

According to the fire, my house burned down:
An Investigation into Thai Student Use of the
English Phrase “according to”.

D. Scott Humphries

Abstract

Observation has shown that some Thai university students in English intermediate writing courses have used constructions of the phrase “according to” that, while similar to each other, differed from the accepted normal construction in English. In an attempt to discover the origins of student use, document and empirical research methods were set up and applied. Initial document research was performed in which the phrase was checked in several English grammar guides readily available in Thailand to see if the explanation of the phrase could be interpreted by Thai learners in a way which would lead them to use the phrase to show causality, which some of them had done, e.g. “according to a fire at my head office, a lot of my computer data were destroyed”. These books were then further examined to determine if they gave any indication that another student construction, namely “according to psychotherapist Paula Hall explains”, is possible in English. During the empirical research phase, the students who had either used “according to” correctly or incorrectly in their writing were individually interviewed as to their acquisition of

the phrase. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed as verbal data for use as a basis as to the origin of student use. The students were also asked to fill out a short questionnaire which asked about their personal background, as well as their earlier background in English language acquisition and study. Using the domain of error analysis as a theoretical framework, this paper discusses and examines the results of the research. It attempts to draw conclusions, first, about whether the student usage is incorrect and, second, if the phrase was used in error, whether the error was due to the way the construction was learned or whether it was the result of some other factor, such as first language interference.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and statement of the problem

As a lecturer of English at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand, I have daily contact with Thai student written compositions in English in the form of essays, business letters and reports. My students, many of whom are English majors in the Bachelor Degree program at the Faculty of Arts, always make a concentrated effort to use the highest level academic English which their skills allow and, to that end, use formal writing vocabulary and phrases that a native speaker writing at the same level would use. Yet, since I began teaching at Chula, I have noticed that many of my Thai students use certain phrases, such as “according to”, in a way that is different from the normal English usage. Whereas a native English speaker writing a college level composition might write “according to psychotherapist Paula Hall, spending more time together is important in having successful relationships” or “according to the report, a fire damaged the head office and a lot of computer data were destroyed”, Thai students have written¹:

¹ In reference to examples presented, the abbreviation “Ex.” for “example”, both in the examples themselves as well as in the text of the article proper, is used throughout when referring to said examples. In addition, ungrammatical sentences in student writing are indicated with an asterisk at the beginning of the sentence.

Ex. 1: *“according to a fire at my head office, a lot of my computer data were destroyed”

Ex. 2: *“according to psychotherapist Paula Hall explains in her article that spending more time together is a key to have successful relationships.”

That many students seem to consistently produce such similar variations of the phrase has led me to the conclusion that the phenomenon bears investigating. My research into Thai student use of this and several similar phrases, and their deviation from standard English, has revealed a possible explanation for these deviations which now forms the basis for this paper.

1.2 Research questions

The problems in incorrect usage of “according to” as described above leads directly to three questions which this paper seeks to examine and answer:

1. Why do Thai students use the phrase in the manner described?
2. When the phrase is used in error, what type of error results?
3. What are the possible sources of the errors?

2. Review of Literature

In this paper, I examine samples of Thai student writing in English using a theoretical framework of both *contrastive* and *error analysis*, which are well known approaches used in such research. Therefore, a review of the literature I have

used in making my analysis is necessary, especially with regard to explaining differences between the two approaches as well as operating definitions and terminology.

2.1 History and development of error analysis

Lightbown and Spada (2006) suggest that Error Analysis (EA) as an approach began in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a response to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) in which errors in second language acquisition “were often assumed to be result of transfer from learners’ first language” (pp. 78-79). CAH predicts bi-directional errors: i.e. that French learners of English and English learners of French, for example, would make the same types of first language (L1) transfer errors when learning the second language (L2) (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Research has shown, however, that this is not always the case and that CAH cannot always explain errors in L2 acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). The approach of EA “differed from contrastive analysis in that it did not set out to predict errors. Rather it sought to discover and describe different kinds of errors in an effort to understand how learners process second language data” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 80). This is confirmed by Ruth Cherrington: “EA differs from contrastive analysis (CA) by proposing that learner errors are not just mistakes due to interference or transfer from the first language but evidence of underlying, universal learner strategies” (2000, p. 198). Similarly, Hassane Kaeoluan wrote: “Since some learners’ errors cannot be explained by merely native language interference proposed by contrastive analysis, it gives way to error analysis to account for errors” (2009. p. 141). The topic

is also addressed by Carl James (1998). James states that “the mother tongue was not supposed to enter the picture. The claim was made that errors could be fully described in terms of the TL, without the need to refer to the L1 of the learners.” (1998, p. 5). However, James also includes a discussion of the limitations of EA used alone, and cites Selinker’s work on interlanguage in 1972 as well Corder’s work in 1971.

