

Analysis of the Frequency of Errors Made by Thai Students In Conversational English

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Introduction

What grammar and pronunciation problems give Thai speakers of English the most trouble? We know that Thai treats structures like plurals, tense and verbs very differently than does English structure; and this difference causes a lot of trouble. Likewise, endings of words in English with their aspirated consonant sounds, as well as the sounds of /r/, /l/, /v/ etc. all cause Thais a great deal of difficulty. But what is the hierarchy of specific errors, and in the normal speaking of English by Thais, what grammar and pronunciation mistakes are more frequently encountered than others? These are the questions that all English teachers in Thailand have to have some idea about in order to create useful and appropriate materials and lesson plans that will help our students overcome these problems.

These were also the questions we faced when we thought about where to concentrate our efforts in developing a suitable course in English conversation for the students at Chiangmai University. We had to determine what structure and pronunciation problems to work on most in order to give the students the most help for the limited amount of time we had together. We wanted to know what errors our students *really* made when they attempted to speak conversational English. Up until then we had relied, as most teachers do, on experience and intuition. But how reliable is this? When we are developing course curriculum we should be able to rely on more than guess work. But the solid information we needed was not available.

It was our luck to be in a position to be able to get the information we were looking for. The English conversation course at CMU (Oral, Expression I) requires the students to go through a series of interviews where they are tested for communicative abilities as well as correctness of structure and pronunciation. From approximately 300 interviews of this sort we have come up with, what we think to be, a fairly accurate picture of the frequency of errors in oral English by Thai students. We found that in many cases our intuition was right on target. But in a few interesting cases we were surprised to find high frequencies in areas we hadn't

given much thought to. We also noted some correlation of error frequency that can give us a better idea of where to place our emphasis in the teaching of English conversation.

Description of sample population

The individuals who participated in this study came from students who chose to study *Oral Expression I* (a requirement for English majors). This meant that we had to work with a 'sample of convenience' of our subjects were not chosen at random.

The students on the average had studied English for eight years. For the great majority, this, course afforded them the first opportunity to use spoken English in a near normal situation. Approximately 50% of the subjects were English majors and 85% were female. Most often they were answering the instructor's questions so that the problems that students have in *asking* questions and with question patterns are not shown here. This could be an area for further study.

Methodology

We developed a check list that had ample space to write down all of the mistakes that the students made during the interviews. The check list shows our intuition as to the students' areas of difficulty. These areas were divided into grammar mistakes and pronunciation mistakes. These were further divided into separate categories as shown below.

Grammar

plurals	garbled syntax
subject verb agreement	preposition & article
tense	other
word selection	

Pronunciation

r/l	th
v/w, vf	clusters
s/c	vowels
s/z	stress
endings (t, d, k, f, g, etc.)	other

A space was left next to each category for the interviewer to write down the sentence, phrase or word that was incorrectly produced. Each mistake was noted and later shown to the students in order to help them produce it correctly.

The students were not corrected until the interviews were over. They were not interrupted while they were talking. They knew that they were being tested as part of the course and they were aware that the interviewer was taking down their mistakes. Because of this they were trying their best *not* to make mistakes. We attempted to take down every mistake and not to be guided as to whether they appeared on the check list or not. Therefore, the 'other' boxes were often used it is felt that the

list had no influence on the results of the data. There was only one interviewer which allowed for consistency of evaluation.

Results

The following are the results of our survey. The grammar section is divided into nine major categories (or areas of mistakes), three of which are further subdivided to show high frequencies within the category. To clarify the kinds of errors, for each category we have shown a representative error made by a student. You will most likely be very familiar with these.

The pronunciation section is divided into eleven categories with the category 'ending' further subdivided. Taking all the interviews as a whole, we found 1508 grammar errors and 1150 pronunciation errors. We have given the frequency (f) of error for each category and sub-category. We have also given the percentages (%) of error. The categories have been listed in order of frequency.

