The Influence of Native Language in the Production of English Tenses by Thai and Spanish Learners
อิทธิพลของภาษาแม่ต่อการใช้กาลในภาษาอังกฤษของผู้เรียนภาษาไทยและผู้พูดภาษาสเปน

Kewalee Kongthai
A lecturer in School of Liberal Arts
Mae Fah Luang University

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาอิทธิพลของภาษาแม่ที่มีต่อการใช้ประโยคปัจจุบันกาลปกติ(present simple tense) และ ปัจจุบันกาลต่อเนื่อง (present progressive tense) ในภาษาอังกฤษ โดยมุ่งศึกษาลักษณะทางไวยากรณ์ระดับคำ อันได้แก่ การเติมหน่วยคำเติมท้ายคำกริยาเพื่อแสดงกาล การวิจัยครั้งนี้ผู้วิจัยได้เก็บข้อมูลจากผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษชาวไทยและชาวสเปนที่สามารถสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษอยู่ในระดับเบื้องต้น (elementary level) โดยให้กลุ่มตัวอย่าง ทั้งสองกลุ่มแปลประโยคจากภาษาแม่ของตนเองเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ภาษาแม่มีผลต่อการใช้ รูปประโยคแสดงกาลในภาษาอังกฤษของผู้เรียนทั้งสองกลุ่มอย่างชัดเจน นอกจากนี้ยังพบว่า ผู้เรียนชาวสเปนที่ภาษาแม่มีระบบการแสดงเวลาในระดับไวยากรณ์ซับซ้อนคล้ายกับภาษาอังกฤษสามารถผลิตประโยคแบบปัจจุบันกาลปกติ และ ปัจจุบันกาลต่อเนื่องที่ถูกต้องได้มากกว่าผู้เรียนชาวไทยที่ภาษาแม่ไม่มีระบบการแสดงกาลในระดับไวยากรณ์ดังกล่าว

คำสำคัญ : การถ่ายโอนภาษา การิเคราะห์และเปรียบเทียบภาษา การวิเคราะห์ข้อผิดพลาด

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the influence of the native language on the use of the English present simple and present progressive tenses by Thai and Spanish native speakers learning English as a second language at an elementary level. The study focused on exploring the core morphosyntactic features, with specific emphasis on the production of verb inflections. In order to accomplish this, a translation task was given to two groups of participants and their responses were observed. The participants performed the task by translating sentences from their native language into English. The outcomes suggested that there was a very clear influence of the native language on the participants' tense production. The Spanish learners, whose native language has a complex tense-marking system, showed more target-like production of the present simple tense and present progressive tenses than the Thai learners whose native language has no tense-marking system.

Keywords : Language Transfer, Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis

Introduction

An individual language has particular characteristics that make it different from other languages. Native speakers of a certain language hardly find their native language difficult to understand as they use it naturally in their daily life communication. People usually face some difficulties when they have to learn another language, which is not their own native language. Speakers of a certain language may find a particular language more difficult to learn than another. This variation is very much dependent upon the similarities and differences in the linguistic features of the speakers' native language and the target language. It is claimed that individuals seem to bring their previous linguistic characteristics from their native language to the production of the target language, so they are likely to

find it easier to learn a language that has similar linguistic features to their native language. There is a controversy among linguists on this claim. Many linguists attempt to find out if the claim is reliable or it is just a subjective answer. Linguists, therefore, have been trying to find the objective concept from the subjectiveness of the answer of whether L1 really affects or interferes with the acquisition of L2. In previous studies, it was found that learners transferred their previous grammatical knowledge of the L1 to the L2 (Odlin, 1989; Schwartz and Sprouse, 1996; Schwartz, 1998). Many L2 researchers agreed that L1 transfer influenced the L2 learning process (e.g., Dechert and Raupach, 1989; Gass and Selinker, 1992).