2.2 Interlanguage

This term was first used by Selinker to describe a separate linguistic system, neither L1 nor L2, “which results from a learner’s attempted production of a TL norm” (1972, p. 214). Ellis expands this definition to clarify that the system is “constructed at a single point in time” as a “starting point” which is “constantly adapting to new information” (1995, pp. 350-51). According to Lightbown & Spada, interlanguage “has some characteristics influenced by previously learned languages, some characteristics of the second language, and some characteristics ... that seem to be general and to occur in most interlanguage systems” (2006, p. 80). Two other terms used by James for interlanguage are “idiosyncratic dialect” and “transitional competence” (1998, p. 16). Nickel (1998) establishes the link between interlanguage and EA as well as foreign or second language learning in general. This link is also reflected in other literature (Cherrington, 2000; James, 1998; Kaeboluan, 2009; Lightbown & Spada, 2006), and is further evidence that EA, modified in a way which includes elements of CA, can be used as a valid approach.

2.3 Transfer, interference and cross-linguistic influence

According to James: “It has ... proved impossible to deny the effects of MT on TL, since they are ubiquitously and patently obvious” (1998, p. 5).² Yet he cautions using a weaker version of CA “that makes the more cautious claim of merely being able to explain (or diagnose) a subset of actually attested errors – those resulting from MT interference” (1998, p. 5). General terminology used to define this phenomenon includes: L1 *interference* (Cherrington, 2000), *cross-linguistic influence* (Olin, 2003 and James, 1998), and *transfer* or *language transfer* (James, 1998).

2.4 Classification of errors

Different classifications of errors appear in the literature. For this paper, the following categories are important and are briefly described.

2.4.1 Mistakes vs. errors

At the beginning of his book, James offers a most basic definition of an error in language as simply “an unsuccessful bit of language” (1998, p. 1). A mistake, on the other hand, is a lapse on the part of a learner when using L2 forms they have already learned. He defines a mistake as output which can be corrected, and an error as a fault in output which is “unintentionally deviant” (James, 1998, p. 78). This idea is corroborated by R. Ellis who refers to errors as “gaps in a learner’s knowledge” (2001). An even more useful definition comes from Vacide Erdoğan, who considers that the idea is more flexible: it is a mistake if students *sometimes* use

² James uses the abbreviation MT for mother tongue.

the correct form but an error if they always use the incorrect form (Mersin, 2005, p. 263, my emphasis).

2.4.2 *Global and local errors*

Hassanee Kaeoluan (2009) refers to two types of error: *global* and *local*. A *global* error is an error which affects communication to the point where a message may be misunderstood or a sentence may become impossible to understand: “They also affect overall sentence organization and significantly hinder communication, such as word order, misplaced sentence connectors, e.g. ‘English language use many people’” (Kaeoluan, 2009, p. 147). A *local* error is an error which does “not significantly hinder communication of a sentence’s message or affect single elements in a sentence such as articles, verb inflections, auxiliaries, e.g. ‘he like to sing’” (Kaeoluan, 2009, p. 147).

2.4.3 *Addition errors and blends*

Kaeoluan refers to a type of local error which is then further categorized as an *addition error*, in which there is double marking of a semantic feature (2009, p. 145). James (1998) uses the term *blend* to describe this type of addition error. All of the terms described here in 2.4 will be used in this paper for analyzing and categorizing students’ errors.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research tool and procedure

In order to discover the underlying reasons why many Thai students use “according to” in a way that is similar among themselves but not completely correct in standard English, I began collecting samples of student writing in October, 2008, in order to build a small corpus to use as a source for my

research. I made copies of all incoming student writing, prior to correction, in all writing courses I taught. After one year, the corpus was searched to find all examples of both correct and incorrect usage of the phrase “according to” as well as other examples of how students used the causal phrases “because of”, “due to” and the causal connectives “because”, “as” and “from”.

