Some Syntactic Errors Made by Two Different Thai-Speaking Groups : A Comparative Study

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I. Introduction

1. Background

1. What is "transitional competence" and "interlanguage." ?

When an adult second language learner uses his target language (TL), he will try his best to raise the standard of his "new language", either in a spoken form or a written form, to the norm of the TL he has in mind. He wants to achieve native-speaker competence in the language. However, since there are many factors involved in his learning process, e.g., age, the interference of his native language (NL), motivation and the need to "master" (Lado's term) the TL, it is usually not an easy task. It is believed that he is trying his best to find a short cut to master the TL by forming his own rules, not just by imitating some of the models, but by making inductive hypotheses about the system of the TL, and then testing them to see if they work properly. While he is trying out his hypotheses, "trial-and-error" can take place and his knowledge about the TL varies from time to time. This is termed "transitional competence" (Corder, 1978: 25). His set of utterances (of a spoken language) or sentences (of a written language) is not identical to the ideal set (norm) which would have been produced by a native speaker of the TL for the same purpose. The difference between the sets indicates the existence of a separate linguistic system and is termed "an interlanguage" (Selinker, 1978 : 35). It is at this stage that "errors" and "mistakes" occur.

2. What are "errors" and "mistakes"?

The term "errors" is used to mean "the systematic errors of the learner from which we are able to reconstruct his knowledge of the language to date, e.g., his transitional competence" (Corder, 1978 : 25). (It implies deviant forms in the TL which the learner continues to use after having been given a chance to make corrections.) These forms might be the result of not only a marked difference between the two languages but also because of certain faulty learning

strategies such as the formation of false hypotheses, overgeneralization, false analogies, etc. In short, they occur whenever one's interlanguage system and the TL system are different and can be adequately observed through one's performance. They are systematic and thus can be formulated at any particular time. They are very useful pieces of information (i) for the teacher to know how far his student has progressed and what are the specific problems that remain; (ii) for the researcher as evidence of how language is learned, and (iii) for the student as a device used for learning the TL.

However, "mistakes" are regarded as those errors that are unsystematic and can be easily identified or corrected by the learner himself. They are the "slips of the tongue (or pen)" which can normally happen to the native speaker of the TL or to the learner when using his own NL because of similar external and internal conditions, e.g., carelessness, tiredness, hesitation, etc. Mistakes are of no significance to the process of language learning (Corder, 1978 : 25), and thus will be omitted in this study.

3. What are causes of errors and how can they be discovered?

There are 2 main approaches to explain the causes of errors :

A. Contrastive Analysis

This approach is broadly associated with behavioural learning theory and with structuralist linguistic theory. It is led by many well-known linguists such as R. Lado, C.C. Fries and R.L. Politzer – to name but a few. They believe that language is a set of habits. Lado claims that errors in the TL may be predicted by a contrastive analysis of the learner's NL and the TL. He says, "We can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning and those that will not cause difficulty by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the language and culture of the student" (Lado, 1957 : vii). He adds that "Those elements that are similar to the native language will be simple for him and those areas that are different will be difficult" (Lado, 1957 : 2). Fries also expresses the opinion that "The most efficient materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner" (Fries, 1945 : 9). The ideas of contrastive analysis were significantly influential in foreign language teaching in the 1950s.

Moreover, views concerning the relation between the theory of transferring and the linguistic effect of similarities and differences are strongly believed by Politzer who claims that this theoretical relation has been tested satisfactorily, e.g. Japanese, Tagalog (by Pascasio, 1961 : 77) and Hiligainon (Politzer, 1968 : 38). From his own study of the influence of parallel (similar) structures and

contrastive (different) structures of French and Spanish learners on their learning of English, he concludes that "the experiment seems to indicate that the concept of 'parallel = easy' and 'contrastive = difficult' applies clearly and unambiguously only if 'contrastive' and 'parallel' refer to syntactical arrangement involving word order" (Politzer, 1968 : 43). Sometimes, when a contrastive analysis is aimed at the purpose of predicting errors only, it is termed "contrastive analysis apriori approach" (CA apriori).