However, previous studies have also shown that not all findings confirmed the existence of the transfer. The controversial findings from theories and previous studies motivated the researcher to find out if L1learners actually transfer their L1 linguistic features' to the L2 production. The principle focus of the present study was to explore the acquisition of core morphosyntactic features of the present simple tense and present progressive tense in English. The primary construction was to observe the role of the mother tongue towards the acquisition of verb inflection with respect to tense-marking properties in the L2 based primarily on the transfer theories suggested by Schachter (1983) and Ringboom (2007).

It has been observed that the morphosyntactic structures of the present simple tense and present progressive tense in Spanish is quite similar to those English. Spanish at least has the verb inflection to indicate tenses and an agreement between subject and verb (Azoulay-Vicente and Vicente, 1998). On the other hand, Thai morphosyntactic structure of the present simple tense and present progressive tense are different from those of English. Thai completely lacks verb inflection to indicate tenses, and it lacks an agreement between subject and verb (Moore and Rodchue, 2005). Due to the similarities in tense marking features of Spanish and English and the differences in this respect of Thai and

English, the research attempted to observe the aspects of language transfer found in Spanish speakers learning English and Thai speakers learning English. Then, two groups of participants including L1 Thai learners of English and L1 Spanish learners of English were selected to perform a translation task in the present study. The participants' production was investigated by the translation test.

Related theories

According to the behavioural approach to language learning in the 1950s and 1960s, language learning is a matter of habit formation and second language learning is built through a new set of habits that are against previous ones. The presumption that difficulties in learning a second language are based on the differences between the learner's native language and the language they are trying to learn (Lado, 1957) leads to the emergence of the contrastive analysis (CA). Contrastive analysis is a systematic way of comparing 2 language systems such as the phonetic systems, morphological systems, or syntactic system in order to identify the similarities and differences and determine the errors caused by the differences. It is based on the idea that similarities facilitate learning. This can be called positive transfer, or facilitation; whereas differences cause difficulties, which can be called negative transfer or interference. These were described by Lado as "those elements which are similar to the learner's native language will be simple for the learner, and those elements that are different will be difficult for him" (1957).

In the 1960s, the concept of contrastive analysis and behaviorist theory of language learning were challenged. The errors that occurred in the target language had not always been accurately predicted by the contrastive analysis hypothesis. For example, the sentence "*He camed yesterday"(Gass and Selinker, 2008) produced by a beginner second language learner of English is hardly explained by the CA. Additionally, the CA had never predicted such an error, as it is so uncommon and

goes beyond the surrounding speech, and it cannot be from the imitation, as the behaviorist theory of language learning suggested.

One significant point that challenges the concept of CA is that the influence of native language sometimes affects the production of one language but not another language. To clarify this point, Dusková (1984) pointed out that native speakers of Czech learning English as a second language did not transfer the characteristic of bound morphemes from their native language when learning English, but they did so when learning Russian.

A further point is that the error production of one native language is not consistent with another when considered the other way around. To highlight this point, Zobl (1980) found that a French native speaker learning English did not produce the sentence with the object pronoun preceding the verb, which is consistent with the grammatical structure in French. Conversely, an English native speaker of English learning French produced a sentence that looked exactly like their native language but was impossible in French.

Although contrastive analysis does not completely make an accurate prediction of errors at some point, Fisiak (1981) claimed that contrastive analysis still useful because not all contrastive analysis hypotheses are wrong. The problem concerning validity of the CAH should not be interpreted to suggest that the mother tongue has no role in second language acquisition. Instead, it should be noted that there are other possible factors that affect the learning of a second language and those factors can be defined by another approach; namely, error analysis. To overcome the shortcoming of the contrastive analysis, it is therefore suggested that we should integrate contrastive analysis approach with error analysis in order to clearly identify the source of difficulties and fully explain certain errors actually made by second language learners.

