



A Data Analysis of English Interlanguage among Thai Adult Learners with a Focus on Temporality

Sarinya Khattiya

English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University, Thailand
E-mail: skuttiya@hotmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the acquisition of temporality in English by 2 Thai adult learners. The primary focus of temporality examined is the expression of past-time events (PTEs). The analysis found differences patterns used in encoding PTEs among learners with different L2 proficiency levels. This research also confirmed the previous hypothesis about morpheme acquisition order.

Keywords: adult learners, expression of past-time events, interlanguage, temporality



บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษาการรู้กาลเวลา (temporality) ในภาษาอังกฤษ ของผู้เรียนที่เป็นผู้ใหญ่จำนวน 2 คน โดยมุ่งเน้นที่การศึกษาสำนวนภาษาที่ใช้อธิบายเหตุการณ์ในอดีต ผลการวิเคราะห์พบรูปแบบความแตกต่างของภาษาที่ใช้ในการอธิบายเหตุการณ์ในอดีตของผู้เรียนที่มีระดับความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษที่ต่างกัน งานวิจัยนี้สนับสนุนสมมติฐานของทฤษฎีลำดับการรับสัทอรรถ



1. Introduction

Tense tends to be difficult elements of English grammar for Thai learners to acquire even though most tenses are taught in primary school and revisited again in secondary school and university. One of the problems for Thai learners of English is that their first language temporal system is different from English. While English is a tensed language, Thai is considered a tenseless language. This key difference between English and Thai temporal system appears to present difficulties for Thai learners in their acquisition of English tense.

This study seeks to investigate the acquisition of the English tense system by Thai adult learners who learn English as the second language. It focuses on the use of morphosyntactic devices to encode past time events. This report first provides an overview of interlanguage development researches and temporal references in English and Thai. Then, the methods used were discussed. Finally, it presents research findings and discussion at the end.

Interlanguage Development Research

Since the 1970s, close attention to the language that learners produce has enabled important insight about the nature of interlanguage. The term interlanguage is coined by Selinker (1972) to refer to the language system that each learner construct at any given point in developmental; it is a natural language characterized by systematicity and variability; and it is more than the sum of the target input and the L1 influence (Ortega, 2009). In other words, interlanguage is an inbetween system used in second language acquisition by L2 learners which seem to have no connection to the forms of either L1 or L2 it contains aspects of L1 and L2 but it is an inherently variable system with rules of its own (Yule, 1997).

Interlanguage researchers believe that the same general cognitive learning mechanisms that help humans learn and process any other type of information help them extract regularities and rules from the linguistic data available in the surrounding environment (Ortega, 2009). Much of SLA research has focused on describing the learners' interlanguage and identifying sequences and patterns of development. The view of interlanguage that guided early research saw second language learners as processing a set of rules or intermediate grammars with the influence of the first language on the emerging interlanguage (Adjemian, 1976; Selinker, 1972). Most of analyses of interlanguage in this period tend to focus on the product; what interlanguage demonstrates at a given point of time.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, researches working in the interlanguage framework began to develop data-analytic procedures that would yield information about the dynamic qualities of language change that made the interlanguage a unique system, both similar to and different from the first and target languages (McLaughlin, 1987). As argued by Pica (2005), because interlanguages are systematic, they follow rules and patterns that change over the course of L2 development, but do so in patterned ways. Based on this process-oriented approach, researchers turn their attention to the developmental process and to how one could account for both systematicity and variability in the development of interlanguage.

When describing interlanguage development, researchers often cluster its patterns into interim grammars, which they refer to as developmental sequences or stages. The language that learners produce provides evidence that they acquire different morphological features in a fixed order and also that they pass through a sequence of developmental stages in the acquisition of specific syntactical features. A striking example of the systematicity of interlanguage consists of common developmental sequences within morpho-syntactic domains through which, with only minor variations, all learners seem to pass, regardless of age, native language or (formal or informal) learning context (Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991). In the 1970s a number of studies, commonly referred to as the morpheme studies, were carried out to investigate the order of



acquisition of grammatical functors such as noun and verb inflections, articles, auxiliaries, copulas and prepositions. The so-called morpheme studies provided early empirical evidence of interlanguage systematicity and of the existence of L1-neutral developmental sequences.