In short, this approach believes that errors are caused by the differences between the learner's NL and FL and the consequent interference of the linguistic system and culture of his NL. So, discovering errors can be done by a CA apriori between the two language systems.

B. Error Analysis

This approach which is also called "non-contrastive analysis" (Richards' term) is led by the more contemporary applied linguists such as S.P. Corder, L. Selinker and J. Richards – to name but a few. They point out that both linguists and teachers have previously paid too much attention to predicting what the learner will do, but do not pay enough attention to the study of what the learner actually does. They put forward theories based on the cognitive learning theory and on Chomsky's insistence that what a learner learns, or internalizes, is not habits but rules. They put more emphasis on the view that "the language learning process is a kind of hypothesis-testing and it involves cognitive activity on the part of the learner." This approach tends to disagree with the previous approach. Corder argues that " . . . we cannot assert that any particular feature of the target language which differs from the mother tongue is necessarily inherently difficult to learn" (Corder, 1973 : 230). He defends that "Indeed, there is evidence that something totally 'new' or different may prove easily mastered rather than something which is only slightly different". This is because the difficulty of learning a TL is a psycholinguistic matter but the differences between two languages is a linguistic matter and both relate to each other only in some aspects.

Therefore, this approach aims mainly at analyzing the actual errors made by the learner at a particular period of time during his transitional competence stage to discover the patterns of regularity (rules) of the errors made.

However, this approach does not entirely reject the theory of transfer. The analysis involves both descriptive linguistics and psycholinguistics, but it is believed that psycholinguistics plays its role in causing the errors only to some extent. So, it can be concluded that errors are caused in part by the

learner's hypothesis-testing and some by the influence of his NL. The main sources of errors are (Richards, 1978 : 72) :

(i) *Overgeneralization* (OG) – the use of previously available strategies (rules) inappropriately in new situations

(ii) *Ignorance of rule restrictions* (IRR) – the use of rules in a context where they do not apply

(iii) *Incomplete application of rules* (IAR) – the use of only some parts of the rules which seem necessary

(iv) *False concepts hypothesized* (FCH) – the use of false hypotheses due to faulty rule – learning at various levels

(v) *Language transfer* (LT) – the influence of the transferred knowledge of the learner's linguistic system (and culture) from his NL

4. Does language transfer really cause errors?

As we know, contrastive analyses, especially CA apriori, put more emphasis on the influence of the NL and language transfer in causing errors. It is believed that we can predict before the teaching-learning process begins what kind of errors the learner will make in learning the TL and what types of errors are easy or difficult to learn. However, error analysis, while accepting the views of language transfer, puts less emphasis on this aspect. From recent research, it was found that only one-third of the errors in the student's TL are caused by the influence of language transfer (in Richards, 1978 : 5). The rest of the errors are caused by many factors, e.g. intralingual interference, learning strategies, teaching strategies etc. Besides, from a recent research work (Taylor, 1974 : 30) on adult second language learning, there is strong evidence that (i) while some second language errors appear to exhibit native language transfer, many do not, and (ii) many second language errors are systematic and similar for learners with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Richards feels that language transfer is perhaps most predictive and useful at the phonological level and least predictive at the syntactic level. This is because there are many ways to avoid syntactic difficulties, e.g. paraphrasing and using different constructions, but to avoid phonological difficulties is difficult, if not impossible at times.

Therefore, it seems necessary to realize that language transfer does play a part in causing errors. However, it need not be viewed as simply a generator of interference or as a system which must be overcome, but rather can be considered as a reference point which the learner has to use when the informtion in his TL linguistic system is not available (Taylor, 1974 : 31).

2. The Purposes of the Study

1. To formalize the patterns of some syntactic errors made by two different Thai-speaking groups.
2. To compare the learners' strategies of both groups in coping with the same syntactic problems.
3. To investigate the causes of errors
4. To evaluate the progress (of the groups) in learning some English syntactic features.

