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Errors in translation made by English major students: A study on types and causes

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Many Thai English major students have problems when they translate Thai texts into English, as numerous errors can be found. Therefore, a study of translation errors is needed to find solutions to these problems. The objectives of this research were: 1) to examine types of translation errors in translation from Thai into English, 2) to determine the types of translation errors that are most common, and 3) to find possible explanations for the causes of errors. The results of this study will be used to improve translation teaching and the course "Translation from Thai into English". The participants were 26 third-year, English major students at Kasetsart University. The data were collected from the students' exercises and examinations. Interviews and stimulated recall were also used to determine translation problems and causes of errors. The data were analyzed by considering the frequency and percentage, and by content analysis. The results shows that the most frequent translation errors were syntactic errors (65%), followed by semantic errors (26.5%) and miscellaneous errors (8.5%), respectively. The causes of errors found in this study included translation procedures, carelessness, low self-confidence, and anxiety. It is recommended that more class time be spent to address the problematic points. In addition, more authentic translation and group work should be implemented to increase self-confidence and decrease anxiety.

Introduction

In Thailand, although the grammar-translation method has long been used to teach foreign languages and many students use translation as a mean to understand English, many students seem to have problems with translating according to a number of studies (Chanasakulniyom, 2010; Pojprasat, 2007; Yodnil, 2006). Translating is a complicated skill. A translator has to interpret a source text, and then put it in another language, keeping the meaning, style, and purpose of the source text, and this requires proficiency in both foreign languages and the mother tongue, as well as

specialized and cultural knowledge. However, at the primary level, simple sentences without the inclusion of specialized and cultural content are often used because accurately translating source texts semantically and grammatically is the first step of many translation courses in Thailand. This indicates that Thai students are not familiar with translation despite their familiarity with the teaching method and the learning process.

From the studies mentioned above, the frequency of translation errors in translating from Thai into English is higher than the frequency in translating from English into Thai. One assumption is that translation is a process that requires a translator to be proficient in both the source language and the target language. Many students, however, are less proficient in their second language, so they cannot translate Thai texts into English correctly. The differences in

grammatical structure are also another possible reason (Wimonchalau, 2000). Many students are not aware of the differences, so their English grammatical structures in target texts are made to match Thai structures, resulting in many errors. To understand this problem more clearly, translation errors need to be analyzed to identify which problems are the most common and the causes behind them.

The course "Translation from Thai into English" is a new course that was offered to third-year English major students at Kasetsart University. Therefore, a study on translation errors should be beneficial as it not only pinpoints problems students have in translating from Thai into English, but also indicates the weaknesses students have in English. As a result, the right methods can be used to address those problems, and the course can be improved. To achieve this, the current study aimed to examine the types of translation errors in translation from Thai into English, to determine the most common types of translation errors, and to find possible explanations for the causes of errors.

Literature Review

There are no fixed models to categorize translation errors. Translation errors stem from various causes, such as a lack of comprehension, or misuse of words, so there are many classifications of errors which are found in research (Hatim, 2001). Pym (1992) stated that there are two types of translation errors: binary and non-binary errors. Binary errors refer to any errors that count as incorrect translation. In contrast, non-binary errors refer to a translation that is not totally wrong, but may not be appropriate and can be improved. In non-binary errors, from the many correct choices, a less appropriate one is chosen. In the classroom, this categorization of errors can reveal either the language competence or the translation competence of students. Binary errors imply that language competence needs to be improved. On the other hand, non-binary errors reflect translation competence, which was defined by Pym as the ability to create a group of target texts, and then select the best one that suits purposes and readers.

Suksaeresup and Thep-Ackrapong (2009) studied translation from English to Thai and classified translation errors into two types based on causes of errors: errors from reading and errors from interpreting. In the former type, a translator misreads the source text. This can be a pure miscue such as *"hop"* and *"hope"*, or the interference of background knowledge such as *"Kramer fighting Kramer"* and *"Khmer fighting Khmer"*. Errors from interpreting emerge when a translator misinterprets the source text. This can relate to grammar, denotative meaning of words, or connotative meaning of words. This classification was based on causes of errors.