Importantly, from all the information mentioned earlier, it can be restated that the similarities either in the linguistic form, and function of L1 and L2, should facilitate the acquisition of those elements in L2 (positive transfer) as individuals naturally seek the similarities before the differences (Schachter, 1983). On the other hand, if there is a different element in some relevant parameters of L1 and L2 features, it may create an interfering effect and may result in a systematic error (negative transfer). Besides the similarities and differences between L1 and L2, there may be a condition that the given feature of L2 does not have any similarities to the L1 feature, which is known as a zero relation. In this case, learners are unable to associate certain L2 elements to their previous linguistic knowledge and learners may lack an important concept to perceive the fundamentals of those certain structures in the L2 (Ringboom, 2007).

Research questions and hypotheses

The main aim of this study is to investigate the acquisition of verb inflectional morphology in the English tense-marking system by Thai native speakers and Spanish native speakers learning English as a second language at the elementary level. The research attempted to find out whether Thai and Spanish learners of English successfully acquire the core morphosyntactic features of the present simple and present progressive tenses, and how the differences or similarities in the tense marking features between Thai or Spanish and English affect the acquisition of English verb inflection of the two tenses.

From the claims of Schachter (1983) and Ringboom (2007) about the roles of transfer of L1 to the target language, it can be predicted that Spanish second language learners whose native language has rich verb inflections in the aspect of tense-marking system would benefit from the positive transfer of using verb inflection in English tenses. On the other hand, Thai second language learners with the lack of verb inflection in the aspect of tense-marking system in the native Thai

language would have more difficulties in producing the tenses in English (L2). Thus, the hypotheses can be generated as follows:

- Hypothesis 1: L1 Spanish learners of English will show more target-like production of present simple tense than L1Thai learners of English.
- Null hypothesis 1: There will be no difference between the production of present simple tense by L1 Spanish and L1 Thai learners of English.
- Hypothesis 2: L1 Spanish learners of English will show more target-like production of present progressive tense than L1Thai learners of English.
- Null hypothesis 2: There will be no difference in the production of overt tense-marking in the present progressive tense by L1 Spanish and by L1 Thai learners of English

Research Methodology

Participants

The data for this study was collected from native speakers of Thai and Spanish who study English as a foreign language at the elementary level. The total number of participants in this experiment was twenty (n=20). Participants were divided into two groups depending on their first language: Thai and Spanish. Participants in both the Thai and Spanish groups were people who have never been to or lived in an English speaking country at the time of the test. All participants in the Thai and Spanish groups have been studying English explicitly in the schools in their own countries for at least nine years at the time of testing. The ages of people who participated in this study ranged from fifteen to seventeen years old. The proficiency of the non-native speakers of English was determined by the Quick placement test (2001). In the Quick placement test (2001) those who scored between 18-29 were classified at an elementary level. Therefore, in this experiment only participants that scored between 18-29 in the cloze test were selected to take part.

Research Instruments

The material in this study was a translation test. There are two versions of the test, one in Thai and the other in Spanish. The test consisted of 20 affirmative simple sentences. 5 sentences were for testing the verb inflection (s or –es) of the present simple tense, and 5 sentences were for testing the verb inflection (-ing) for the present progressive tense. The remaining 10 sentences were mixed tenses, excluding the present simple with an overt verb inflection and the present progressive tenses. Even though there were 20 sentences in the test, only the 10 sentences with the present simple tense and present progressive tense were considered and analysed. The 10 non-analysed items were included in the test to disguise the dependent variable. In order to get the most realistic results from their natural responses, it was believed that participants should not be aware that they were being tested specifically on the production of the present simple tense and present progressive tense.

Procedures

Firstly, L1 Thai and L1 Spanish learners of English were asked to do a 60-item English proficiency test called Quick placement test (2001). After testing learner's proficiency, 10 L1 Thai and 10 L1 Spanish learners who scored at 18-29 out of 60, which is equivalent to an elementary level, were asked to be participants in this study. In the present study, the translation test was used as a material. The participants were firstly asked to complete their background information in the first page of the test, including their mother tongue, their age, and the age of the onset and duration of their formal instruction. The participants were then asked to translate 20 sentences provided in their own language, Thai or Spanish, into English (target language). The participants were given 40 minutes to complete the task, but they were allowed to ask for more time if they needed.

