

## The Effects of the Modifiers in English on Thai Learners

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### Abstract

This article aims to describe the modifiers in English and show how they can have an effect on Thai learners' learning of English. The modifiers are the important elements of the grammatical structure of English. They can affect learners' learning development in a number of ways. Understanding the modifiers in English can be beneficial to Thai learners. Generally, the modifiers in English are classified into a pre-modifier and a post-modifier. Comparatively speaking, the first can have more effect on Thai learners because it is different from the modifiers in Thai language. Hence Thai learners of English are more likely to make more errors. The second is less likely to cause learners to make mistakes as the word orders in English and Thai are more or less similar. Hence, Thai learners are less prone to errors. However, errors in the post-modifier may occur if the head word has longer post-modifiers.

**Keywords:** modifiers, pre-modifiers, post-modifiers, learning English of Thai learners

## Introduction

The question commonly asked as far as English learning of Thai learners is concerned is why a majority of Thai learners are not satisfactorily successful in learning English. Apparently, lack of successful learning is recognized in spite of the fact that Thai learners have been learning English for many years at both schools and universities. However, the end result can be considered as less satisfactory considering the investment of a considerable amount of time and energy spent, and other facilities available. From years of teaching experience, I have found that a majority of Thai students I had taught have language competence or ability in English at a low level. Furthermore, they have got insufficient vocabulary essential to their learning at almost all levels. I have also found that their knowledge of a grammatical structure is not sufficient either.

Thai learners' poor performance in English can be attributed to a number of factors. The wretched instruction of a teacher can be one of the contributing factors. In recent years, many schools have hired native English speakers and English-speaking foreigners to teach English. But these teachers are in a small number. As a result, most schools rely on Thai teachers to do the teaching job. However, it is to be accepted that many of these teachers are not fully qualified. Many teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of English and teaching methodology in order to guide their students in their learning. In addition, some teachers teach the level of English impractical or inappropriate for students' age groups. For example, they teach English meant for 14-16 year olds to 11 year olds. Therefore, the result does not come out as was expected. As for learners themselves, as was said above they do not have sufficient vocabulary to learn and use English. With limited vocabulary, learners are naturally unable to read or use English effectively. Although vocabulary

is one vital aspect in learning and teaching English, no adequate attention is given to learning vocabulary. However, vocabulary should not be considered as an end in itself, rather as a means to a desired goal. I am strongly convinced that if learners are fully equipped with vocabulary and knowledge of the grammatical structure, they will be able to easily make progress in their learning. Regrettably, many of Thai learners are not well equipped with both vocabulary acquisition and knowledge of a grammatical structure. As a result, it is not surprising to find that they fail to perform satisfactorily as far as English proficiency is concerned.

The poor performance on the part of Thai learners may be attributed to a number of related factors. Failure or unsuccessful learning on Thai learners' part can be attributed to numerous factors. The following factors are contributing factors to Thai learners' learning of English: *attitudes and motives, teaching medium, influence of a mother tongue, inadequate words, different concept, and learning English as a foreign language.*

### **Attitudes and Motives**

First and foremost, Thai learners have got the wrong attitude towards English. A good number of Thai students just dislike the language, holding that it is too difficult for them to learn, and it is not relevant to their life or their daily work. It is generally known that one can successfully learn language provided that he or she has got motivation to learn. As Pit Corder puts it, "Those who are most successful in learning will be those with the highest degree of motivation." (Corder, 1998, p. 204). D.A. Wilkins also agreed that "It is the integratively motivated learners who are the most successful" (Wilkins, 1989, p. 185).

There are some learners who have learning potential, but unwilling to learn or make an attempt to learn. They are unwilling to learn because they do not have motivation to learn. It is to bear in mind that learning and motivation are closely linked. Thus, if one factor is dysfunctional, the other is inevitably affected. When learners do not have inclination whatsoever to learn, good performance or success cannot be expected or achieved. I have personally found that many of my students learn English because they are forced to, not because they are keen to, or they learn just to fulfil the requirements. As a result, it does not come as a surprise to find that their learning is not satisfying. Furthermore, they hold a wrong attitude that they need not learn English because they can easily get help from new technologies like the mobile phones or the Internet. They learn English at school or university because it is compulsory and they do it in order to pass the required test.