First, the corpus of student writing was analyzed in order to isolate and examine errors in these phrases. Then, document research was conducted to investigate how the phrases are explained in general grammar texts available in Thailand. After the initial document research, empirical research was performed which involved a questionnaire regarding the personal and English language acquisition backgrounds of the students. In addition, individual interviews of fourteen former students from my writing courses who had used the phrases and connectives mentioned above either correctly or incorrectly in their writing were conducted. The interviews also focused on what the students understood the phrase to mean and how they originally learned to use it. From this data, I was able to consider several hypotheses and draw conclusions. Because the usage of the language by students was not correct in the instances which prompted the investigation, EA, as a theoretical framework, must also play a role in the discussion and analysis.

The nature of the research for this paper was qualitative; I do not seek to quantify the use of “according to” by Thai students in a way that would lead to statistical or trend related analysis. My interest is in observing the ways in which Thai students have used the phrase, and in drawing

conclusions from my observations, the questionnaire, and the interviews conducted with the former students.

3.2 Participants

The resulting samples of correct and incorrect usage of “according to” all derive from two courses I taught between October, 2008, and October, 2009, namely: *English Composition* and *English Letter and Report Writing*. Both courses consisted of second year Chulalongkorn University Faculty of Arts students, most of whom were English majors. There were 15 upper-intermediate female students in the composition course, which met from October, 2008, until February, 2009, and 18 upper-intermediate female students in the report and letter writing course which met from June until October, 2009.³ Additional details about the participants can also be found in section 6.1 below.

4. Corpus of Student Writing

At the beginning of this research, the writing samples derived from these two courses were examined. Course materials for both courses were internally generated at Chulalongkorn University, including course books that had been designed and compiled by Faculty of Arts staff.⁴

³ There is no official assessment of the students’ levels; however, all of these students had successfully completed two semesters of required freshman English which, at the time in question, used *Total English Upper-Intermediate* as the basic course book.

⁴ Careful examination of both course books shows that while there are some instances of “according to” or other phrases discussed in this paper in examples of letters or compositions, there is no overt teaching module for any of the phrases in question.

Samplings of 17 pieces consisting of 95 pages, and 101 pieces consisting of 204 pages respectively, were used from the composition and report and letter writing courses. Of the 15 students involved in the composition course, samples from seven students were collected in which 14 instances of “according to” were used⁵ (Table 1). Although all of those 14 instances were used to refer to sources of information, eight of them reflect some form of incorrect usage. No phrases other than “according to” were examined in this group. Of the 18 students involved in the report and letter writing course, samples from 11 students were collected in which ten instances of “according to” were used. Of these ten instances, four were used to refer to a source of information but all four of those instances were incorrect in how they referred to the source of information. The other six instances of “according to” used by this group reflected causality and were, therefore, completely incorrect. In addition to the phrase “according to”, three instances of both “due to” and “as”, as well as two instances of “because” and “from” showing causality, were also collected from the same sample of students to compare and contrast with usage of “according to” when it was used for causality.

⁵ Although 7 students used “according to” 14 times, this does not mean that each student used the phrase twice. 3 students used the phrase once, 3 students used the phrase twice, 1 student used the phrase 3 times and one student used the phrase 4 times.

Table 1. Incidence of use of phrase “according to” in student samples

Course	Total number of students	Total number of pieces collected	Total number of pages collected	Number of students using phrase	Number of times phrase actually appears	Number of times phrase appears incorrectly
English Composition	15	17	95	7	14	8
English Letter and Report Writing	18	101	204	11	10	10

5. Error Analysis

There seem to be two specific ways in which my students used the phrase “according to”. Those two types of usages, as shown in Ex. 1 and Ex. 2, as well as whether they followed the rules of English grammar precisely or not, seemed to be dependent upon which course is examined.

5.1 First type of usage: *cross-linguistic influence and blending*

In the composition course, in which the phrase was used 14 times and no other phrases such “because of” or “due to” were examined, students used the phrase correctly almost 50% of the time. Consider these examples of correct usage:

Ex. 3: “According to a study by Chulalongkorn University, the annual income from prostitution is about 500 million baht, or about 10-14% of the

country's GDP.”

Ex. 4: “According to an effective sexually transmitted diseases control program in Senegal, an early legalization of prostitution has been credited for this low level of STD rate.”

In addition to using the phrase correctly in terms of referring to the source of information, Ex. 3 and Ex. 4 both also contain correct grammar and syntax. In comparison, here is a usage of the phrase in which the reference is clear but the syntax is garbled:

Ex. 5: **“According to the research of Yahoo’s Website “Shine” which reaches 10 million women each month, hosted the survey throughout June 2008, found out that 87% of parents who participated in the survey are spending time playing video games with their children.”*

The sentence certainly has grammatical mistakes yet the intention of the student to show reference is clear. The overall meaning or intention of communication is retained. This can be considered closer to, if not completely, a local error as defined in section 2.4.