The existence of developmental sequences is one of the most important findings of SLA research to date. There is now general acceptance in the SLA research community that the acquisition of an L2 grammar, like the acquisition of an L1 grammar, occurs in stages. However, it should be noted that although general developmental sequences have been attested in learners in different situations and with differing backgrounds, variations in the specific order in which particular features occur have also been found. However, the pioneering research within this framework has also given rise to a number of procedural issues and questions of interpretation. Huebner (1979) states that it fails to recognize the systematic use of English functors before they acquire Standard English functions and to explicate the interrelationships of the various areas of the interlanguage syntax. Larsen-Freeman (2006) also expresses doubts on the value of past interlanguage findings because they are based on the metaphor of 'a developmental ladder'. She sees a solution forward in her proposed view of language as dynamic and self-organizing systems, ever adapting to changing contexts.

In addition to developmental sequences, some researchers maintain that language learners appear to be inherently variable. Tarone (1979) states that interlanguage could be seen as analyzable into a set of styles that are dependent on the context of use. She also argues that a second language learner's system is a variable one, changing when the linguistic environment changes. Learners frequently use one structure on one occasion and a different structure on another. A key issue is the extent to which this variability is systematic. Learners alternate their use of linguistic forms according to linguistic context and situational context, in particular according to who they are speaking to (Beebe, 1980). Learners also vary according to stylistic continuum. They are more likely to use correct target language forms in situations and tasks that call for a careful style (i.e. formal language use) and more likely to use transitional, learner forms in their vernacular style (i.e. in informal, everyday language use). Therefore, it is assumed that the interlanguage is a natural language, obeying the constraints of the same language universals and subject to analysis by means of standard linguistic techniques (Tarone, 1979).

Recently, SLA researchers have considered the acquisition of pragmatic competence in its own right. Instead of drawing a focus on acquisitional patterns of interlanguage knowledge over time, most studies in interlanguage pragmatics have focused on second language use rather than second language learning. According to Kasper and Schmidt (1996), interlanguage pragmatics emphasizes on the development and use of strategies for linguistic action by nonnative speakers. Researchers in this field believe that learners have to learn when it is appropriate to perform a particular language function and also how to encode it (Ellis, 1994). To date, the role of pragmatic transfer has been the only issue specific to interlanguage studies that has received sustained attention in interlanguage pragmatics and, thus, aligns it with mainstream second language acquisition research.

As we have seen, the study of interlanguage offers a valuable window into the recognition that the emergent competence of L2 users is shaped by the same systematicity and variability that shape all other forms of human language learning. Such recognition can help us combat deep-held views of learner language as a defective version of the target language and of errors as the sign of dangerous habits that need to be eradicated (Ortega, 2009).



Time Reference in English and Thai

Tense is the term used to indicate the time-reference signaled by a verb form or that form of a verb which signals a particular time reference. According to Comrie (1976), tense is a deictic category that describes the location of an event on the time line. Wekker (1976) also suggests that tense expresses the temporal relationship between the event or action described by the verb and the actual utterance.

English is a time-oriented language which requires the overt marking of time in its sentences. This time orientation is generally shown in the use of tense or the set of verbs which are inflected in different forms, thus indicating when an event occurs, occurred, or will occur. In English, past time reference is expressed morphologically (tense marking), lexically (time adverbials and modals), and syntactically (periphrastic tenses) (Ayoun & Salaberry, 2008). For example, the past tense morphological marking, *-ed* employed in (a) and adverbial, *yesterday*, used in (b) mark past tense meaning in English.

- (a) I *finished* my homework.
- (b) I went to Sydney *yesterday*.

In contrast, Thai does not have a tense system to convey the time concepts. Forming a sentence in Thai without any specific time markers can be understood in any tense (Chiyaratana, 1961). This can be ambiguous when translated into a tensed language like English.

<i>rao</i>	<i>rien</i>	<i>paa saa angkrit</i>
we	learn	English

The above sentence can be reconstructed into:

- “We learned English.”
- “We are learning English.”
- “We will learn English.”

Though these examples of reconstruction might suggest that Thai is a timeless language, the temporal differences exhibited imply that there exists certain underlying time category in Thai, categories by which the time of an action is covertly marked in Thai sentences (Noochoochai, 1978). There are many contexts in Thai that do not require any expression of temporal aspect and this differs from English where most of the time temporal aspect is marked overtly.

