

Five Things that Thai Teachers have to Consider

Before Teaching English Grammar

ห้าข้อควรพิจารณาสำหรับอาจารย์ไทยก่อนการสอนไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษ

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คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์ วิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีภาคใต้ จังหวัดนครศรีธรรมราช

Abstracts

Teaching English in Thailand was a problem in Thai society for a long time. It can be noticed that many Thai people had learnt English for at least 16 years counting from kindergarten, primary, secondary and higher education level but the language proficiency still becomes low in every skill when compared to the English ability of nearby countries in South East Asia. In this article, the writer, noticing from several years of English teaching experience, has an attention to present something about grammar teaching that teachers should explain to their students before conducting their teaching process. It is about the difference between Thai and English structure. For Thai learners, they grow up in Thai language usage environment. They hear, listen and speak mostly in Thai so when they have to study any second languages including English, they always compare and apply Thai language structure with those languages. As a result, they produce some mistakes and send some misunderstanding with native speakers. Five topics that Thai teachers should consider before teaching English for Thai students in this article include tense and time, words before noun, adjective order, modal verb and active and passive voice. These structure can be used or not used in Thai language but the sense of usage is different.

Keywords: Tense, Noun, Adjective Order, Modal Verb, Active and Passive Voice, Comparative Grammar, First Language Interference

บทคัดย่อ

การสอนภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทย มีปัจจุบันมาซ้านานสังเกตจากคนไทยจะเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นระยะเวลายี่ปีตั้งแต่ระดับอนุบาล ประถมศึกษา มัธยมศึกษาและอุดมศึกษา รวมระยะเวลาไม่ต่ำกว่า 16 ปี แต่ความสามารถในการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษของคนไทยโดยเฉลี่ยก็ยังอยู่ในระดับต่ำทุกทักษะเมื่อเปรียบเทียบกับประเทศเพื่อนบ้านในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ ในบทความที่นำเสนอในครั้งนี้เป็นข้อสังเกตจากประสบการณ์ที่ได้มีโอกาสสอนภาษาอังกฤษในทุกระดับ และขอเสนอข้อคิดเห็นเฉพาะปัญหาการสอนไวยากรณ์ ซึ่งได้พบว่า โครงสร้างประโยคระหว่างไทยกับภาษาอังกฤษมีข้อแตกต่างกัน จำเป็นที่ผู้สอนต้องอธิบายให้นักเรียนเข้าใจก่อนนำสู่เนื้อหาของการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในทักษะด้านต่าง ๆ ผู้เรียนที่เป็นคนไทยและเติบโตในสิ่งแวดล้อมที่ใช้ภาษาไทยจะคิดตามระบบโครงสร้างภาษาไทยและนำไปเทียบเป็นโครงสร้างในภาษาอังกฤษและจะนำไปสู่การสร้างประโยคภาษาอังกฤษโดยผสมเข้ากับโครงสร้างประโยคในภาษาไทยทำให้เกิดการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษที่ไม่ถูกต้อง ประเด็นที่นำมาเสนอในครั้งนี้ มีความประสงค์ให้ผู้สอนอธิบายก่อนลงมือสอนไวยากรณ์ให้นักเรียนไทยประกอบด้วย 5 หัวข้อ คือ การและเวลา คำนำหน้านาม คำคุณศัพท์ คำกริยาช่วย และ กรรมวิจารณา ซึ่งทั้งโครงสร้างทั้งที่รูปแบบนี้ไม่ปรากฏในลักษณะการใช้ในภาษาไทยหรือมีลักษณะการใช้แต่มีวิธีการใช้ที่แตกต่างกัน

คำสำคัญ: Tense, Noun, Adjective Order, Modal Verb, Active And Passive Voice, Comparative Grammar, First Language Interference

Introduction

When Thai teachers have to teach English for Thai students, many of them face some of difficulty to explain grammar for their students. It is very confusing for Thai learners to understand some points in structure lessons because they are not familiar with the English grammar concept. Generally, there are a lot of difference between two languages but five topics will be brought to present in this article including tense and time, words before noun, adjective, modal verb, and active and passive voice. All these topics are still be the difficulties in English grammar acquisition for most Thai students and the habits of Thai people who rarely use this structure when they speak or write as it is not the style of Thai language and the sense of usage is different.

