

Reading Problems and Exercises for Thai Learners of English

I.S.P. Nation

D.T.E.C. Language Institute

K. Nation

Wherever possible our teaching should be based on research so that we are sure that what we present to our learners is dealing with real problems and is not creating unnecessary difficulties. The investigation described here is an attempt to give teaching a positive effect by trying to isolate some of the problems Thai learners of English encounter while reading, and by selecting reading exercises that deal with the problems.

Procedure

At different times a class of 18 adult Thai learners studying at the D.T.E.C. Language Institute were given short passages of English to translate into Thai. The learners could use a dictionary if necessary but were not allowed to communicate with each other while doing the translation. The learners were all graduates who had not used English for several years and could be loosely classified as intermediate in their command of English. After the passages were translated into Thai, one of the researchers translated them back into English in order to see where the learners' translations differed from the meaning of the original. At the same time the misinterpretations that the learners made were studied in an attempt to see what caused them. This was a difficult and time-consuming process and was full of difficulties. However, the findings justified the effort required.

Findings

The following sample passage is presented in two forms, first in its original form, and second as a retranslation including the commonest errors made by the learners in their translation into Thai. In the second form the errors are italicized

I. The original passage

This population explosion may be the greatest challenge of the present time. Within the next forty years, the world population may double. Can the frontiers of science meet the needs of the crowded world of tomorrow? If the present rate of population increase continues for the next 600 or 700 years, there will be standing room only. Each person will have between 3 to 10 square feet of space in which to live. This includes the mountaintops, deserts, and the ice and snow fields of the polar regions. Of course nobody expects such a thing to happen. War, plague, famine, or some

other catastrophe can be expected to occur long before the population reaches this point. Actually the danger is not in an overcrowded world where people are huddled together so that they cannot move arms and legs, but in an upset balance between population and resources.

2. The retranslation including the commonest errors.

(The percentage figures in brackets indicate the approximate proportion of learners who made this error. So, (60%) means that eleven learners out of a group of 18 made this error.)

This population explosion *is* (60%) the *great* (90%) challenge of the present time. Within the next forty years, the world population *will* (90%) double. *Science can* (30%) *find* (50%) *enough land* (50%) for the crowded world of tomorrow.

If *in the present the rate* (50%) of population increase continues, *in* (35%) the next 600 or 700 years there will be *rooms for standing* (35%) only. Each person will have between 3 to 10 square feet of space in which to live. This includes the mountaintops, deserts, and the ice and snow fields of the polar regions. Of course nobody expects *the things that will* (35%) happen *such as* war, plague, famine, or some other catastrophe. *These things will* (35%) occur *for a long time* before the population reaches this point. Actually the danger is not in an overcrowded world. *Everywhere* (20%) people are huddled together so that they cannot move arms and legs, but *this will cause* an upset balance between population and resources.

The most striking differences between the original and the translation occur in three main areas, clause relationships, homography and/or reference words. Let us look at each of these areas in turn, bringing in examples from other retranslation.

Clause relationships:

The main clause in this sentence taken from the passage has two parts. Actually the danger is not in an overcrowded world where people are huddled together so that they cannot move arms and legs, but in an upset balance between population and resources.

The first part of the main clause *Actually the danger is not in an overcrowded world* is separated from the second part *but in an upset balance between population and resources* by two other clauses *where people are huddled together* and *so that they cannot move arms and legs*. This separation gave rise to two errors in translation. Learners stopped the main clause after *world*, and made *people are huddled together so that they cannot move arms and legs* the subject of the second part of the main clause.

Here is a similar misinterpretation from another passage. The original is given first and then the misinterpretation.

The International Locust Control Organization was set up more than 20 years ago *and* ⁽¹⁾ as a result of its activities the damage caused to crops by locusts,⁽²⁾ which used to cost farmers at least £15 million annually, ⁽²⁾ has been reduced.

The International Locust Control Organization was set up more than 20 years ago ⁽¹⁾ as a result of the locusts activities indamaging the crops ⁽²⁾ the farmers' income ⁽²⁾ has been reduced by at least £15 million annually. (40%)

Notice that in the misinterpretation that (1) is interpreted by the learners as effect and cause, and that (2) *cost farmers* (or *farmers' income*) instead of damage has become the subject of *has been reduced*. The separation of subject and verb by a clause *which used to cost farmers at least £15 million annually* resulted in a failure to see the subject verb relationship.