Data Analysis

After the data were collected, they were entered into and analysed by the SPSS software (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The results were considered for the accuracy of using verb inflectional morphology in the English tense-marking system in the present simple tense and the present progressive tense. Only the verb inflectional morphology was considered whilst other errors, such as word order, word choice, or spelling were excluded. One mark was given to each correct item and zero mark was given to an incorrect item. The errors of verb inflection were analysed based primarily on the contrastive analysis and error analysis approaches.

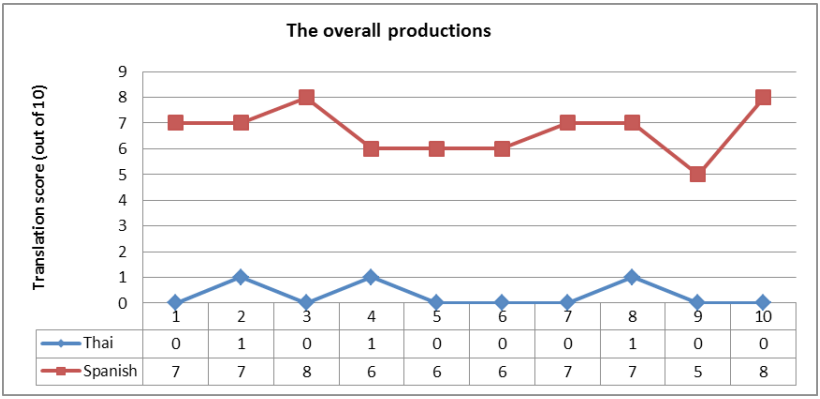
Results

Overall results of the translation task

In the translation test, each participant was asked to translate sentences provided in their own native languages into English. 10 out of 20 sentences in the test were considered as a result of the study, including 5 sentences the present simple tense and 5 sentences for the present progressive tense. After collecting the data from the two groups of participants, it was found that L1 Thai and L1 Spanish learners of English performed very differently in the test, which can be seen in Table 1and Figure 1 below.

Table 1. The overall mean and standard deviation of the two groups of participants

Language group	N	Sum of correctness (out of 100)	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Thai	10	3	.3000	.48305	.15275
Spanish	10	67	6.7000	.94868	.30000



	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Thai	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Spanish	7	7	8	6	6	6	7	7	5	8

Figure 1. Overall results of the translation test

Figure 1 shows that the overall productions of the present simple tense and present progressive tense between L1 Thai and L1 Spanish were very different. The statistical results showed that overall production between two language groups in the two tense were significantly different ($t=19.01$, $p=0.00$). The mean value of the accuracy of performing the test in the Spanish group was 6.7; while, the mean value of the Thai group was only 0.3. This indicates that the L1 Spanish learners of English performed much better than L1 Thai learners of English in both tenses. Furthermore, the standard deviation in each group of participants was low with respect to the mean, indicating that each participant in each group performed the task similarly because most of the data points were close to the average.

Results of the production of the present simple tense

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of the present simple tense production by the Thai and Spanish learners

Language group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Thai	10	.3000	.48305	.15275
Spanish	10	2.4000	.51640	.16330

From Table 2, it can be seen that the standard deviation is low with respect to the mean for both language groups.

The results of the production of present simple tense showed that the mean of L1 Spanish was almost two times greater than that of L1 Thai learners overall. The L1 Spanish learners performed quite well in producing the present simple tense as we can be seen from the mean score of 2.4. 48% of participants in the Spanish group correctly translated the sentences into the English simple tense sentences. On the other hand, L1 Thai learners performed poorly at the mean value of 0.3. It indicated that only 6% of L1 Thai learners correctly produced the present progressive tense in English. Overall, there was a significant difference between the two groups when producing the present simple tense in English. The production of L1 Thai and L1 Spanish in present simple tense was significantly different. (t=9.391, p=0.000).