If the learners develop such a negative attitude, it is natural that a teacher will find it more difficult to teach them. From the onset, it is important to teach students the usefulness and relevance of English language in today's world. What is important is that the learners' attitudes are to be first set right so that they will have a right attitude on the language. With the right attitude, they would make more effort to learn and most probably more progress in their learning, not just waiting to be spoon-fed by teachers. It is apparent that the attitudes can have a significant effect on learners. As Douglas Brown put it, "Second language learners benefit from positive attitudes and negative attitudes may lead to decreased motivation and to unsuccessful attainment of proficiency" (Brown, 2000, p.181).

## Teaching Medium

In Thailand, English is taught and learned as a foreign language. To understand the role of the teaching medium, one has to know what a foreign language is. Jack Richards, John Platt and Heidi Weber define a foreign language as “a language which is not a native language in a country. A foreign language is usually studied either for communication with foreigners who the speak the language, or for reading printed materials in the language” (1985, p. 108). The medium mainly used in a teaching process in a school or university in Thailand is a Thai language, a mother tongue of Thai learners. Using Thai to teach English can make things easier for both teachers and learners. However, there are several downsides in using Thai. For example, learners do not have enough exposure to English and they do not have enough opportunity to use English, thus making them less capable and less enthusiastic to develop required skills in a language.

Some classes in English programs are conducted in English. However, Thai language is mainly used in the teaching process. In most cases, however, teachers are in great dilemma. They may want to use English in the class to expose their students to the language. However, their students who are not well prepared are unable to follow the class. Inevitably, learners lose interest to learn. In other cases, teachers who want to keep their students engaged have to resort to Thai. Although doing so proves convenient for both students and teachers, it does not sufficiently expose learners to more words and expressions in a target language. In this respect, Cook (2003, p.65) recommended that “to maximize the efficiency of the learning and teaching process, a combination of various learning methods such as a direct method, natural language learning, and a communicative approach should be put into use.”

### **Influence of a Mother Tongue**

A mother tongue is “the language the learner uses in his own country” (Seaton, 1982, p. 129). Most of Thai learners are one way or another influenced by their mother tongue, which makes it harder for them to learn another language. Things become more difficult if learning habit in a mother tongue has been fossilized. The influence of a mother tongue on Thai learners is easily and mainly found in pronunciation and a grammatical structure.

Thai learners, because of an influence of a mother tongue, frequently make errors related to English modifiers. To avoid this undesirable outcome, learners have to practice regularly to overcome the constant interference from a mother tongue. Learning English at an earlier age can help solve this problem as the mother tongue has not profoundly influenced the learner. In other words, the earlier learning a foreign language takes place, the better it becomes.

### **English as a Foreign Language**

To show where Thailand belongs as far as learning English is concerned, I will briefly describe three circles where English is used. The countries in which English is used can be categorized into three circles: inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle. The inner circle includes the USA, the UK, Australia; the outer circle includes India, and the Philippines, etc., and the expanding circle includes the countries like China, Japan (McKay, 2002, p. 10). Thailand is categorized in an outer circle in which English is taught and learned as a foreign language. In this regard, English is mostly learned and taught in classroom. Once out of the classroom, learners rarely have the opportunity to use it. In most case scenarios, learners learn from the book, read and practice the tasks assigned by the teacher. They hardly have a chance to really use English outside the classroom setting. Hence, it turns out that

learners have not developed desired skills despite of many years they have spent learning.

The factors described so far are intimately linked to the performance of learners. It is impossible to solve only one issue and ignore another. Attention is to be simultaneously given to these factors so that teaching and learning English become more effective, more satisfactory and more successful.

One aspect which can be a key obstacle to Thai learners of English is the modifiers of a noun. From my teaching experience, I have found that the modification in English is a main area the teacher should give a serious attention to as far as learning English is concerned. If learners understand the modifiers, they will, I believe, find it relatively easy to understand other related elements and they will be able to deal with reading texts with ease., and in turn they can use English more satisfactorily.

The reasons why I choose to describe the modifiers in English are because many of the students I had taught often made errors when they have to deal with the modifiers. Besides, this part of the structure is indispensable to teaching and learning English. However, it is often overlooked and not given sufficient consideration. Naturally, in real communicative purposes, speakers or writers do not use only a noun or a noun having just one modifier. Instead, time and again they may use a noun with many, long modifiers.

Thus, a person sometimes uses one or two modifiers, and at other times uses three or more modifiers, depending on a number of factors. Learners who do not understand the structure of modifiers well may find it very hard to understand what is being meant or intended in the text. On the contrary, if they have a good knowledge

of the modifiers (of nouns), they will have little or no difficulty understanding the messages or texts.