Further examination reveals that the most common type of error in the sampling of the composition class students were local errors which can further be categorized as addition errors or blends, in which double marking of a semantic feature occurred. Ex. 6 and Ex. 7 illustrate this characteristic:

Ex. 6: **“According to psychotherapist Paula Hall explains in her article that spending more time*

together is a key to have successful relationships.”

Ex. 7: **“According to the website of the American Gambling Association in Washington, DC, it is reported that revenues from gaming have been a large part of the state budget since 1931.”*

Ex. 6 can be “unblended” to obtain two correct grammatical sentences:

Ex. 6a: *“According to psychotherapist Paula Hall in her article, spending more time together is a key in having successful relationships.”*⁶

Ex. 6b: *“Paula Hall explains in her article that spending more time together is a key in having successful relationships.”*

Ex. 7 can likewise be unblended thus:

Ex. 7a: *“According to the website of the American Gambling Association in Washington, DC, revenues from gaming have been a large part of the state budget since 1931.”*

Ex. 7b: *“It is reported by the website of the American Gambling Association in Washington, DC, that revenues from gaming have been a large part of the state budget since 1931.”*

As mentioned, the errors in Ex. 6 and Ex. 7 are local – the intentional meaning the student wishes to communicate remains – and the characteristic is addition or blending, a

⁶ I have also corrected additional grammar in this sentence; namely, “to have” to “in having”.

duplication, so to say, of information.

5.2 Second type of usage: *causality* in place of *reference*

The second type of Thai student error present in the samples generated from the letter and report writing course is illustrated in Ex. 1 above and below in Ex. 8 and Ex. 9:

Ex. 8: * “According to the fact that your company is well-known fast service, I would like to ask you: If it is possible may I have the insurance money before August 30, 2009.”

Ex. 9: * “According to the insurance money for the house reparation you informed us, the comprehensive hurricane insurance policy does not include the interior damage because it is normally covered by flood or homeowner’s insurance.”

While Ex. 9 seeks, in a very ungrammatical way⁷, to make a reference to a source of information, Ex. 1 and Ex. 8 clearly show use of “according to” to indicate causality. In both of those sentences, a native speaker would use the phrase “because of” or the word “because” or its equivalent to have the sentence convey the meaning the writer intends:

Ex. 1a: “Because of a fire at the head office, a lot of my computer data were destroyed.”

Ex. 8a: “Because it is a fact that your company is well-known for its fast service, I would like to ask you, if possible, if I may have the insurance money

⁷ Since the other ungrammatical aspects of these sentences are not the focus of this examination, they will not be discussed.

before August 30, 2009.”

There are also instances in the same group of student writing samples where other phrases normally used for causality were used incorrectly or semi-correctly:

Ex. 10: * “From all this, I would like to ask for a further extension on my payment deadline to 24th July, if it is possible.”

Ex. 11: * “As the reason mentioned above, may I please have your kindly understanding to postpone on my payment deadline to 24th July of this year.”

Again, a native speaker would probably re-write Ex. 10 and Ex. 11 using a subordinate clause beginning with “because”. In the student writing samples where the word “because” itself or the phrase “due to” were actually used, they often showed causality correctly but were topicalized or moved to the beginning of the sentence in an awkward manner:

Ex. 12: “Because of the hurricane, the fence was torn down, the roof was partially ripped off.”

Ex. 13: “Due to the Hurricane Andrew my home was seriously damaged during the storm last week.”

While Ex. 12 is close to grammatically correct, and would probably be considered even more correct in spoken English, it might sound more normal to say “The fence was torn down and the roof partially ripped off because of the hurricane.” In Ex. 13, again, a more normal English construction would not begin the sentence with

the phrase “due to”. It would be placed instead in the middle of the sentence as a connective and the repetition of the noun (“the storm”, “Hurricane Andrew”) would be eliminated as seen here in Ex. 13a and Ex. 13b:

Ex. 13a: “My home was seriously damaged due to the storm last week.”

Ex. 13b: “My home was seriously damaged due to Hurricane Andrew last week.”