Pojprasat (2007) analyzed translations from English to Thai and Thai to English, and then categorized the errors into three types: semantic errors, syntactic errors, and cultural errors. Semantic errors deal with any mistranslation of words, which can be a single word, collocations, or idioms. Syntactic errors refer to mistranslation of sentence

structures or grammatical structures. Cultural errors are any errors that are caused by cultural differences.

Since the course is at the introductory level, the language competence of the students is the focus. Therefore, Pojprasat's model is most related to this study as it deals only with binary errors. Errors in translation from Thai to English were analyzed and categorized in his research. The participants were similar. Furthermore, his categorization can specify problems, whether they are the ability to choose the correct words (semantic errors) or the ability to comprehend the structures (syntactic errors). With this categorization, we can pinpoint the weaknesses of the students, and improve the course.

Methods

The participants in this study were 26 third-year English major students at Kasetsart University, Thailand. They had only taken one translation course, "Translation from English into Thai", before taking the course "Translation from Thai into English". The course contributed one session on a topic of differences between Thai and English. Students were given translation practice in each period. They were tested with a translation exercise every two to three periods. In each exercise, students had to translate five to six short excerpts (1.5−3 lines per excerpt) from various sources, such as newspapers, magazines, and websites. The teaching methods and activities were designed to parallel the previous course, "Translation from English into Thai". Additionally, it was designed for a course that has many (five) sections, so the instructions and evaluation in each section are parallel to each other, and subjectivity is minimized as much as possible. Seven out of the nine exercises and examinations were collected in order to analyze the translation errors. During the practice and examinations, electronic dictionaries were prohibited, but students were allowed to consult paper dictionaries. Translations for terminology, jargon, and cultural references were provided to the students since they could not do internet searches. The errors were categorized into two types according to Pojprasat's model: syntactic errors and semantic errors. Cultural errors were excluded because translations of cultural terms were provided as mentioned previously. The data were analyzed by frequency and percentage.

Aside from content analysis, the researcher also interviewed five students individually to obtain insightful information on the causes of errors. Students were selected based on their performance in the exercises, which was categorized into low, medium, and high performance. Each interview took around 15 min. The interviewees were asked about their preparation before translating the texts, the procedures they used to translate the exercises, their problems during translation, and their opinion of the course. Importantly, to gain accurate information on the causes of errors, stimulated recall was also used in this research. This method examines the participants' mental process when they were doing a specific task (Mackey & Gass, 2005 as cited in Fox-Turnbull, n.d.). The subjects were shown a video clip or other materials related to the time when they did the task to stimulate their recall. In this study, the interviewees were given back their translation

exercises, and then the researchers pointed out notable errors, and asked the interviewees about the reasons behind their choices of the translation.

Results

Each type of translation error found in the study is summarized in Table 1. Translation errors that did not fall into the syntactic or semantic categories were classified as miscellaneous errors.

Syntactic Errors

Syntactic errors had the highest frequency (Table 1), implying that the students usually made grammatical errors when doing translation. The syntactic errors could be divided into 20 sub-categories as provided in Table 2.

The three notable syntactic errors were countability, determiners, and tense. Countability refers to errors involving countable, uncountable, singular, and plural nouns. This concept does not exist in Thai. Thai nouns always take the same form regardless of the quantity and whether we can count the nouns is not of importance. In contrast, English nouns are divided into countable and uncountable nouns. In addition, countable nouns can take a singular or plural form, depending on the quantifier. Therefore, students often made mistakes if they ignore this aspect. Students are often found committing mistakes such as not putting an "s" after countable plural nouns, or using the plural form with uncountable nouns. Table 3 illustrates this group of errors.

In the first example, the sentence "ทำตามคำแนะนำเหล่านี้ดูสิ" (Try following this advice) was translated as "Try following these advices". Students saw the word "เหล่านี้" which is equivalent to "these", so they literally translated it, overlooking that "advice" is an uncountable noun. In the second example, "หลายวัฒนธรรม" is equivalent to "many cultures", but the students omitted the "-s". This kind of error, if it occurs in small numbers, is not serious because it generally does not affect the meaning. However, as it had the highest frequency, it cannot be overlooked since it shows that the students most often ignored this grammatical difference.