Results of the production of the present progressive tense

It was found that the results of the production of the present progressive tense by L1 Spanish and L1 Thai were similar to the results of the production of the present simple tense. That is, Spanish participants performed better than Thai participants. This is shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of the present progressive tense production by the Thai and Spanish learners

Language group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Thai	10	.0000	.00000	.00000
Spanish	10	4.3000	.82327	.26034

From the table 3, it can be obviously seen that there is a clear difference between the mean score of the Thai and Spanish groups and the standard deviation is low with respect to the mean score for both language groups.

The results of the production of the present progressive tense by L1 Spanish differed largely from the production of the present progressive tense by L1 Thai. The L1 Spanish learners performed much better in producing the present progressive tense as it can be seen from the mean score at 4.30. 86% of the participants in the Spanish group correctly translated the sentences into the equivalent present progressive sentences in English whilst only 14 percent of participants, incorrectly produced the present progressive sentences in English. On the other hand, L1 Thai learners performed very poorly in this respect, having the mean value of 0. It was surprising to know that no participant in the Thai group correctly produced the present progressive tense in English. Overall, there was a significant difference between the two groups when producing the present progressive tense in English. The productions of the present progressive tense by the Thai and Spanish learners of English were significantly different. ($T = 16.517$, $p = 0.000$).

Summary of the result

In the translation task of the present simple tense, the results for the Spanish group and the Thai group in performing the present simple tense in the translation task were significantly different ($t=9.391$, $p=0.000$). The results

were similar to the task of the present progressive tense. The results showed that the production of present progressive tense between L1 Spanish and L1 Thai learners of English was significantly different (T = 16.517, p = 0.000). L1 Spanish learners performed much better than L1 Thai learners. Therefore, it can be said that the productions of the two tenses between the two language groups were significantly different.

Discussion and Conclusion

The research questions in this study were influenced by the claim made by Schachter (1983) and Ringboom (2007) about the role of transfer of native language to the target language that the similarities between the L1 and L2 would facilitate the acquisition of the L2 (positive transfer), whilst the differences would create difficulties and may result in errors in the L2 production. In this study, it was asked if Thai and Spanish learners of English at the elementary level successfully acquire the core morphosyntactic features of the present simple tense and the present progressive tense. Additionally, we also attempted to find out how the differences in the tense-marking properties of the L1 affect the acquisition of verb inflection in the L2.

In this study, other variables were considered and accounted for, including age range, length of formal instruction, and English proficiency level. The statistical analysis showed that these three factors between the two language groups were not statically different. Thus, they would not affect the result. The statistical information here ensured that the only independent variables in this present study were the features of the native languages as mentioned earlier in the hypotheses.

The study came to the conclusion that the L1 Thai and L1 Spanish learners of English were more successful in performing the core morphosyntactic features in the present progressive tense and present simple tense than Thai learner or it can be said that Spanish learners had higher rate or level of acquisition than Thai

learners. Also, the results showed that there were differences in performing the task between the two groups of participants. Hence, it can be said that the characteristics of the different L1 seemed to affect the production of certain structures in the target language differently. These findings with regard to the research question will be systematically discussed in the next section.

The implication of the overall findings

In both present simple tense and present progressive tense, the results of this study showed that Spanish learners of English will show more target-like production of the present progressive tense and present simple tense than Thai learners of English. The statistical data showed that the difference in the tense production by L1 Thai and L1 Spanish learners was significantly different. The findings of this study rejected both Null Hypotheses 1 and 2 and confirmed the Hypotheses 1 and 2 stated earlier.

The results suggest that L1 Spanish learners have an advantage from their L1 over the L1 Thai learners in the use of the both tenses, indicating a positive transfer. This is in accordance with the claim made by Schachter (1983) that the similarities would facilitate the acquisition in L2. On the other hand, the performance of the Thai group clearly showed that they had serious difficulties in the use of the two tenses. This can be seen from a very low mean score, indicating that the negative transfer was made. In addition, the very poor production of the two tenses by L1 Thai learners can possibly be explained by the concept of the "zero relation" suggested by Ringboom (2007), that when there is no similar feature between the L1 and L2, the learners may have more difficulties due to the fact that they are not able to associate their previous linguistic knowledge to help them learn the L2. The very low overall mean score of the Thai group at 0.30 significantly showed that L1 Thai almost completely failed the acquisition of the two tenses in English, which is likely due to the fact that they have no concept of tense-marking