5.3 Possible sources of errors

In light of the fact that many students in the composition class made the identical type of error described in 2.4 above, it may be useful to examine their native language as a possible source of the error. In considering EA of second language acquisition, it is logical early in the analysis to consider cross-linguistic influence. There is indeed a construction in Thai that would result in the instances of blending noted in Ex 6 and Ex 7.

Ex. 6c: *taam thii nákcìtbambàt Paul Hall athíbaay*
nay bòtkhwaam khǒŋ khǎw wâa...

Ex. 7c: *taam thii website khǒŋ American Gam-*
bling Association in Washington, DC (dâay) raaynaa
*wâa... ...*⁸

⁸ Grateful acknowledgement to Dr. Noraseth Kaewwipat, Lecturer of German at Ramkhamhaeng University, Bangkok, for all Thai-English translations and transliterations in this text.

Based on the fact that many of the errors made by the composition students were very similar in the characteristic use of addition and blending and the fact that there is a construction in Thai that is similar when directly translated, I would conclude that errors of this type were caused by cross-linguistic influence or (L1) linguistic interference.

In moving on to the second type of error students made with regard to the phrase “according to”, however, the use of error analysis, specifically the idea of linguistic interference, may not be enough to explain why some students substituted “according to” in place of “because of” or other expressions of causality.

In the samples of collected sentences from the report and letter writing course, 11 of 18 total students used some form of the phrases currently under discussion. The phrase “according to” was used ten times, all other causal phrases (“because of”, “due to”, etc.) were used nine times. “According to” was used twice to show causality, six times to refer to a source of information incorrectly and twice correctly.

Ex. 14 and Ex. 15 serve as representative examples of typical incorrect construction:

Ex. 14: *“According to your booking date on September 19th to 23rd 2005, we are promptly to welcome you.”

Ex. 15: *“According to this policy, we are reasonably unable to grant your settlement check before the end of August.”

What are possible sources for these errors? The first possible source is the general materials that can be assumed the students have access to. Accordingly, some of these materials were considered and examined.

Although there was no access to the specific learning materials used by my students, it can be assumed that all students in Thailand have access to basic grammar guides of the English language, such as Swan's Practical English Usage or the Cambridge Grammar of English, or access to a monolingual English language dictionary. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English defines "according to" to mean, first, "as stated or reported by somebody or something" and, second, "agreeing with or depending on something". Respective examples given are: "According to Mick, it's a great movie" and "The work was done according to her instructions" (Hornby, 2005: 9). Other grammar guides support this definition by saying we use this phrase in English when we refer to "external evidence to support a statement or opinion" (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 25 and Swan, 2000, p. 4). Swan further states that "according to X means 'If what X says is true'" and points out that we do not use the phrase when giving our own opinion but only referring to an outside source (Swan, 2000, p. 4). These reference guides are quite simple, clear and easy to read and understand. They are designed for learners of the English language, and the entries in each of them for "according to" are quite short and to the point: "According to" is used to refer to a source of information. There is nothing in the definition of "according to" in these sources which indicates that it can be used to show causality. Nor is there anything in other entries on words or phrases which

do indicate causality that “according to” is in any way included among them, e.g. “because,” which is defined as “a subordinating conjunction which introduces clauses of cause and reason” (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 57).

The grammar guides mentioned give no indication that “according to” can be used to show causality. Yet, I have consistently encountered usage in which Thai students use it to show causality each semester that I have taught composition courses. Ex. 1 is a typical construction along these lines. Since the grammar books describe how to use the phrase clearly and correctly, I considered that the alternative student usage must come from some other source, possibly L1 interference, other books, or from earlier instruction.

Once again the domain of cross-linguistic influence should be checked to see if there are any Thai constructions which could be causing these two types of error. While that might be possible in the case of causality,⁹ it does not appear to be the case in relation to the six instances of “according to” used to show reference, regardless of whether these instances are grammatical or ungrammatical. Here, the students seem to understand what “according to” should be used for but do not appear to be able to construct it properly.

⁹ In Thai ตามที่ (taam thii) is used the same way “according to” is used in English and เนื่องจากว่า (nâaŋ càak waâa) is translated as “because of”. While these are clearly two different words, there is some disagreement among native Thai speakers I interviewed as to their inter-changeable nature, i.e. some Thais say they can be substituted for each other the way an English speaker might substitute “jealous” for “envious” or vice versa. Other Thais disagree and say the two would never be substituted for each other.