Homography :

Two words that have the same spelling but a different meaning (and often a different function) are called homographs. Often learners only know one meaning of a pair of homographs, or sometimes they know both meanings but cannot distinguish when one is used and when the other is used. In the passage, *room* in *there will be standing room only* means "space" but some learners interpreted it as "a part of a house or building." Similarly *meet* in the passage means "satisfy" but some learners gave it its more common meaning "come face to face with". In another passage, the clause *John Dalton....made the atomic theory really useful* was translated by most of the learners as *John Dalton....made the atomic theory which is really useful*. Here both the meaning and the function of *make* differ. A more serious misinterpretation resulting from homography occurred in the same passage. The passage said, *Atoms cannot be destroyed or changed in any way by chemical reactions; all that can happen is....* Most of the learners misinterpreted *that* as a reference word (demonstrative pronoun) and not as a joining word (relative pronoun). So, they translated the sentence *Atoms cannot be destroyed in any way by chemical reactions. All these things can happen*. One final example of homography should be enough to show the effect this may have on understanding. In another passage, about locusts, this sentence occurred. *They gather in large swarms probably, in the first place, as a result of their food supplies being restricted* Most of the learners interpreted this sentence in the following way. *They gather in large swarms probably in one place (in the first area) with the result that their food supplies are restricted*. In the original, *in the first place* means *firstly* however most of the learners interpreted this sequencing comment as part of the description of the locusts' habits.

Reference words :

The difficulty caused by reference words like *it*, and *that* is related to the problem of homography. *It* as a pronoun and formal *it* are homographs. *That* as a demonstrative pronoun and a relative pronoun are homographs. One common error with *it* is to interpret formal *it* as a pronoun. Here is the original.

When you go down a coal mine it is important to try and get to the coal face when the fillers are at work. This is not easy....

In their translations several learners interpreted the passage as saying *The coal mine is important*. Also, *This is not easy* was interpreted as *The work of the fillers is not easy*. The difficulty of correctly interpreting reference words increases as the distance between the reference word and the words referred to increases and when the reference word does not refer to a simple noun but to a phrase or clause. The following example shows that learners may also be confused about the form of reference words. The original was as follows.

The International Locust Control Organization was set up more than 20 years ago and as a result of its activities the damage caused to crops by locusts....

Most of the learners interpreted *its* as referring to locusts presumably on the analogy *it* = singular, *its* = plural.

Exercises

Now that a few of the reading problems faced by Thai learners have been isolated, we are able to choose exercises that make learners aware of the difficulty. In another paper in this volume, Mark Ellis has described two excellent exercises that do this. We will describe these exercises again in the following section on clause relationships using the passage on the population explosion that is given earlier in this article as a source of examples.

Clause relationships :

1. The teacher chooses verbs or words related to verbs from the passage and writes the list of words on the blackboard. The learners find these words in the passage and write the subject and object (if any) of the words according to the passage. All the verbs must be written as active verbs. So *expect* occurs in the passive "can be expected to occur", but in the exercise the learners must make it active. So the correct answer would be *(people) expect war, plague, etc.* Here are words from the passage on the population explosion.

_____ increase/s
 _____ continue/s
 _____ live/s
 _____ include/s_____

_____ expect/s _____
 _____ expect/s _____
 _____ occur/s _____
 _____ upset/s _____

Notice that *upset* in the passage acts as an adjective “an upset balance” but because it is related to a verb it is included in the exercise. Also notice how in this exercise, having to deal with the first occurrence of *expect* will help the learners avoid the misinterpretation that occurred in the translation, namely *nobody expects war, plague, etc.*

Here are the answers

<i>population</i>	increase/s	
<i>rate</i>	continue/s	
<i>each person</i>	live/s	
<i>space to live</i>	include/s	<i>mountaintops etc.</i>
<i>nobody</i>	expect/s	<i>each person will have 3 to 10....</i>
<i>(people)</i>	expect/s	<i>war, plague, etc.</i>
<i>War, plague etc</i>	occur/s	
<i>overcrowded world</i>	upset/s	<i>balance</i>

2. The teacher chooses sentences in the text that might be difficult for the learners to interpret because of their complicated structure. The learners break these sentences into parts by putting them in boxes. Usually each box contains a verb form. The box containing the main clause is placed highest. Here are some examples.