Errors involving determiners were another problem. This type of error includes articles and quantifiers. In fact, articles seem to be the more prominent problem, often causing problems for students. Despite the apparent simplicity with only three choices, "a", "an" and "the", the students found this to be one of the most difficult grammatical aspects of English. The students were often confused with definite and non-definite nouns; therefore, they frequently are uncertain whether to use "a/an" or "the". In the case of quantifiers, they usually used them correctly. However, when it comes to the word most and non-specific numbers, such as "hundreds" and "thousands", the students often used them incorrectly. For example, the students often wrote "most of people" when "of" is not required for non-definite nouns. Table 4 shows some determiner errors found in this study.

The first and the second examples show how the students were confused with articles. In the first example, the word "ชายแท้" (a heterosexual) is a non-definite noun. It does not refer to any straight man in particular, so "a" should have been used instead of "the". In the second example, the words "light pole" and "tree" are non-definite nouns, but the students used "the" with these two nouns. The third and fourth examples are about quantifiers where the word "most" and a non-specific number were incorrectly used.

Tense was another grammatical point students had problems with. The concept of time is important in English. Verb forms change according to the time when the actions occur. In contrast, time has no effect on Thai grammar as Thai verbs always take the same form. Thus, students can easily make mistakes if they ignore or are not aware of this

Table 1
Frequency of each type of error

Type of error	Frequency	Percentage
1. Syntactic	858	65.0
2. Semantic	349	26.5
3. Miscellaneous	113	8.5
Total	1,320	100.0

Table 2
Percentage of each subcategory of syntactic errors

Type of error	Percentage	Type of error	Percentage
1. Countability	20.16	11. Relative clauses	3.84
2. Determiners	14.21	12. Agreement	2.21
3. Tense	10.78	13. Serial verbs	2.21
4. Prepositions	6.52	14. Word order	2.21
5. Transitions	5.85	15. Pronoun references	2.10
6. Punctuation	5.60	16. Fragments	1.86
7. Form	5.36	17. Double verbs	1.86
8. Part of speech	4.77	18. Noun clauses	1.16
9. Ellipsis	4.31	19. Double subjects	0.70
10. Voice	4.31	20. Parallelism	0.23

Table 3
Examples of countability errors

Source text	Student translation	Correct translation
1. ทำตามคำแนะนำเหล่านี้ดูสิ	Try following *these advices* …in many *culture*	Try following *this advice* …in many *cultures*
2. …ในหลายวัฒนธรรม		

Table 4
Example of determiner errors

Source text	Student translation	Correct translation
1. ถ้าคุณคือชายแท้…	If you are *the real man*…	If you are *a heterosexual*…
2. …ชนเสาไฟฟ้าและต้นไม้	…crashed into *the light pole and the tree.*	…crashed into *a light pole and a tree.*
3. ผู้บาดเจ็บนับพัน	*a thousand of* the injured	*thousands of* the injured
4. นักเรียนไทยส่วนใหญ่	*Most of* Thai students	*Most* Thai students

Table 5
Examples of tense errors

Source text	Student translation	Correct translation
1. ภาพช่วนระทึกนี้เกิดขึ้นในแอฟริกา	This shocking situation *happens* in Africa.	This shocking scene *occurred* in Africa.
2. แม้มุมไบจะมีสถานที่ท่องเที่ยว…	Even Mumbai *will have* tourist attractions…	Even though Mumbai *has* tourist attractions…
3. เธอจะทำอะไรหลังเรียนจบ	What will you do when you *graduated*?	What will you do when you *graduate*?

difference. Some examples of errors about tense can be found in Table 5.

The first example involves an event that occurred in the past, so past simple should have been used here, but students used present simple instead. The second example states a fact about Mumbai, so present simple is appropriate here. However, students used "*will*", which denotes the sense of future, because they focused on "*จะ*", the equivalent to "*will*". Present simple should have been used in the third example because the adverb clause of time indicates the future. These types of errors can affect meanings or cause confusion as in the first and second examples.