Both Ex. 14 and Ex. 15 above are grammatically incorrect sentences. However, the overall meaning of each sentence can be predicted and, more importantly, the idea of reference to the source of information is present in the use of “according to”. It is possible in these two examples to perhaps form a link between the second definition of “according to” given above, which refers to “agreeing with or depending on something”. However, the lack of addition or blending as evidenced earlier in Ex. 6 and Ex. 7, and the fact that Ex. 14 and Ex. 15 are dissimilar in their overall grammar, can be argued to rule out cross-linguistic influence as the only source of the error. Moreover, CA in general has its limitations and is often rejected by researchers as the *only* explanation for learner problems with a target language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). It is clear then that CA involving L1 transfer (cross-linguistic influence), while useful, may not be enough to explain the incorrect usage of this type of error.

In considering EA further, it can be said that both Ex. 14 and Ex. 15 appear to move in the direction of global error, as defined above, although enough of the communicative intention is evident to be able to decipher meaning so that the term global error may not fully suffice. On the other hand, they remain ambiguous enough as to not allow the label local error to be used either. In order to determine the type of error, it is necessary to know how the students themselves understood the phrase “according to” and how they intended to use the phrase. This could only be accomplished by asking them directly, and the next part of this paper will discuss the empirical research involved in interviewing these students.

6. Empirical Research

Empirical investigation in the form of questionnaire and interview was conducted in order to attempt to answer the remaining questions about student usage and to uncover the source of student acquisition of “according to”.

In considering which questions to ask in both the questionnaire and interview, I considered three important questions which the domains of error analysis and cross-linguistic influence did not seem to address either directly or indirectly. First, did the students themselves recognize their use of “according to” as an error? In other words, was their use of the phrase an actual error as defined earlier in this paper, or were they simply making a mistake which they could correct given the chance? Posed in another way as a slightly different question, did the students know the rules which apply to the phrase “according to” in English, i.e. did they understand what the phrase is used for and how to use it correctly? Third, how did the students acquire their use of the phrase? Had they had earlier instruction either at elementary or high school level in the use of “according to” in English? The questionnaire and interview contained questions, therefore, with a focus on how the students used the phrase as well as how they had learned it.

6.1 Description of the participants

Out of the 33 students involved in both courses, only the 7 in the composition course and the 11 in the business report and letter writing class who actually used the phrase in their writing were invited to participate.

Of those 18 invited, 6 of the 7 in the composition course and 9 of the 11 in the business report and letter writing course actually participated. All participants were asked to complete the questionnaire regarding their personal and English learning backgrounds, and were then interviewed and asked about their usage and acquisition of “according to”.¹⁰

The average age of the participants was 20.6 years¹¹. All are, as of the writing of this article, third-year, second-semester female students in the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. At the time of the writing sampled, the group which attended the composition course was in the second semester of their second year at Chulalongkorn University and the report and letter writing cohort were in the first semester of their third year. All but four of the students are English majors. The four who are not English majors are all, coincidentally, German majors who attended the report and letter writing course. All participants had learned English in Thailand, in both elementary and high school, for an average of 15 years¹². Five of the participants had additionally studied English abroad for periods ranging from one to three months as part-time summer exchange students¹³. Their contact with native speakers in Thailand had been or

¹⁰ The questionnaire and interview script are included at the end of this article as Appendixes 1 and 2, respectively.

¹¹ Nine of the girls were 21 and five were 20 years of age.

¹² This figure is based on the data of 13 of the 14 participants as one participant did not answer this question on the questionnaire.

¹³ These summer exchange programs mostly occurred during the years 2000 through 2008 and took place in England, the United States, Canada or New Zealand.

is limited to teachers and other students or, in two cases, native speaking friends¹⁴.

6.2 Interview data

During the interview, the participants were shown the samples of their writing and asked if they noticed any errors. They were told that the interviewer was not insinuating that there were errors present, nor was the interviewer insinuating that errors were not present. They were asked to examine their writing on their own without any other prompting. In the composition class cohort, four of the six students initially said they thought their sentences were correct overall without indicating any problem areas. The other two students in this cohort thought there might be problems with basic grammar constructions but did not indicate any problems with “according to”. In the cohort from the report and letter writing course, most of the students thought they had grammatical errors and tended to go in that direction as shown in the following example:

Interview excerpt no. 1:

Interviewer: “I would just like you to tell me if you see anything that’s incorrect.”

Student A: “It should be a comma here.”¹⁵

¹⁴ The ones who studied abroad briefly as exchange students had more contact with native speakers during the time they were in a native speaking country.