1.

Each person will have between 3 to 10 square feet of space
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 2.

in which to live.

1. _____ have/s _____
2. _____ live/s _____

The verb in each clause is treated as in the first exercise described above.

1. *each person* have/s *3 to 10 square feet of space*
2. *each person* live/s _____

Notice in the following examples how the problems that learners encountered in the passage are clarified by putting the sentences in boxes.

1.

War, plague, famine or some other catastrophe can be expected

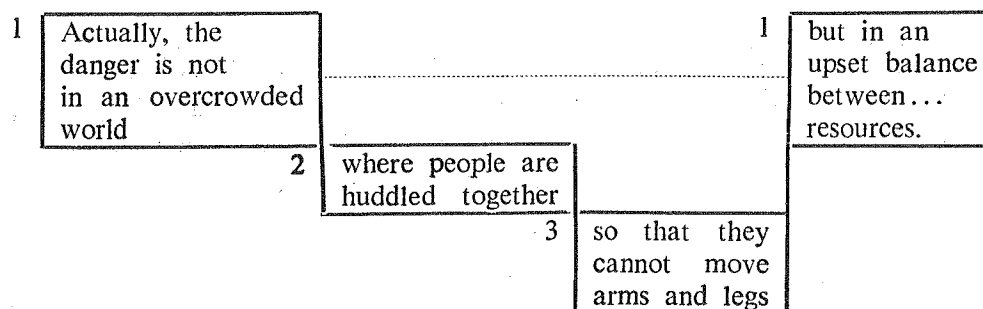
 2.

to occur

 3.

long before the population reaches this point.
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In the above example notice how *long* is kept near *before* rather than being put in the same box as *occur*. In the translation some learners considered *long* as a modifier of *occur*.



In the above example the dotted line and the numbering show how the main clause has been broken into two parts.

The teacher can prepare learners for this type of exercise by drawing the boxes for them on the blackboard and then letting them break up the sentence so that it fits the boxes. After the learners can do this easily, the teacher gets them to draw their own boxes.

Homography:

To overcome problems of homography, learners need to be aware of the different meanings and functions that a form has, and need to have practice in discriminating the meanings and functions. The following exercise tries to do this. Notice that the instructions for the exercise indicate the possible meanings, and the items in the exercise give discrimination practice.

Look at the two meanings of *meet*. Then look at the sentences and decide which meaning is used. The first one is done for you.

- meet a) – come face to face
 b) – satisfy

1. Does this *meet* your needs? (b)
2. I'll *meet* you here tomorrow. ()
3. We *met* by chance. ()
4. Will this *meet* the requirements? ()
5. Have we enough money to *meet* the expense? ()
6. The two trains *met* at the station. ()

If a homography exercise is made for formal *it* and the pronoun *it* or the two uses of *that*, the instructions would also include grammatical information.

Reference words:

The first clause relationship exercise gave some practice in reference words because in that exercise the subject and object of each verb had to be stated in a

full form and not as a pronoun. The following exercise concentrates specifically on reference words.

Find the underlined words in the passage and then find the words in the passage that they refer to. The first one is answered for you.

1. *This* includes (3 to 10 square feet of space in which to live)
2. Such a thing
3. *they* cannot move

This kind of exercise can be combined with a homography exercise in the following way.

Find the underlined words in the passage. Some can be replaced by other words in the passage that they refer to. Others do not refer to other words and cannot be replaced. Write those words from the passage which can replace some of the underlined words. The first two are answered for you.

1. *There* will be (_____)
2. *This* includes (3 to 10 square...live)
3. *such a thing*
4. *this* point
5. together so *that*
6. *they* cannot move

The type of investigation described here is full of traps and difficulties but it does give some insight into the problems Thai learners face when reading. Other methods of investigation will reveal different problems and hopefully confirm the few isolated here. What is important is the principle. We should try to base our teaching techniques and procedures on investigations of learners grappling with the language. We cannot assume that because certain teaching techniques, like some of our colleagues, are old and common, they are good. Good teaching is based on careful investigation.