLL is the fact that imitation does not prepare learners for actual communication in real-life situations where it is necessary for them to construct sentences that they have never seen or heard before. A finite amount of memorized sentences is insufficient to truly communicate in a conversation. A second weakness with this view is that many of the errors made by FL learners are not based on grammatical structure of the L1. Instead, the inaccuracies produced most often by learners are similar to errors made by children while they are in the process of acquiring their L1.

In response to these flaws of the behaviorist view, the cognitive view was later developed. In the cognitive theory, learners are thought to discover out the rules of the L2 on their own by using their cognitive skills. It is assumed that learners notice the patterns that are used in the second language and to construct the grammar rules based on what they observe. When they have difficulties with communication, they should be able to adjust their understanding of the L2 grammar to be more accurate and correct. In this approach to L2 acquisition, learners are believed to benefit from the errors that they make as they actively participate in the FLL process and to learn how the language works for itself.

One major flaw with the cognitive theory is that cognition is not the only factor that is applied by learners to make assumptions about a second language. It has also been observed that some of the errors that learners make are based on the rules of the L1 instead of being mistaken conclusions based on their cognitive abilities. Another weakness is that it is not always possible to clearly determine what type of error the learners have made merely based on what they are assumed to have intended to communicate.

Error analysis in second language acquisition was

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established in the 1960s by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues [3] as an alternative to contrastive analysis, an approach influenced by behaviorism in which applied linguists attempted to study differences between the learners' first and second languages in order to predict the types of errors that they would make. Error analysis showed though that this type of contrastive analysis was unable to predict a majority of errors, although some valuable aspects of this approach have been incorporated into the study of language transfer. An important finding of error analysis is that there are many errors which are produced by making incorrect inferences about the grammar of the second language.

The two goals of error analysis are: to describe, through the evidence contained in errors, the nature of the interlanguage, an intermediary form of a language produced by second language learners that combines features of L1 and L2, in its developmental stages and to examine the processes involved with second language acquisition through these descriptions [4].

The term interlanguage was coined by Selinker in 1972 to describe the system of knowledge that is independent of both the L1 and the L2, but which falls between the two. He defined it as a system based upon the best attempt of learners to provide order and structure to the linguistic stimuli around them. By a gradual process of trial and error and hypothesis testing, learners slowly and tediously succeed in establishing closer and closer approximations to the system used by native speakers of the language [5].

II. METHOD

A. Participants

The research data was collected by a test paper which was completed by a sample group of 83 Thai students at the end of their 3rd academic year. The test was conducted in the period of time after they had finished their final examinations. The students are all majoring in Business English at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, in Bangkok, Thailand.

B. Materials and Procedures

The test paper contained three parts that were related to Tense and Aspect, and Comparative and Possessive -'s forms and inflections. The items were tested by having the students' complete sentences that described pictures by filling in gaps and also by choosing from a number of alternatives in some sections.

The second step was that the test papers were checked for errors, which were then tabulated by a score of 1 point for a correct response and 0 points for an incorrect response for each of the noun, verb and adjective inflections that were tested.

The test paper was constructed from and tested for errors related to the eight types of inflectional affixes for nouns, verbs and adjectives [6] and [7]. These inflectional affixes are listed below:

A. Nouns:

Plural -*s* Suffix {-S$_1$} – noun plural

Possessives -'s Suffix {-S$_2$} – noun possessive

B. Verbs:

3rd person SG non-past –*s* Suffix {-S$_3$}–present
                               3rd-person singular
Progressive -*ing* Suffix {-ing$_1$} –present participle
Past tense -*ed* Suffix {-d$_1$} – past tense
Past particle –*en*/-*ed* Suffix {-d$_2$} – past participle

C. Adjectives:

Comparative -*er* Suffix {-er$_1$} – comparative
Superlative -*est* Suffix {-est} – superlative

Following the collection of the raw data and the tabulation of the scores, the results were analyzed through the use of software for calculating statistical values for qualitative data using content analysis. This produced a large amount of statistical data related to the percentage, mean, SD, frequency, standard t-test, analysis of variance and significant correlation at 0.05.