Kanchanawan (1978) suggests that since there is no verb inflection in Thai, time maybe expressed through the combination of time phrases, time markers, and certain types of verbs. Time markers have syntactic functions as pre-serial verbs, auxiliaries, post-serial verbs, or particles. They also have semantic function as time implication which has its meaning in relation to time presented in the time phrase.

<i>chan</i>	<i>pai</i>	<i>krung thep</i>	<i>muer waan nee</i>
I	go	Bangkok	yesterday

“I went to Bangkok yesterday.”

<i>khao</i>	<i>song</i>	<i>jodmaii</i>	<i>atit tee laew</i>
he	send	letter	last week

“He sent a letter last week.”



To sum up, time in Thai morphologically marked only optionally. Therefore, the only way to distinguish between a past time reference and a present time reference in Thai would be through context.

Research Questions

This study examines the acquisition of temporality in English interlanguage through a systematic investigation of linguistic means learners employ to express past-time events (PTEs). Data collected from two Thai adult learners learning English are examined and analyzed to address to following questions:

- a) Which morphosyntactic devices do the learners use to express temporality?
- b) Do L2 learners with different proficiency levels use different morphosyntactic devices to express temporality?

2. Method

Participants

The informants of this study were two Thai adult learners. The first informant was Tanin who is 35 years old. He arrived in Australia in October 2008. He had been enrolled in a pre-intermediate ESL course for 6 months and worked at a Thai restaurant on weekends. He lives in a share house with three other Thai students. The second informant was Noon who is 25 years old. He arrived in Australia in April 2010. He has just finished the high-intermediate English for academic course and is now enrolling in a high-intermediate listening and speaking course. Currently, Noon lives in a share house with two other international students.

Instruments

Determining a nonnative speaker's intention regarding tense is a challenging task. In order to interpret and control the data more precisely, data elicitation was employed. Free speech production task through interview was used to create a situation in which informants could speak about PTEs. The topic set for this task was talking about their experiences when they first arrived in Australia.

Data Collection Procedures

The data for this study were collected through the audiorecording of visits at the informants' home. The data collection sessions were recorded on an MP3 recorder, which was placed on the table between the informants and the interviewer. Before the data elicitation session, the informants were informed about objective of this study and details about the task using their L1. The informants were allowed 5 minutes for preparation. Each free speech production task lasted approximately 10 minutes for each informant. After the data collection process, the audio clips were transcribed for further analysis.

Analytical Procedures

Since the primary goal of the present study was to examine patterns used to encode past-time reference, the analytical procedures were divided into several stages. First, obligatory occasion for the use of past-time reference were identified. Therefore, utterances referring to any time interval in the present or future were excluded from the analysis. Questionable data such as forms resulting from the informants' mimicry of the interviewer were also eliminated in order to increase the accuracy of analysis. Then, both locative and temporal adverbials used to encode past-time reference were identified. Next, major linguistic means used to encode past-time reference were coded: base verb forms, nonpast verb forms with some kind of marking on them, past-tense marking.



3. Results

The primary focus of this research is to investigate learners' interlanguage with regard to expression of PTEs. The findings reveal different use of morphosyntactic devices among learners with different L2 proficiency levels. In addition, an emergence of fossilization can be witnessed from the analysis.

Past Time References

Past Marking on Verbs

The analysis led to the distinction of two different ways of encoding a past-time event: a non-past tense form, and a past tense form. From the datasets, verb forms that encode PTEs fell into 10 categories, which comprised some verb forms found in the corpus. Table 1 gives an overview of the 10 verb categories that constitute lexical and grammatical means used in encoding past time by the two informants. In all verb forms used to encode PTEs, the base form of a verb is the preferred form for both informants. In Tanin's data, the use of this form appeared 15 times and 11 times in Noon's data. When analyzed in details, both of them used base form of verb for predicates of state or activity more than that of accomplishment and achievement. One reason is that states are nondynamic and both states and activity predicates are atelic and thus do not assume a natural endpoint. This supported the Aspect Hypothesis (Anderson & Shirai, 1996) in which the learners first use or perfective marking on achievement and accomplishment verbs and gradually extend the marking to activity and stative verbs.

The second reason accounted for the frequent use of base verb form among these learners might be due to differences between Thai and English. As Thai syntactic pattern of time reference is distinct from that of English, Thai learners learning English might encounter L1 transfer. Transfer can be positive transfer, where L1 supports the acquisition of L2, or negative transfer, where the influence of L1 imposes difficulty in the acquisition and, even worse, the misuse of L2 (Odlin, 1989). Due to the non-inflectional pattern of time reference in Thai, Thai learners of English have difficulties perceiving and producing regular past tense verbs in which more complicated syntactic patterns are required.