There were other syntactic errors, but they were not as remarkable as the first three types. Nevertheless, some examples will be provided. Prepositional errors involve incorrect uses of prepositions, such as when "*แยกกับ*" was translated as "*separate with*" instead of "*separate from*". Transitional errors occurred when words were not properly translated. For example, students translated "*แม้…แต่…*" as "*Even…, but…*", not "*Even though…, …*". Punctuation errors deal with incorrect uses of punctuation such as comma splices or punctuation misplacement. Additionally, form errors refer to incorrect uses of word forms in a certain structure, such as the use of "*cured*" after "*can*".

Semantic Errors

Semantic errors had the second highest frequency. Despite the use of dictionaries, many students chose incorrect words when translating. The errors were at both the word level and phrase level. Table 6 illustrates some examples of semantic errors.

In the first example, students directly translated "*กรงแคบๆ*" (small cages) as "*narrow cages*". The word "*narrow*" should be used with places where length is substantially longer than width, such as roads or alleys. With a cuboid space where length and width are almost equal, such as rooms or cages, the word "*small*" is more appropriate. However, the word "*แคบ*", normally equivalent to "*narrow*", can be used in both contexts in Thai. As a consequence, an error can occur when differences in usage are not considered. The second example shows an error in the phrase level. The action "*กระโจนเข้าขวิด*" gives the sense

of rushing towards something before butting it. Nevertheless, the word "*กระโจน*" can also mean "to leap" or "to jump" forward quickly. So the context determines the word to use in this case. This sentence refers to the actions of a buffalo toward lions; therefore, the buffalo should not "leap" when it is going to butt something, but rather it should "*charge and butt*", not "*jump and gore*". Next, students had to think of a way to translate "*จนลอยคว้าง*", which should be put in the same sentence. In the example, the students did not know how to use it. As a result, a word-by-word translation was applied. They equalized "*จน*" with "*จนกระทั่ง*" (until). Then they directly translated "*ลอยคว้าง*" as "*float in the air*". The word "*float*" is used with something that moves slowly on water or in the air, but with the lions rammed and butted by a buffalo, surely the lions would not move slowly in the air. Therefore, the students' translation gives a totally different meaning in the second example. This finding implies that students neither critically thought before translating the text nor consulted an English–English dictionary to confirm their choices of words from a Thai-English dictionary.

Miscellaneous Errors

The researcher also came across other errors that could not be categorized into syntactic errors or semantic errors. Therefore, these errors were categorized as miscellaneous, which consisted of misspelling, under-translation, and unnatural translation. Examples of these errors are provided in Table 7.

The first is an example of misspelling. It was often found that students dropped the final letter and mistranslated place names. The second example shows an

Table 7
Examples of miscellaneous errors

Source text	Students' translations	Correct translations
1. ผลไม้/แม้ว่า/กรุงโซล	fruite/althoug/Soul	fruit/although/Seoul
2. เครือข่ายสังคมออนไลน์	social network	*online* social networks
3. เขาจะได้รับการให้อภัย	He will *get the forgiveness*.	He will *be forgiven*.

Table 6
Examples of semantic errors

Source text	Student translation	Correct translation
1. พวกมันถูกขังอยู่ในกรงแคบๆ	They were put in *narrow cages*.	They were put in *small cages*.
2. ตัวหนึ่งก็กระโจนเข้าขวิดสิงโตจนลอยคว้าง	One of them *jump and gore* the lions *until they floated in the air*.	One of them *charged the lions and butted* them *into the air*.

under-translation error where students did not translate important words or phrases. The last example exemplifies unnatural translation. It refers to a translation that does not sound correct in English. In the example, students translated "...ได้รับการให้อภัย" (…be forgiven) as "…*get forgiveness*". It is grammatically correct, but it is not naturally used in English.

In the interviews, the researchers mainly asked the interviewees about their preparation before translation, their translation procedures, and their opinions on the translation errors. In general, the students would read all the sentences or paragraphs before translating them. However, when they translated, they would read the source texts, translate them in their mind, and write the target texts. Most of them rarely revised their translation. In addition, they did not consult dictionaries unless they really needed to. The students claimed that they had very limited time, so revision or consulting dictionaries would waste their time. In terms of their opinions towards the errors, they thought that their grammatical and lexical knowledge was limited, hence the errors. When doing the translation, they concentrated on completing the task rather than the quality of the translation. They stated that more time and shorter sentences would have been better. The researchers used stimulated recall, in which some of their translation errors were shown and the interviewees were asked for the reasons behind their translation in order to determine the causes of errors. This is addressed in the discussion below.