The purpose of this article is to provide both Thai and foreigner teachers who teach English grammar at all educational level beware some points of difference in structure between two languages that may send an effect to learners. Actually, the students in different countries have preferred learning language in various styles. For Thai students, they like auditory and kinesthetic so many Thai teachers still focus on teacher center and explain grammar before developing

other language skills. Widely seen in both Thai primary and secondary school, a huge of drill and practice emphasizes on grammar exercise but sometimes the load of explanation cannot be clarified for the students. Although Thai learners are familiar with learning English grammar, they still misunderstand some points of them as the influence of Thai native structure. In order to help Thai students can acquire in grammar skill, the following suggestions may be a small tip that leads to get success in the teaching methodology and learning of the English grammar.

English Syntax and Structure

As mentioned above, the main problem for Thai students is adequate background knowledge about the second language's linguistic system. Syntax (Chomsky, 1950) is the arrangements of words to show their relationship to one another in a sentence. Syntax rules govern proper sentence structure. Chomsky (1977, 1986) developed transformation grammar and classified it in to two levels, surface structure and deep structure.

The surface structure is the actual spoken sentence.

The deep structure is the underlying meaning of the sentence.

A single deep structure idea can be expressed in many different surface structure. For example:-

Deep Structure : Boy kisses girl.

Surface Structure : The boy kissed the girl.

The boy was kissing the girl.

The girl was kissed by the boy.

The deep structure gives the semantic component of a sentence, while the surface structure gives the proper phonological information to express that thought. The transformation rules of Chomsky help to transform the deep structure into the surface structure. Ariyapitipun (2003) explained that English grammar is a cover term embracing morphology and syntax. Morphology deals with the structure of words and syntax deals with relationship and the distribution of words or words groups. Chomsky (1977, 1986) studied structural linguistics and sought a way to analyze the syntax of English in a structure grammar. His theory is called transformational, generative or transformational generative grammar. Generative grammar comprised four components: phrase structure (PS), lexical transformational and morphophonemic. Each of the components consisted of a set of rules operating upon a certain 'input' to yield a certain

'output' Phrase structure tree, sometimes called a constituent structure tree or tree diagram, is a form of representation of sentences in which nodes or elements are labeled by syntactic category such as NP, VP etc. This tree shows that a sentence is both a linear string of words and hierarchical structure with phrases nested phrases.

English Structure

According to Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) the sentence of English has its own characteristics. It is related to tense with reference to time. English has finite verbs which inflect along with the tense. It has only two tense forms. They are past and present or "past" and "non past", where "past" includes reference to remote events as well as past time, while "non past" includes references to present and future time as well as cases in which timelessness is intended. Every non imperative English sentence must have either a modal auxiliary or a grammatical tense – past or present. The English verb thus has many potential auxiliary elements that must be accounted for in phrase structure rules. An English sentence structure is presented as follow a tree structure (Figure 1)

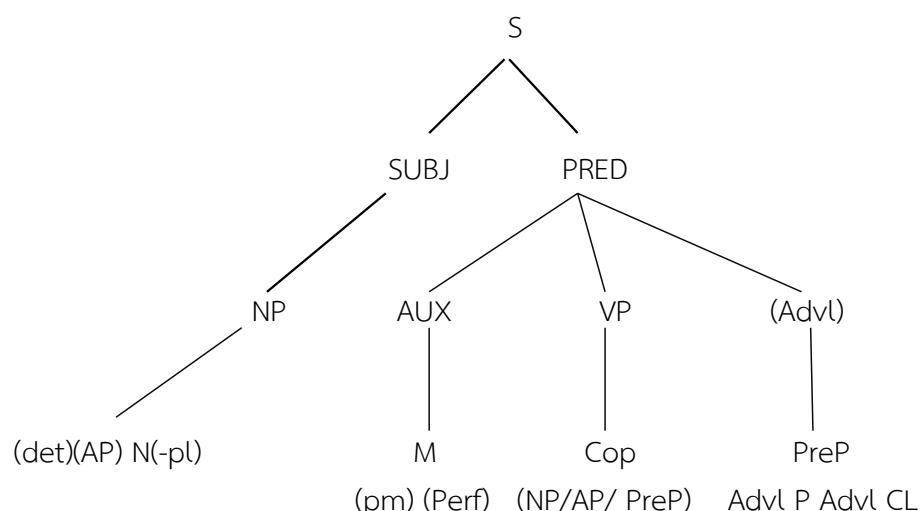


Figure 1 An English sentence structure is presented as follow a tree structure

S	=	Sentence
M	=	Modal
Subj	=	Subject
AP	=	Adjective Phrase
Pred	=	Predicate
Prep	=	Prepositional Phrase
NP	=	Noun Phrase
Advl P	=	Adverbial Phrase
Aux	=	Auxiliary Verb
Advl Cl	=	Adverbial Clause
VP	=	Verb Phrase
Advl	=	Adverbial Phrase
Det	=	determiner