3. Statistical Tests

Besides simple linear correlations and descriptive statistics, e.g. mean, standard deviation and standard error of mean, t-tests and chi-square tests were also used. The calculations were done by a FORTRAN program written by the author.

II. Data Collection

1. Data

The data for this study were 2 sets of controlled compositions written by 10 first and 10 third year Thai teacher college students learning English. In the middle of a semester, they were asked to write 3 short stories by means of completing 3 incomplete passages according to 3 sets of pictures provided. Apart from a briefing about the stories in Thai, no class preparation concerned directly with the stories was given. The 3 stories were completed and handed in within one teaching period.

2. Hypotheses

In accordance with the selected literature mentioned previously, the hypotheses for the purposes of this study are as follows:

1. The third-year students seem to make fewer errors than those in the first-year regarding the same syntactic constructions.
2. One-third of the errors of the students in both groups are due to the influence of Thai, their NL.
3. The students' errors in each group, regarding the same syntactic constructions, have their own patterns.

3. Data Collection

In attempting to analyze the data in this study, I followed the techniques suggested by Corder (Corder, 1977 : 127) and Etherton (Etherton, 1976 : 67) to some extent. Since my data consisted of written compositions, I had to try my best to guess, according to the surface structures in the contexts, what the authors were intending to say. In other words, I was using "plausible interpretations". The recognized errors are classified as one of two types:

(i) *Overtly erroneous errors*

These are obviously wrong constructions which no native speaker of the TL would have said or written. The structures are ill-formed and grammatically unacceptable.

(ii) *Covertly erroneous errors*

These are well-formed constructions, but ones which no native speaker of the TL would have said or written in such contexts. In other words, the errors are grammatically acceptable, but semantically unacceptable.

III. Data Analysis and Findings

1. Method

1. The different frequencies between the 2 groups in the same categories are found by simple subtraction. The results are termed "the progressive scores of each construction" (PSEC).

2. The difference of the total errors of the groups is then found by a simple subtraction. The result is termed "the progressive scores of the problem construction" (PSPC). Therefore, "progressive scores" implies both PSEC and PSPC.

2. Evaluation

A. Assumptions

1. The students formed their own formulas in dealing with the problems they had. The formulas that they used are represented by plus signs (+).

2. Some students did not use some of the formulas because they had learned that they did not work or they had their own ways of putting their ideas across. These formulas are represented by minus signs (−).

3. The students made more errors in a particular syntactic feature because they had more problems than the others who made less.

B. Estimation

1. If the frequency of the errors in the Upper Group (UG) is less than the frequency in the Lower Group (LG), it means that the UG applied that particular rule less frequently than the LG, and thus knew more about that rule (that it did not work) and vice versa.

2. If a PSEC is positive, it means that the UG had made some progress in using that particular rule (they knew more about that rule), and vice versa.

3. If a PSPC is positive, it means that, the UG knew more about how to solve a syntactic problem than the LG, and thus they had made progress on that point, and vice versa.

4. If one of the groups used less rules in solving a syntactic problem, it means that the group used their rules more systematically than the other. They, then are assumed to know more about that problem.

5. If one of the groups used more explainable structures and made less deviant errors than the other, they are assumed to know more about that problem.

However, in determining which group knew more than the other, (i) the number of rules used for a particular syntactic problem, (ii) the nature of the rules (explainable? very deviant?), (iii) the nature of each PSEC (+ or - ?) and (iv) the nature and amount of PSPC, are taken into careful consideration. They all are equally weighted.

3. Findings

Only 7 syntactic errors which occurred with a high degree of frequency were examined in this study. The ones with low frequencies would be insufficient for drawing any conclusions. The 7 syntactic problems are as follows:

1. Articles

A. Description of data

The errors of the 2 groups were formalized and categorized in the following ways: (please see the first table)

B. Explanation of data

I think the errors were due mainly to only 3 of the 5 main sources of errors.

1. Overgeneralization (OG)

For example, we, teachers of English, tend to teach our students at an initial stage that **a** or **an** is to be used when one first mentions a countable noun. Most of the errors in definite article usage seem to be due to the overgeneralization of this principle, e.g. "He looked into **a** canal. He was on **a** top of a tree."