III. RESULTS

A. Errors of Inflection

The results of the test paper for the frequency of errors of all inflections of the three parts of speech that can be inflected can be compared by percentage. These three parts of speech include nouns, verbs and adjectives. The results show that nouns had the highest percentage at 88.89%, followed by adjectives at 83.33% and verbs had the lowest percentage with 66.67%. This is shown in Table I.

TABLE I
ERRORS OF NOUN, VERB AND ADJECTIVE INFLECTION

Types	Items	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	$\bar{x}$ (%)	S.D. (%)	Min. (%)	Max. (%)
N	18	8.18	4.15	39.02	22.47	.00	88.89
V	21	17.53	11.76	26.21	18.95	.00	66.67
Adj	6	1.69	1.51	28.31	25.20	.00	83.33

B. Errors of Noun Inflection

For noun inflection - plural morpheme, the most common errors were the plural morpheme -es after 'z' as in "quiz - quizzes" (zz - double morphemes) and plural morpheme –a as in "phenomenon – phenomena" with 100% of students' error. The second most common error was the Ø morpheme occurring with the word "mouse - mice" and the third most frequent error was the plural morpheme -es occurring with the word "leaf - leaves" with 92.8 % and 89.2 % respectively. When considering the least frequent error, it was the plural morpheme –s after k (voiceless sound), for example, "book – books" with 10.8%.

For noun inflection - possessive morpheme -'s, the most common error was the morpheme –'s: "Helen's daughter's boyfriend" (74.7%), the second error was morpheme –'s: mother's mother (47.0%), and the third one was morpheme – s': her sons' blue eyes. The overall error of noun inflection, morpheme –s and morpheme –'s was 61.6%. This is shown in the Table II.

TABLE II
NOUN INFLECTION

Noun environments	No.	%
Plural morpheme –s		
–s after k (vl.): books	9	10.8
–s after r (vd.): computers	61	60.7
–es after *ss*: classes	49	59.0
–es after *sh*: dishes	42	50.6
–es after *ch*: churches	54	65.1
–es after *x*: boxes	35	42.2
–es after *z*: quizzes	83	100.0*
–es after *o*: tomatoes	42	50.6
–es after *f* : leaves	74	89.2
–es after *y*: babies	34	41.0
– Ø: deer	65	78.3
– Ø: children	42	50.6
– Ø: mouse - mice	77	92.8
– a: phenomenon – phenomena	83	100*
– Ø: person – people	62	74.7
Possessive morpheme –'s		
–'s: Clinton's wife	33	39.8
–'s: mother's mother	39	47.0
–'s: Helen's daughter's boyfriend	48	74.7
–s': her sons' blue eyes	35	42.2

C. Errors of Verb Inflection

The most common errors for verb inflection for tense and aspect - 3rd person present simple, morphemes –s or –es were the morpheme –es after *o* as in "go – goes" with 94%. The second most common error was the morpheme –s after *t* (vl.) as in "get – gets" and the third most frequent error was the morpheme –s after *l* (vd.) occurring with the words "travel – travels" with 80.7 % and 73.5 % respectively. When considering the least frequent error, it was the morpheme –es after *sh*, for example, "wash – washes" with 69.9%.

For verb inflection – present continuous, the most common error was the morpheme –ing after *e*: have – is having (85.5%), the second most frequent error was the morpheme –ing after r, for example "wear – is wearing" (81.9%). High rates of error were also found in all other morphemes in this section, with rates of error above 70% in each case.

For verb inflection – past simple, the most common errors were the morpheme –ed (reg vl.) as in "start - started" with 94%. When considering the least frequent error, it was the morpheme –ed/Ø (irreg), for example, "cut - cut "with 42.2%.