Comparative Grammar between Thai and English Language

Thai grammar is different from English in many aspects as there is no tense system so many Thai learners are not familiar with some concepts of usage in English. The following ideas are suggested for teachers who instruct English for students in Thai classroom as foreign language. Points to recognize

1. Concept about Tense and Time

In Thai language, the concept of tense and time is not like the European language. The words that are used for showing action or verb are not changed their pattern according to the time. When talking about present, past or future, the surface structure is still the same. Some additional words may be used to tell some action for explaining past, continuous or future but there is not any definite rules. So many teachers should teach their students about the sense of time and tense before explaining the pattern and form of tense. If a teacher gives an exercise to students and assign them to practice, they will get confused. They may memorize the rule and pattern but they cannot apply in their daily life. According to research of Watcharapunyawong & Usaha (2012) it is found that the errors caused by L1 interference in narrative writing firstly comes from verb tense. The total findings are shown in the following table (Table 1)

Table 1 Errors Caused by L1 Interference Found in Narrative Writing

Error Types	Frequency	Mean	Percent (%)
Verb tense	382	9.95	26.98
Word choice	178	4.45	12.57
Sentence structure	150	3.75	10.59
Article	140	3.50	9.89
Preposition	114	2.85	8.05
Modal / Auxiliary	88	2.20	6.21
Singular / Plural form	85	2.12	6.00
Fragment	60	1.50	4.24
Verb form	50	1.25	3.53
Pronoun	49	1.22	3.46
Run – on sentence	44	1.10	3.11
Infinitive / gerund	27	0.67	1.91
Transition	25	0.62	1.77
Subject – verb agreement	13	0.33	0.92
Parallel Structure	6	0.15	0.42
Comparison Structure	5	0.13	0.35
Total	1,416	35.40	100

An error with highly occurred in Thai students writing is about verb tense. The cause of the mistake

is explained that in there is no time concept in Thai language. Many students cannot produce the

correct sentence ideas according to the time in which they occurred in the English sentence. This is the main difference between Thai and English. In English to indicate time is very clear because there are the definite pattern and usage. Twelve tenses are the time concept that every native must learn although there are only 4-5 tenses are used in daily life. However in Thai language system, there are no verbs or marker words to indicate time systematically. So the high verb tense error is on the top of the chart.

2. Words before Noun

Another difference of English and Thai language is about grammatical noun usage. According to the table that presented by Watcharapunyawong & Usaha (2012) the error of article usage appeared highly as the forth. It is implied that many Thai students do not understand about noun and words before noun in English. Teachers should teach them about the concept of noun in English that there are two types of noun, countable and uncountable. Students must recognize this rule first because it relates to the other grammar in the high level. Many quantifiers such as much, many, little, few, a, an, the etc. must be used according to the rule of countable and uncountable noun. In Thai language, noun is not classified to be countable and uncountable and there is not plural form by adding morpheme “s” or “es” or changed form to be plural form like in English. As a result, Thai students are not familiar with plural form of English. So many of them cannot use words before noun or quantifiers in English correctly. In the Thai classroom, this structure should be taught at the beginning of lesson as it will be the first stage to use the correct language. The following is an example of ungrammatical sentence that Thai students may produce when they have to speak or write in English.

Thai language: ฉันต้องการซื้อรถยนต์หนึ่งคัน

Thai students may translate this sentence to be as follows:

I want to buy car.

In fact, the correct sentence must be

“I want to buy a car.”

Most of them forgot to add article “a” before the countable noun “car” because in Thai language, there is no words before noun then they transfer this concept to English. It is an example of error from first language interference.

3. The Position of Adjective and Adjective Order

Adjective is a word that modifies noun. Many languages put the position of adjective before noun. English language puts it before noun and has a definite rule to order it when there are more than one adjective word before noun. Contrast to Thai language, it is put after noun and there is no definite rule about adjective order. For example, “a big house” is said in English. “a big” is an adjective which is put before noun but in Thai “a house big” is said in the difference way. In Thai language, it is said “บ้านหลังใหญ่” “บ้าน / baan/ = house หลัง / laang/ = a quantifier for a house in Thai language which is not found in English ใหญ่ / yai/ = big. So many of Thai learners, they think in Thai first and then write or speak in English. As a result, they produce some mistakes. Many learners say “A house big” which is not acceptable in English. Some foreigners may understand what they means but it is not the correct grammar. This is another point that English teacher should explain their Thai students.