2. False concepts hypothesized (FCH)

Some students at both levels formed a false hypothesis in using **the**. They may think that **the** can always be used in front of any countable noun. This may be because **the** is usually used much more often than **a** or **an** in any texts or contents. **The** is one of the highest frequency words (Thorndike, 1972 : 185). So, such a false concept can be easily formed. The constructions in cols. 3, 4, and 9 might be due to the false hypotheses as well.

3. Language transfer (LT)

In Thai, there is no article. A collective noun is literally used for an indefinite article + NP and a collective noun + a demonstrative adj. for a definite article + NP. However, both constructions are always omitted, except for emphasizing. Therefore, the students might transfer these constructions to English, especially in

Errors in Article Usage

rules	indefinite						definite			total	%
	countable					mass	countable		mass		
	the + NP	φ + NP	a + other + NP	some +N-sing	no. + the+NP	φ + NP	a + NP	φ + NP	a + NP		
LG	+ (16)	+ (10)	+ (1)	+ (1)	+ (3)	+ (7)	+ (3)	+ (2)	+ (1)	44	69.84
UG	+ (7)	+ (1)	–	–	–	+ (4)	+ (7)	–	–	19	30.16
PSEC SE	9 OG	9 LT	1 FCH	1 FCH	3 OG	3 FCH	-4 OG	2 LT	1 FCH	25 PSPC	100
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9		

Note : 1. SE = sources of errors
2. The figures in brackets are frequencies of errors.

their earlier stages (LG) and then, at a later stage (UG) realize that this does not work. This might be why more errors were made by the LG.

C. Evaluation of data

According to our criteria it was found that the UG used only 4 rules while the LG used 9. This means that the UG used their rules more systematically than the other. The majority of PSECs are positive, as well as the PSPC. They indicate that the UG made progress in learning how to use the articles. A lot of students from both groups tend to use **The + NP** to refer to indefinite nouns, ϕ + NP to refer to abstract nouns and A + NP to refer to definite nouns.

Therefore, we can conclude that the UG is significantly better at knowing how to use the articles than the LG. They used fewer rules but more systematically and made fewer errors.

This is the method applied to evaluate the progress in learning a particular syntactic structure. It should be noted here that the causes of errors were subjectively hypothesized based on the author's experience as a Thai teacher of English. This concerns psycholinguistics and is the most difficult part in this analysis because sometimes the causes are overlapping. However, this part is the most worthwhile for a SL/FL teacher. It is not intended to discuss all the analyses in great detail as the one above. The rest are summarized as follows:

2. Verb Agreements

It was found that the LG had significantly more problems (p = 0.001) in dealing with a future if-sentence. They used more rules than the UG. A lot of students made a lot of errors in if-sentences, especially in (i) a past impossible sentence and (ii) a future impossible sentence. We have no equivalent structures in Thai. So, a lot of errors were caused by false concepts hypothesized.

3. Tense Agreements

The LG made significantly many more errors (p = 0.001) by using a simple present tense. Both groups applied the same number of rules and most of the errors were caused by language transfer. So, the UG know more about that particular syntactic feature.

4. Tenses

Most of the errors were due to language transfer. As we know, tense is one of many major problems for Thai students learning English because, in Thai, the differences of tenses are not expressed by different forms of verbs, but mainly by the usage of adverbs of time. They are usually omitted however, if the context or

situation is understood between the addresser and his addressee. No verbs, whatsoever, have different forms and no agreement morphemes are needed. The LG made significantly more errors (p = 0.001) and used many more rules. So, it is assumed that the UG know more about tenses.

5. Parallelism of Verb Forms

The LG used more rules than the UG but yet made significantly more errors (p = 0.001). In other words, the latter used their rules more systematically and effectively than the former. Most of the errors were due to false concepts hypothesized and very few due to language transfer. It was found that parallelism of verb forms is one of the big problems for Thai students learning English, especially in a progressive tense.