For verb inflection – present perfect, the most common errors were the morpheme –en/Ø (irreg) as in "bring - have brought" with 79.5% of students. When considering the least frequent error, it was the morpheme –en/Ø (irreg), for example, "see - have seen" with 51.8%.

For verb inflection with participles, errors occurred more frequently with the past participle morpheme – en/Ø (irreg) as in "break - broken" with 92.8%. Errors occurred less frequently with the present participle morpheme –ing as in "frighten - frightening" with 66.3% of students making these mistakes. This is shown in the Table III.

TABLE III
VERBS INFLECTION

Verb environments	No	%
Present simple tense		
–s after t (vl.): gets	67	80.7
–s after l (vd.): travels	61	73.5
–s after vowel: plays	60	72.3
–es after sh: washes	58	69.9
–es after o: goes	78	94.0
Present continuous tense		
–ing after k (vl.): is drinking	64	77.1
–ing after d (vd.): is reading	65	78.3
–ing after vowel: is playing	60	72.3
–ing after e: is having	71	85.5
–ing after y: is crying	64	77.1
–ing after o: is doing	60	72.3
–ing after r: is wearing	68	81.9
Past simple tense		
–ed (reg vl.): stated	79	95.2
–ed (reg vd.): decided	50	60.2
– ed/Ø (irreg): ran	57	68.7
– ed/Ø (irreg): was	48	57.8
– ed/Ø (irreg): cut	35	42.2
Perfect tense		
– en/Ø: have seen	43	51.8
– en/Ø: have brought	66	79.5
Participle		
– en/Ø: broken	77	92.8
– ing: frightening	55	66.3

D. Errors of Adjective Inflection

For adjective inflection - comparative, the most common errors were found in the morpheme –er (irreg) as in "bad - worse" with 77.1%. When considering the least frequent error, it was the morpheme –er (reg), for example, "big - bigger" with 56.6%.

For adjective inflection - superlative, the most common errors were found in the morpheme morpheme –est which is "delicious - the most delicious" with 100%. The morpheme with the least frequent error was the – morpheme –est (irreg), namely, "good - the best" with 43.4%. Both of these can be seen in Table IV.

TABLE IV
ADJECTIVE INFLECTION

Adjective environment	No.	%
Comparative		
–er: big – bigger	47	56.6
–er: difficult - more difficult	56	67.5
–er (irreg): bad – worse	64	77.1
Superlative		
–est: happy - the happiest	71	85.5
–est: delicious - the most delicious	83	100.0
–est (irreg): good - the best	36	43.4

IV. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The research suggests two important questions: first, why do Thai students make such a large number of errors in English inflection and secondly, how can this situation be

improved and the number of errors that are made by the students be reduced?

To attempt to answer the main findings show that the participants make a high percentage of errors of inflection. Thus, an inference can be drawn regarding the lack of ability to correctly inflect nouns, verbs and adjectives in English.

In addition, an inflectional language or the concept of a changing process is difficult for Thai students. They are not familiar with the different environment of inflected nouns, verbs and adjectives because there is no inflection occurring in the Thai language: there is no plural form of nouns, varied verb form in present/past participle, or a comparative and superlative of adjective form in the Thai language. Furthermore, the phenomenon at the phonological level is affected by English inflection. In addition, inflection at the syntax level, for example subject and verb agreement, is more complicated. Thus, English competency that should come along with both communicative and linguistic competence in the learning process has to be reconsidered.

In regards to the second question, the implication of this correlation is that changes and adjustments to language teaching programs should be considered by schools and institutes. This language curriculum reform should focus on providing students with courses that emphasize both communication skills and linguistic ability. Universities could also be encouraged to provide more activities and opportunities for using English from both communicative and linguistic competence in order to improve students' second language acquisition in the future.

Future research should aim to consider exploring ways in which linguistic elements can be incorporated into curriculum development and design successfully. Also, the processes involved in second language acquisition should be investigated further in order to discover how a more natural approach to foreign language learning might be employed by both language teachers and learners alike.

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