¹⁵ While all ungrammatical sentences from student writing used in this paper are marked with an asterisk, the asterisk was not used to mark ungrammaticality when transcribing the interview data. The words are presented here as spoken by the students without any reference to their accuracy in spoken English

As the participants continued to examine the samples of their own writing, no one initially seemed to recognize any problems with the use of the phrase “according to”. Many sought to correct other obviously incorrect grammar, or were uncertain what was expected of them. When pointed toward the phrase “according to”; however, every one of the ten participants who had used that phrase knew that it in some way referred to other sources, as can be evidenced in the following representative quotes from several interviews:

Interview excerpt no. 2: “‘According to’ is supposed to be like the reference to the survey or something like you know ...”

Interview excerpt no. 3: “... because of the source of the information.”

Interview excerpt no. 4: “‘According to’ is used when I want to refer to something.”

Interview excerpt no. 5: “I want to refer to the source of the information that I get.”

Interview excerpt no. 6: “... referring to the policy, like the policy of this company.”

When asked where they originally learned how to use the phrase, six of the ten participants indicated they learned it in junior high or high school, though some said this with a degree of uncertainty, e.g. “Maybe from high school”. Two of the ten indicated they had learned it since attending Chulalongkorn University and two of the ten students clearly recalled not having learned the phrase

formally but seeing it in English language newspapers. Although questions about the names of various schools they attended or teachers' names as well as the name of books or materials appear on the interview script, these types of questions were asked less formally and less consistently. Many students hesitated in providing names even when asked. While one or two students remembered specific names of books, e.g. *Goal* or *Fundamentals of English Grammar*, most others did not. Some participants mentioned that their teachers used self generated materials. Some participants indicated that they had had native-speaker teachers while others said that they had had Thai teachers¹⁶. Several students also indicated that “according to” and other phrases such as “due to” or single-word connectives showing causality such as “because” were mentioned in class but not focused on or drilled in depth.

6.3 Interpretation of the results

At first glance, one might assume from the data that the participants have made mistakes rather than errors while using “according to” since they all affirmed that they know the phrase refers to an outside source of information and that they had learned the phrase at some point earlier in their L2 acquisition. Yet the term “mistake”, as defined above to mean something that the student could easily self correct, would be misleading and confusing. It is clear that the students did not self correct the incorrect usage before turning in

¹⁶ Exact breakdowns of figures here are not possible, as these parts of the interviews were informal.

their written work. It is also obvious from the uncertainty the students expressed during the interviews that while they may have been exposed to the use of “according to” as well as phrases showing causality, e.g. “because of”, their learning of these phrases and other single-word causal connectives had not been systematic. Based again on the interview data, it can be assumed that they had not drilled or practiced these phrases enough to make them a competent part of their L2 repertoire. The incorrect usage of English in these samples should be considered an error. It can also be assumed that the errors made by the students who attended the composition class were a result of cross-linguistic influence and that cross-linguistic influence may also be a part of, but not the complete reason for, the errors present in the letter and report writing cohort.

With the exception of the two students who claimed to have learned the phrase in their first year at Chulalongkorn University, the participants attended various junior high and high schools throughout Thailand in which they claimed to have learned how to use the phrase “according to”. No two students attended the same high school. External factors, such as unsuitable or non-standardized materials, may play a role here, as Cherrington (2000) mentioned in relation to mistakes which have nothing to do with language learning strategies. While it must be emphatically stated that I make no claim that teaching methods and materials actually play a specific role in the cause of the errors analyzed in this paper, more research should be done into the types of materials and teaching methods used in Thai junior high and high schools in order to ascertain more precisely how students learn this phrase in their earlier English education

and what effect it has on their later use of the phrase. Could the types of incorrect usage seen in the written samples discussed here be the result of students learning that “according to” refers to a source of information but not spending sufficient time practicing the phrase in their own writing as I suggest above, for example? In other words, is the phrase taught correctly but not practiced enough so that students have problems in constructing it correctly in their later writing? It may be quite useful to consider the materials and methods used as another possible source of student error in regard to the phrase and to conduct research to find out if that hypothesis adds to the findings. Access to this material would confirm how the phrase is taught if learning modules containing the phrase can be found in such materials.¹⁷ Another issue the interview questions did not address which needs to be considered in more depth is the link between “according to” used by some students to show causality and the connection with “because” and other words which actually do show causality. This may have to do with methods and materials or incomplete vocabulary acquisition. Support for this idea comes from a more detail excerpt of the interview with Student A referred to in Interview excerpt no. 1. She was also the author of Ex. 1. At one point in the interview that phrase was read aloud to her after she had already examined it silently on her own:

¹⁷ Several students claimed to still have materials relating to their learning of the phrase and, when asked, promised to supply these materials to me. Unfortunately, none of the participants followed through on their promise to provide materials and I did not pursue the matter beyond several friendly reminders

Interview excerpt no. 7:

Interviewer: “According to a fire at my head office, a lot of my computer data were destroyed”.