6. Perceptive Verb Usage   (e.g. NP + felt + very + adj, or pp.)

Surprisingly, it was found that both groups used the same rules and produced the same amount of errors. The UG tended to know a bit more about this syntactic feature by producing less deviant errors. All errors were due to language transfer because they used a verb after a perceptive verb instead of an adj. or a pp. In Thai, the position of a verb and of an adjective or a pp. is exactly the same, and, as mentioned earlier, a verb has only a simple form. It is interesting to find that about 70 % of the students in each group made errors in this syntactic feature. So, both groups had the same problem and were still in the same stage of transitional competence.

7. Infinitive with to

It was found that the UG used significantly less rules and made less errors than the LG (p = 0.001). Most of the errors in LG were due to language transfer. As mentioned, all Thai verbs have only one simple form. When 2 or more verbs happen to be in a single sentence, they simply occur after each other. No other kinds of words are needed in between them. A lot of errors in UG were due to false concepts hypothesized. Instead of using an **Infinitive with to**, they used its past form in the past tense.

IV. Conclusion and Discussion

1. Conclusion

A Summary of Findings

groups	syntactic features	N of rules	sources of errors and number of errors					N of errors
			LT	OG	IRR	IAR	FCH	
1st year students (LG)	1. articles	9	12	26	—	—	6	44
	2. verb agreements	2	—	—	—	—	4	4
	3. tense agreements	2	11	—	—	1	—	12
	4. tenses	5	8	—	—	2	5	15
	5. (NP) + felt very + X	2	7	—	—	—	—	7
	6. parallelism	2	2	—	—	—	4	6
	7. infinitive with **to**	5	16	—	—	—	2	18
total	7	27	56	26	—	3	21	106
3rd year students (UG)	1. articles	4	1	18	—	—	—	19
	2. verb agreements	1	—	1	—	—	—	1
	3. tense agreements	2	2	—	—	—	—	2
	4. tenses	2	2	—	—	—	3	5
	5. (NP) + felt very + X	2	7	—	—	—	—	7
	6. parallelism	1	—	—	—	—	2	2
	7. infintive with **to**	2	2	—	—	—	3	5
total	7	14	14	19	—	—	8	41
LG	% of influences		52.8	24.5	—	2.8	19.8	
UG	% of influences		34.2	46.3	—	—	19.5	
LG+UG	number of errors		70	45	—	3	29	147
	% of influences		47.6	30.6	—	2.40	19.7	

According to the table, it was found that :

1. The third-year students used 14 rules to cope with 7 different syntactic features while the first-year students used 27 rules. This implies that the UG used approximately 2 rules per syntactic problem (14 : 7 = 2 : 1) and the LG used approximately 3.85 rules for a problem (27 : 7 = 3.85 : 1). Besides, the UG made fewer errors than the LG. They made 41 errors (27.89 %) while the LG made 106 errors (72.11 %). Thus, the proportion of errors is 1 to 2.58 (41 : 106 = 1 : 2.58). This indicates that the LG made 2.58 times the number of errors made by the UG. Therefore, we can say that the UG used their rules more systematically and effectively than the LG. Their effectiveness is 1 to 1.92 or roughly 1 to 2 (14 : 27 = 1 : 1.92). This is confirmed by a significant difference between the total number of errors of both groups at p = 0.001 (χ^2 = 19.55, df = 1). In other words, undoubtedly, the UG had made more progress in learning the 7 syntactic features than the LG.

2. The majority of errors (52.8 %) made by the LG were due to language transfer ; 24.5 %, 19.8 % and 2.8 % were due to overgeneralization, false concepts hypothesized and incomplete application of rules respectively. (So, the rank of influence is 1, 2, 3 and 4). However, 46.3 %, 34.2 % and 19.5 % of the errors made by the UG were due to overgeneralization, language transfer and false concepts hypothesized respectively. This indicates that language transfer influences the LG more than the UG, but overgeneralization influences the UG more than the LG. This implies that the more the students learn a language, the less they are influenced by their NL. In other words, their NL causes fewer problems for them as they advance their studies. Psycholinguistically, this should be a fact in learning a TL. Interestingly, the more they learned the more errors they made through overgeneralization. Why so ? This might be due to a more thorough investigation of how to apply their hypothesized rules, rather than to a regression in their ability. Going through the errors caused by this factor, it was found that most of them are less deviant than the ones caused by other factors. This means that they knew the rules of the TL, but over-used them while, at the same time, they were less bound by the influence of their NL. This is a sign of their progress in learning a TL.