Frequency of Error For Different Grammar Categories

Category	Example, of error	f of error	% of total
*1. plurals	*many thing	393	26.1
*2. sub-verb agree	*He go.	333	22.1
3. tense	*I come yesterday.	210	13.9
4. word selection	*We entrance CMU.	148	9.8
5. prepositions	*I was angry to him.	115	7.6
6. adjectives	*I don't happy.	102	6.7
7. articles	*He's the 4th year student.	43	2.9
8. garbled syntax	*There are cars too many.	26	1.7
*9. other		138	9.2

*Examples of High Frequency Errors

Category	f	% of category	% of total
Plurals			
many	69	17.6	4.5
Sub-verb agree.			
3rd person sing.	238	17.6	15.8
Other			
modals	18	13.0	
ever	15	10.9	
most, most of,			
almost	11	8.0	
every	9	6.5	
than	8	5.8	
far from	6	4.3	
another	6	4.3	

Frequency of Error For Different Pronunciation Categories

Category	f	%	Category	f	%
*1. endings	444	38.6	7. /ʃ/	56	4.9
2. /r/-/l/	210	18.3	8. vowels	42	3.7
3. /v/	84	7.3	9. added /s/	35	3.0
4. stress	82	7.1	10. x	26	2.3
5. th sounds	65	5.7	11. other	41	3.6

***Frequency of Ending Errors**

ending	f	% of cat.	% of total	ending	f	% of cat.	% of total
*1. /s/	105	23.6	9.1	8. /f/	16	3.6	1.4
2. /t/	91	20.5	7.9	9. /č/	11	2.5	1.0
3. /z/	75	16.9	6.5	10. /š/	11	2.5	1.0
4. /d/	50	11.3	4.3	11. /k/	9	2.0	.8
5. /g/	23	5.2	2.0	12. /v/	8	1.8	.7
6. /id/	20	4.5	1.7	13. /p/	6	1.4	.5
7. /th/	17	3.8	1.5	14. /n/	2	.5	.2

Discussion of results

Grammar

The first three categories of the grammar division show us where the major English structure problems for Thai students lie. The highest frequency of error came in producing *plurals* (26.1% of all grammar errors). The students simply failed to produce the plural ending for nouns. Related to this was the high number of incorrect sentences made by the students using the single word 'many'. As the chart shows us, 4.5% of all grammar errors came in using this one word. As it turned out, the word 'many' was used in more incorrect sentences than any other English word.

The second largest category was that of *subject-verb agreement* (22.1%). Within this category though we find that *3rd person singular* mistakes (leaving off the inflection) caused an even higher percentage of error (15.8%) than the third largest category, that of *tense* (13.9%). A large majority of tense mistakes came in using past tense; the students usually substituting the simple infinitive forms for

inflected verb endings or irregular past tense verbs. (An oversight on our part was that we neglected to differentiate between regular and irregular verbs in compiling our data.)

Besides the first three categories we see that *word selection*, choosing the correct word or part of speech (9.8%), had a high frequency which indicates needed work in the area of vocabulary build up and emphasis on the different parts of speech. *Prepositions* (7.6%) were often misused or omitted; especially with prepositional completers (interested *in*, angry *at*, etc.). *Adjectives* (6.7%) were somewhat of a surprise since we had completely overlooked this problem in our intuitive approach to error analysis. The 'be' was often omitted or substituted for with 'do'. Adjectives were sometimes used as verbs. This is most probably because of native language interference since Thai adjectives resemble English verbs in usage much more than they resemble English adjectives.

Specific errors in the *other* category include mistakes using *modals* and the famous 'ever' problem. Students also confused *most*, *most of* and *almost* as well as misusing the word 'every' (They tend to make it plural while making 'many' singular.). But these problem areas seem insignificant when compared to the number of mistakes using plurals, tense and 3rd person (55.8% of all grammar errors). We can be safe in saying that approximately 50% of all grammar mistakes came in using sentences that required an *inflected ending* of some kind. This will be more significant once we look at the pronunciation errors.

Pronunciation

It is very clear from the chart that the category *endings* is far and away the most difficult pronunciation problem for our students (38.6%). The types of errors in this category ranged from omitting the ending completely to substituting the problem sound with one that was more easily produced. When mispronounced, the fricatives /s/ and /z/ were either omitted or changed to stops, very often glottal stops. Released sounds such as /t/ and /d/ were also omitted or often changed and left unreleased. If these final stops were simply left unreleased or unaspirated we did not look at them as errors as this is normal among native speakers.

The sounds /g/, /f/, /k/, /v/, and /p/ when mispronounced were usually dropped and replaced with glottal stops. /č/ and /š/ as well as /th/ were usually replaced with an un released /t/.

Two sounds that appear in Thai but that caused the students more trouble than any others were the /r/ and /l/ (18.3%). These sounds not only both appear in spoken Thai but there are different letters of the alphabet to distinguish them. Why then the problem?