Student A: “Data there’s always singular.”

I: “Anything else on that one?”

A: “According to?”

I: “What about it?”

A: “Because ‘according to’ we have something like information that we have to look up.”

I: “Okay, can you explain that a bit more?”

A: “Like according to there must be some information that we can look up.

I: “How do you mean ‘look up?’”

A: “Like we have been look it up in the book or in like dictionary.”

I: “In order to say what?”

A: “In order to give the reason.”

Perhaps Student A was confusing the word “reason” with the word “source”. She clearly indicates that somehow reference is involved with the phrase “according to” but seems to have mixed up the idea of reason, or causality, with the idea of source. This confusion would lead back to an examination of the role of cross-linguistic influence, since the Thai word “hé:t” can be translated into English as both “reason”

and “source.” In this case, however, the analysis regarding cross-linguistic influence would have to be performed at the level of material and method rather than at the individual student level. It clearly becomes important to consider the materials and methods of instruction involved in earlier L2 acquisition when considering the source of these types of error in Thai student writing.

7. Summary and Further Research Possibilities

After observing Thai students use of the phrase “according to” in English, I noticed some interesting ways in which students used the phrase that, while similar to each other, were different from the standard use in English. This prompted document and empirical research, the results of which are presented in this article. EA was used as a theoretical framework in order to discuss the correctness or incorrectness of the student usage of the phrase. The research indicates that there are two particular types of similar usage of the phrase in Thai, one of which (e.g. “according to psychotherapist Paula Hall explains”) can be explained as blending caused by L1 interference or cross-linguistic influence. A second type of usage (e.g. “according to a fire at my head office, a lot of my computer data were destroyed”) shows the phrase being used to show causality. EA and cross-linguistic influence were determined to be useful but not complete in an analysis of this type, and empirical research in the form of questionnaire and interview was conducted. This research, while inconclusive, leads to several assumptions, one of which is that while the students seemed to be aware that

“according to” refers to a source of information, they were still not often able to construct or use the phrase properly in writing.

Further research should be conducted to see if external factors actually do have a bearing on the source of incorrect usage. This research would first involve finding the actual material mentioned by students interviewed for this paper in order to check if teaching modules for “according to” do exist in those books and, if so, to see how the phrase is presented. Moreover, additional textbooks from several other high schools could be obtained and examined in order to find out the same. In addition, a questionnaire could be prepared for teachers in Thai high schools to inquire about their teaching methods regarding the phrase “according to” and other phrases such as “because of” and “due to”.

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Appendix I: Questionnaire

Name:
Sex:
Age:
How long have you been learning English?
Since when?
What is your current year and semester at Chulalongkorn University?
Year: _____ Semester: _____
What year and semester were you in during the time of the writing?
Year: _____ Semester: _____ (209 = 2 nd Semester 2008, Nov 2008 – Feb 2009) _____ (301 = 1 st Semester 2009, June – Oct 2009) _____
Is English your Major in the Faculty of Arts at Chulalongkorn University?
If no, what is your major?
Have you only learned English in Thailand (EFL)?
If no, where and when have you learned English in an English speaking country (ESL)?
In a non-English-speaking country (EFL/ESL)?
If in a non-English-speaking country, under what conditions (i.e. at work, school, etc.)?
Contact with native speakers?

Appendix II: Interview script

1. Do you notice any errors in this phrase/these phrases you wrote? I'm not saying there are or are not any errors, I'm simply asking if you notice any.
2. Why did you write the phrase as it appears? What do you mean here by using this phrase?
3. Do you remember how you originally learned to write or were taught the phrase, i.e. what school, teacher, book, material, how long ago, when and where, etc? Or have you never been taught the phrase?
4. Where did you attend primary / secondary school (name of school)?
5. Do you remember the names of books or materials used in learning this phrase? Do you still have copies? Or copies of any notes you may have on the phrase?
6. Do you remember the name(s) of your English teacher (s)?