In addition, false concepts hypothesized seem to have an equal effect (19.8 % and 19.5 %) in causing errors in both groups. But, a number of errors of the UG were due to incomplete application of rules. It implies that the UG knew more about the rules of the TL and may have over-used them (by means of overgeneralization).

3. As a whole, the majority of errors of both groups (47.6 %) were due to the influence of their NL, 30.6 %, 19.7 % and 2.04 % of them were due to overgeneralization, false concepts hypothesized and incomplete application of rules, respectively. In other words, it simply means that approximately half of the errors were influenced by language transfer. This is evidence to show that not all errors are caused by language transfer as

is claimed implicitly by a contrastive analysis. Overgenerliazation played a big part in causing errors (30.6 %), but incomplete application of rules played the smallest part (2.04 %) Not one, as far as could be seen, was caused by ignorance of rules restrictions. However, as has been stated before, the influences of the major sources of errors are overlapping and thus no absolute claim can be made as to how much each source contributed to the errors making. These figures here show only an estimation.

4. Statistically, it was found that the correlation between the errors caused by 2 sets of rules is 0.925 (p = 0.01) which is very high indeed. This is an indicator to show that (i) the pattern of errors is very stable and (ii) the 7 syntactic features caused the students in both groups to make some errors in the same direction, but proportionally by different degrees. For example, "articles" caused by LG and the UG the most problems, but with different degrees. In other words, we may say that the ranks of the 7 syntactic problems of both groups are more or less the same (r^2_{xy} = 0.85 or 85 %), but the degrees of their problems are significantly different at p = 0.01.

Moreover, the correlation between the number of rules used by 2 groups is 0.87 which is also very high (p = 0.05). This indicates that (i) the pattern of rules is fairly stable and (ii) both groups used rules in solving their problems in the same direction, but, again, proportionally in different degrees. For example, the LG used 9 rules for solving their "articles problems" while the UG used only 4 and the former used 2 rules for "verb agreements" while the latter used only 1.

Therefore, according to our 3 hypotheses (on page 44), we can conclude that :

1. It is true that the third-year students made fewer errors than those in the first-year regarding the same syntactic constructions.

2. It is not true that only one-third of the errors in both groups were due to the influence of language transfer. The amount was nearly to 50 %

3. It is not entirely true that the students' errors in each groups, regarding the same syntactic construction, have their own patterns. Some of their rules are the same, but generally speaking, the lower group used more rules than the upper group and made more errors. The upper group used their rules more systematically and effectively.

2. Discussion

From this study, it is thought that error analysis alone is insufficient to study the students' errors, especially syntactic errors. The author agrees with Schachter (Schachter, 1974 : 212) that a combination of approaches, e.g. error analysis, CA apriori and comprehension testing would be more reasonable. This is because the students might sometimes avoid using some syntactic constructions and hence, it cannot be claimed

that they have no problems in such areas. Thus CA apriori would appear to be a more useful method than CA aposteriori, but the use of both would be very helpful in discovering the sources of errors and their formulas. It is thought that "to confirm or disprove the psycholinguistic theory of 'transfer'" (Corder, 1973 : 266) would be insufficient for analyzing errors if error analysis is the main tool used because of the students' error avoidance. So, CA apriori should be taken into account. This can be done only by using a carefully designed instrument (e.g. tests, exercises etc.) based on a systematic contrastive analysis. This also means implicitly that free composition is not a good source for making an error analysis. If a generalization is to be made after this kind of analysis, it is believed that it would be inaccurate and, theoretically, such a generalization should not be made.

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