in their native language at all (zero relation). Thai learners had to face the challenge of learning an entirely new way of producing the overt tense-marking system in English; this is by adding the inflection to the main verb in the present simple tense with the singular subject and using the auxiliary verb (is, am, are) followed by present participle (V-ing). This made them begin to learn this certain language feature (the present simple and present progressive tenses) at a later point and experience more difficulties in comparison to the L1 Spanish learners.

The implication of the significant errors

The results in the present study agreed with the study of the role of the native language in the use of the English non-generic definite article by L2 learners (Chrabaszcz and Jiang, 2014). In their study, they found that with regards to the concept of transfer, L1 Spanish learners of English, whose language has a complex system of the article, showed more native-like production of the non-generic definite article in English than L1 Russian learners of English, whose language does not have the article. The findings demonstrated that the Russian learners omitted the articles in the task, which is similar to those Thai learners in this study that almost completely omitted the tense-marking features in the both two tenses. These findings again confirmed that the L1 transfer has a significant role in the L2 acquisition.

Notably, it was found that the only sentence in the present simple tense that L1 Thai learners translated correctly was the sentence "she usually stays in her office on Monday afternoon". The accuracy rating for the Thai group belonged only to this sentence. The Thai learners somehow knew that the verb "stay" had to be inflected by adding the suffix "-s" to agree with its singular subject "she", whilst the other overt tense-marking items in the rest of the sentences were ignored to have an inflection to the verb. Conversely, it was found that L1 Spanish learners always correctly produced the sentence "Dan wants to be an engineer".

Spanish learners somehow knew that the verb "want" had to be inflected by adding the tense-marking suffix "-s" whilst there were few errors found in some other sentences. This situation seems like it can hardly be explained by the concept of transfer because it cannot point out why the correctness occurs with one particular verb and the particular subject. However, this might be explained by considering the finding of Zobl (1982) on the acquisition of articles by an L1 Chinese from Huang (1971) whose L1 had no formal category of articles, and an L1 Spanish from Hernández-Chávez (1977) whose mother tongue has articles. Surprisingly it was observed that Chinese children were able to use an article called deictic determiner quicker than Spanish children even though formal articals do not exist in Chinese, but do so in Spanish. From these findings, Zobl concluded that the children of a different language background had a different route of the L2 acquisition.

Conclusion

All participants were in the elementary level at the time of the study. The material used to investigate the data was the translation test. The participants were asked to translate the affirmative simple sentences in their L1. The results were in accordance with the hypotheses of the study based on the positive and negative transfer. Through their performances in the task, it was found that L1 Spanish learners of English (the language with a complex tense-marking system in a verb) showed more target-like production of present progressive tense and present simple tense than Thai learners of English (the language without tense-marking system in a verb). These finding suggest that transfer plays a significant role in the L2 productions.

Suggestions for further research

Although the results in this study may point to the conclusion that the production of the tenses by the two language groups relied on their L1 features

supported by the transfer theory, it should be recognized as well that transfer might not be the only reason for the L2 production. Selinker (1972) looked at language transfer and asserted that it is only one of five processes for the "fossilization" where learners' incorrect language in the L2 becomes a habit and is difficult to correct. Some errors might not occur due to the L1, but can be attributed to the L2 instead. Therefore, it was suggested for future study that more sentence types apart from the simple affirmative sentences as in this study, as well as more items, should be added in the task in order to widely observe the actual cause of errors. Future researchers will be able to ensure whether there are more errors separate from the errors due to the L1 transfer, which occurred in the L2 production. The number of participants should have been more than those used in order to have a larger number of data to analyse quantitatively. In addition, an oral production test should be applied to the study as Ellis (2008) suggested because the production of spontaneous speech seems likely to provide the best evidence of the L1 features in the use of the target language. If so, a more solid conclusion could be made.

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