Although the /r/ and /l/ are, in formal Thai, separate phonemes as in English, informally they are often treated as allophones of the same phoneme. For the student who treats these as allophones in Thai, he may do the same in English—thus the problem. In fact, in some dialects of Thai, namely Northern Thai, the /r/ disappears completely. Since many of our students come from the north it probably explains why it was the /r/ that was most often mispronounced by substituting the (in English, non-allophonic) /l/. Another reason of course is that the /l/ is a lot easier to physically produce.*

Two problems we had overlooked using intuition were the *x* really two sound problems, /ks/ and /gs/ clusters and the final /s/, and also the *added /s/*. The second probably due to overcompensation on the students' part.

The other categories are remarkably equal in the percentages of error and don't show us much more than we had guessed. What is interesting, and what we feel to be important, is the high number of errors involving the final /s/, /z/, /t/, /d/ and /id/ (the final /z/ was treated as a final /z/ problem). These five final sounds made up 29.5% of all pronunciation errors. *We feel that it was not a coincidence that these are the same sounds that the students failed to produce when they made the grammatical errors of plurals, tense and 3rd person.*

We thought it would be interesting to show you what words we found to be the most often mispronounced. The following is a list of twelve words (we call them the 'dirty dozen') that the students pronounced incorrectly more than any others. They may not be the most difficult words to say but because of their high frequency of use are encountered (and mispronounced) all the time. These words are shown with their problem sounds noted.

very (v-w, r-l)	English (/š/-/č/)
nowadays (*howsaday)	about (/t/ omitted)
wife (final /f/ omitted)	six (*sick)
always-sometimes (/z/ omitted)	because (/z/ omitted)
house (*how)	help (*hell)
business (*busy net)	rice (*lice, *iite)

You are sure to be familiar with these and some classroom time spent in getting the students to produce them correctly should prove useful.

Interpretation

The findings suggest that the very high frequency of error encountered in plurals and 3rd person may not only be because of grammatical failure to produce

* Note that these native speakers of Northern dialect have been exposed to at least 10 years of Standard Thai which includes the phoneme /r/

the inflected endings. This would also hold true for the problems in tense where the 'ed' was so often left off. The high number of pronunciation errors produced by *mispronouncing English consonant endings* must definitely play a part in the students' inability to produce the inflected ending on verbs and nouns.

It is highly possible that the students' trouble in producing the final sounds /s/, /z/, /t/ and /d/ on *any word* influences their 'forgetting' to form noun plurals and past tense, past participle and 3rd person verbs. The failure to produce the /z/ in 'chairs' or the /s/ in 'lights' may be the same problem as the failure to produce the /z/ in 'always' or the /s/ in 'house'. The same can be said for the omitting of the /t/ in 'walked' and in 'about'.

This is conjecture on our part as we need to look more closely at the reasons why some individual sounds cause problems. For instance, when a word ends in a final consonant, are the plural and past tense forms more difficult to produce (they often become consonant clusters)? A complete analysis of *why* students have problems with these sounds may help us more; here we have only dealt with *what* the problems are.

If it is true that pronunciation problems play a part in grammar mistakes and we want to attack the grammar problems of plurals, tense and 3rd person, then we cannot concentrate solely on the teaching of the grammatical production of the inflected ending. We must teach these problems in conjunction with the pronunciation of all the consonant endings of English.

We can use the knowledge of frequency of error when we are deciding how much classroom time to use in dealing with specific problems in English conversation. It is obvious that *garbled syntax*, a word order mistake, is not as big a problem as choosing the correct word, part of speech or preposition, and should not be given as much classroom time. Our time would most profitably be used on problems of the highest frequency. For instance, if we decided to work on only the first three categories of grammar mistakes plus teach the pronunciation of consonant endings, we would be dealing with 62.1% of all grammar mistakes and 38.6% of all pronunciation problems. This would be a return that would be well worth our time.

Conclusion

When a student makes a mistake in grammar or pronunciation two things may happen. The first and more serious problem is that his ability to communicate will be impeded. The second, not as serious but in its own way very important, is that even if he is able to communicate he will be labeled as having 'accented speech'. Our study this time was limited to finding where the errors lie. A more in-depth study some day may show what specific problems lead to failures in communication.

We feel that this survey is a beginning in determining the kinds of mistakes our students are making. More work is needed. More should be known about the students' problems in producing questions. We could also compare oral errors with those made in writing. It would be interesting to find out if this hierarchy of frequency of oral error is correlated to mistakes in English composition. We have not attempted to analyze each error or determine the actual causes for each kind of mistake. A contrastive analysis (something our staff at the English department here is contemplating on doing in the near future) may prove beneficial in developing new ways to understand our students' problems and improve our teaching of these problem areas.

We at Chiangmai University would like to share our findings with you and would appreciate any comments or exchange of information with anyone interested or doing similar research.