Discussion

The results showed that syntactic errors were most prominent. Countability, determiners, and tense were the three most common grammatical errors. Semantic errors make up only 26.5 percent of the total. This implies that the students have more grammatical problems than vocabulary problems. There are four possible causes of errors: translation procedures, carelessness, low self-esteem, and anxiety.

Students' translation procedures refer to processes the students used to translate the source text. Most of the students read the source text, translate it in their mind, and write down the target text. This procedure is referred to as the "read-and-translate approach" and it is often used in translation classrooms (Davies, 2004 as cited in Zainudin & Awal, 2012). This approach, without thorough revision, often resulted in a word-for-word or a literal translation. According to Newmark (1988), word-for-word translation refers to a translation close to the source text where words are translated in the order of words in the source text, ignoring the context. However, in literal translation, the translation is still close to the source text, but the grammatical constructions are adapted to the target text as close as possible. However, the meanings of words are still translated out of context. The students read and translated the source texts, word by word. Some students tried to adjust their translation after that, but they still clung to the source text. As a result, they made grammatical errors.

Carelessness was another cause of errors. This study identified two types of careless mistakes that students often commit: misreading and interference of background knowledge. Misreading often occurs when words are spelled similarly and students are too hasty and do not pay attention, such as "อินเดีย" (India) and "เอเชีย" (Asia). Interference of background knowledge refers to the students' knowledge that alters their interpretation or choices of words. For instance, many students translated the word "อสังหาริมทรัพย์" (real estate) as "*landed property*". When asked for the reason, the students said that they are familiar with this word for they often heard or saw it in daily life. This leads to the assumption that it is because the students are familiar with Land and Houses and Property Perfect, whose business involves real estate. As a consequence, the students opted to choose "*landed property*" ("*landed*" from Land and Houses, and "*property*" from Property Perfect) despite seeing the words "*real estate*" in dictionaries. These errors are in line with the results of the study by Pojprasat (2007) and Suksaeresup and Thep-Ackrapong (2009).

Low self-confidence was also a cause of translation errors. During the interview, the students admitted their low proficiency and limited vocabulary. They felt that the translation tasks were too difficult. They did not believe in their ability to perform the tasks well, and then did not put enough effort into the tasks. They focused on completing the tasks instead of the quality of translation.

The final cause of translation errors was anxiety. Because the students felt that the tasks were difficult, and they had limited time to complete them, their anxiety level increased. As a result, they wanted to complete the tasks as soon as possible so they could be released from this anxiety. The students used the read-and-translate procedure as it was the quickest and the most convenient procedure to complete the translation. They neither thoroughly consulted dictionaries nor revised their translation. Furthermore, since they were rushing to finish as they neared the end of the allocated time, they were vulnerable to misreading and the interference of background knowledge. Therefore, it can be said that anxiety may be a primary cause that leads to other causes.

Conclusion

The findings suggested that students' anxiety and low self-confidence are primary causes of errors in translating. These causes led to the read-and-translate procedure the students used and the carelessness they often showed. Therefore, translation teaching and the course should be adjusted to solve these problems. There are five points that can be applied.

1. More class time should be given to the topics that are the most challenging for students. Some grammatical points, such as nouns, articles, and tenses, are problematic for students, so two to three class periods instead of one should be spent on these topics.
2. More group discussion should take place in the classroom. Group work can lessen the stress and encourage students to contribute more to the work (Lee, 2012). Translation examples can be given to students, and the students can participate in group discussions to see how

the problematic grammatical points are authentically used in the examples.

3. Peer review should be encouraged in the class, especially with problematic topics. Wang and Han (2013) found that peer review helps students deal with translation problems they often encounter. By looking at others' translations, students can learn from others' mistakes. In addition, being an evaluator increases a student's confidence (Coint, 2004 as cited in Wang & Han, 2013).

4. Information searching and dictionary skills should be taught to students. One to two class periods can be used to show how to use Thai to English and English to English dictionaries together to select the best words for given contexts.

5. A pre-test can be used at the beginning of the course to determine students' proficiency, so appropriate tasks can be given to the students later in the course.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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