4. The Sense of Active Voice and Passive Voice

In English, when subject of sentence is emphasized, the agent of action must be changed to be an object. Then the form of verb must be changed by using verb to be and past participle or “be + v.3” It is widely written or spoken in English. If we live in any society that English is commonly used, we will be usual their practice and can sense that the use of passive voice has no negative but they want emphasize the action of subject. Unlike in Thai language, it also has the passive voice structure

but the sense of practice is different from English language. Thai people prefer to use this style of language to communicate in the sense of negative feeling. It can be found in the headline of newspaper or spoken language in daily life. For example, Thai people use passive voice when they want to say about punishment, killing or painful experience. For example in Thai language, they like to say :-

The students were punished.

The thief was sentenced to prison. or

The money was stolen.

But they do not use the passive voice structure in positive way. For example, they do not speak that "That man is invited to sing a song on the stage." If someone says that man is invited to sing a song, it may be misinterpreted that he is punished or he is forced to sing a song. So when teachers conduct the passive voice in the class, they should explain the different sense of usage about this point.

5. Modal Verb

There are 24 modal verbs in English. It is used for producing negative and interrogative sentence and diversify tense form. Moreover it is also used in the request, obligation, advice, politeness, prediction and possibility expression. Many Thai students do not understand the use of modal because in Thai language has no modal verb system and modal verb cannot be translated to Thai correctly. Thai teachers should teach the sense of modal verb in each situation. In this article, the writer will give the example of modal "can" and "will". Firstly, a modal verb "can" which has the meaning more than one. It can be translated to the sense of "ability", "polite request", and "possibility". But many of Thai students remember the meaning of modal "can" only the sense of "ability". Another example of modal verb that is widely used but it is limited meaning for Thai students is the modal "will". The modal can cover the sense of "futurity", possibility, and polite request

but Thai students focus it on only the meaning of futurity. So modal verb topic is one of the main problem for teaching English as foreign language for Thai students that English teachers should be concerned when teach this topic in grammar lesson.

Summary and Suggestion

Five things that has been suggested are found to be the problem for Thai students for a long time and it seems to continue. In real situation, Thai students study English more than ten years because they begin to study the language since kindergarten to higher education level. They study every skill of English with Thai and foreigners but only few of them get success in learning. Some common can be explained as following:-

1. The Differences between Thai and English Structure

Thai language has no tense system and the structure of sentence is different from English in many ways. Many words are put in different order and the changes of verbs when they are used to express the change of time both in present and past actions or event or the noun is changed when they are plural. Thai students have trouble understanding these forms.

2. Interference from Thai Language

The interference from Thai language to English learning is considered to be the main sources of errors for Thai students. They often think in Thai before producing English sentence so when they speak or write, many errors occur. Thai students use Thai as mother tongue. They speak English in Thai language style.

3. The Method of EFL Teaching

EFL teachers at the beginner levels do not put emphasis enough for students on some grammar rules that send an effect when they study at the higher level such as subject and verb agreement, verb form and adjective word order etc. Thus this

learning gradually makes Thai students forget the rule. When learners repeatedly make errors without being corrected those errors become permanent and were difficult to correct.

4. Lack of Practice

Any language learners can acquire language through practice. They have to read, write, speak and listen English everyday if they want to improve their language ability. Many activities can be practice via media in their daily life. They can read English newspaper, listen to radio news or English song, write an e-mail with foreigner friends or speak with foreigner tourists. There are plenty ways of practice that learners can do it. However, Thai students do not get encourage to practice. Sometimes they feel shy to use English with foreigners. Although in Thailand, students learn English for more than 14 years, they still cannot use English efficiently.

5. A Word to Word Translation

According to the interfere of the first language, Thai students use English in Thai structure. For example They speak “ I never go to Japan.” In fact, they should say “ I have never been to Japan” This sentence is not standard English and cannot be hardly understood by the native speakers. Many Thai students are not aware that certain words in Thai couldn’t be used to express English words directly.

Conclusion

Thai students still have problems about English grammar learning. However, it is hard to say that the difficulty is from students themselves or teaching methodology because they are non-native English speakers and many areas in Thailand have a low opportunity for using English in their environment. Presenting the grammar rule or structure to class is important because it helps them see how the

particulars are formed in English. However, studying only grammar is not enough for using English efficiently. It should be taught to apply with other skill development. Students should be trained to speak, write, read and listen simultaneously. Grammar must be inserted in every skill of practice and the five things that has been suggested in this article should emphasized when giving them the lesson as it will help them understand more English.

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