Table 1
Frequency of the verb forms encoding PTE

Verb forms	Tanin	Noon
Nonpast forms	(23)	(11)
1. base verb form	15	11
2. present participle –ing	1	0
3. be (not) + noun/adjective	1	0
4. be (not) + (base) verb form	2	0
5. don't/doesn't + base verb form	2	0
6. can(n't) + (base) verb form	2	0
Past forms	(6)	(19)
7. did(n't) + (base) verb form	0	4
8. was (n't) + noun/adjective	0	4
9. irregular past tense form	6	9
10. regular past tense form	0	2
Total utterances	29	30



Furthermore, Thai and English also have different pronunciation system. One of the differences is that the final consonants in Thai never appear in the form of clusters, whereas those in English do. Since there are some differences between Thai and English final sounds, it is predictable that Thai students may have high tendency to encounter the difficulties in pronouncing English, especially with final consonants which never appear in Thai. As stated by Lado (1957) the problems people confront when learning L2 could be predicted by comparing L2 system with that of L1. L1 transfer, according to this hypothesis, is the root of all the difficulties when learning a new language. Based on this hypothesis, L2 pronunciation is easily interfered with by L1 pronunciation system.

The use of past forms between the two learners was also noticeable. Noon was more capable of using various forms of verbs to encode PTEs. Although there were only two tokens of regular past tense verbs, it can be assumed that this verb form was a part of Noon's interlanguage. In contrast, the only past form found in Tanin's data was irregular past tense. This supported the irregular-before-regular order originally identified in the rank order studies reported by various researchers (Ortega, 2009; Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001; Pienemann & Johnston, 1987; Krashen, 1977). The same phenomenon was also found in other L2 learners from different countries. For example, in a longitudinal study, Sato (1986, 1990) found that two Vietnamese-speaking children learning English as a second language used the irregular past more frequently as they had more contact with English. However, neither child exhibited any use of the regular past, with the exception of one token in the eighth month of the study.

Adverbials

The datasets have shown that PTEs were not frequently expressed by means of verbs marked for past tense. Adverbials accompanied by base verb forms or other nonpast verb forms were used by both learners to mark PTEs. Although Tanin did not produce any regular past tense verb, he used some adverbials for past time reference. As stated by Sato (1986, 1990) who examined the development of past-time reference in the English interlanguage of two Vietnamese speakers and found that even though there was a complete absence of regular past verbal inflection in the learners' interlanguage, they employed discourse-pragmatic means to express temporal relations in English such as discourse organization, inferencing, and situational context. Most of the adverbials used by Tanin were formed using Present Perfect tense. However, it is more likely that he remembers this expression in chunk as they take the same form and the use of Present Perfect tense never appeared in other contexts. In case of noon, the use of adverbials increased. This rejects the hypothesis proposed by Bardovi-Harlig (1992), who argued that as the use of tense morphology increased, the functional load of the adverbials decreased, as did the actual ratio of time adverbials to finite verbs. From his data, Noon used more past verb forms in his utterances and at the same time he also used more adverbials when compared with Tanin.

Table 2
Frequency of adverbials

	Adverbials	Locative	Temporal
Tanin	8	1	7
Noon	13	1	12



4. Discussion and Conclusion

Even though Tanin has been in the target language speaking country for almost two years, his L2 is still in pre-intermediate level. On the other hand, Noon, who has been in the country for only one year, can develop his interlanguage more proficiently as evidenced in the datasets. It is obvious that Tanin has encountered fossilization. Selinker (1972) maintained that fossilization results especially from language transfer, but it may also be the result of other processes. For example, strategies of communication may dictate to some individuals that they stop learning the language once they have learned enough to communicate (McLaughlin, 1987). Thus it is not always so that a language learner, given continued exposure to the target language, will steadily grow in his or her mastery of the target language. Based on his profile, Tanin attends his L2 class only twice a week. He spends most of his times socializing with L1 speakers both at work and at home. Therefore, he occasionally communicates using the target language. Corder (1973) suggested that once the language learner's interlanguage grammar is sufficiently developed to enable the learner to communicate adequately for his or her purposes, the motivation to improve wanes (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).

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