## Modifiers

A modifier is a term used in modern grammar to describe the dependent elements in a noun phrase or nominal group. The modifier can occur before or after the noun as head (Wales, 1989, p.304). The modifiers are categorized into two types: pre-modifiers and post-modifiers. Each of them is briefly illustrated in the following sections. Modifiers in English can be classified in terms of types, positions, characteristics, and sentence modifies (Pukkakup, Y., 2002). In this article, I exclusively focus an attention on only the positions where the modifiers appear. That is, a demonstration is based on two types of modifiers: pre-modifiers and post-modifiers.

## Pre-modifiers

This type of modifiers comes before the head noun.

The following are the types of pre-modifiers (Greenbaum, 1996, pp. 217-218).

- 1). Adjective e.g. *a long story*.
- 2). Noun e.g. *a table tennis*
- 3). -ing participle e.g. *a falling rock*
- 4). -ed participle e.g. *a broken window*
- 5). Genitive e.g. *the boy's father*
- 6). Numeral e.g. *six cars*

In a short passage below, the pre-modifiers are the underlined words.

*Anxious residents slept outside after hundreds of aftershocks rattled the earthquake-hit northern Philippines. Five people were killed and more than 150 injured when a 7.0-magnitude quake struck. (Stern, 2005, p.143)*

Based on the test I had given to my students, they did not much difficulty in understanding the message. Probably, the pre-modifiers are short and easy to understand. However, those in the following sentences are longer and can be more difficult to understand. The underlined words are the pre-modifiers of a head noun.

*The thirsty animal gets much-needed drink.*

*Just a few careless steps, these antelopes will be trapped.*

*Hippos cannot swim, but they secrete a thick, oily, reddish fluid.*

*The chilly nutrient-rich water feeds many different animals.*

*The prehistoric bones belonged to a two-legged, crocodile-faced.*

*predatory dinosaur. (Stern, 2005, p.144)*

I have often found that students often have difficulty understanding the head nouns with longer pre-modifiers as shown above.

### Post-modifiers

This type of modifiers comes after the head noun. The following are the types of post-modifiers (Greenbaum, 1996, p. 219).

- 1). Preposition e.g. *The reflection in the mirror*
- 2). Relative clause e.g. *The dog that chases the cat is mine.*
- 3). –ing participle e.g. *The boy playing in the room is my son.*
- 4). –ed participle e.g. *The book written by Hemingway is interesting.*
- 5). Infinitive e.g. *We give them the food to eat.*
- 6). Noun clause e.g. *The belief that the earth is round is true.*
- 7). Adjective e.g. *The party's leader happy with the election win smiles broadly.*

In the book titled, *English Modifiers*, (2002, pp. 226-232) Pukkakup has provided the examples of sentence modifiers. They include 1) Non-restrictive

appositive: *This is John, a manger of our company.* 2) Infinitive phrases: *To tell the truth, I never like her.* 3) Participial phrases: *Students arriving late will not be permitted to enter the hall. Term paper submitted late will not be accepted.* 4) Prepositional phrase: *in the course of a day, students study many subjects.*

In this paper, I treat the sentence modifiers in question as belonging to the post-modifiers. This is because the modifiers come after the components they modify.

### Effects of Pre-modifiers

As far as my teaching experience goes, if the pre-modifiers consist of just one or two words, Thai learners do not have much difficulty understanding a phrase or a sentence. In the sentence below, they can cope with it easily as the head noun is modified by only one noun.

*US warns of major incident amid China provocations in South China Sea.*

In the example shown, the effect of the modifiers on Thai learners is manageable because the phrases are relatively short. In contrast, if the head is modified by three or more words, the problems seem to emerge. The sentence below can easily confuse learners who have yet to understand the modifiers. And probably they can make errors in reading it.

*This aggressive and irresponsible behavior represents one of the most significant threats to peace and stability in the region.*

The main reasons why Thai learners whom I had taught make mistakes can be explained as follows. Thai and English have modifiers in different positions. Modifiers in Thai come after a head noun only while in English modifiers can come before and after a head noun. Thus, it is common that Thai learners often have difficulty understanding a noun with a longer pre-modifier, and are more prone to

errors. However, they can easily understand a noun with one or two pre-modifiers; they often make an error if the head nouns have many pre-modifiers, especially if the modifiers use a comma to separate multiple modifiers of the same noun. For example:

*The efficient, hard-working, and punctual company employee is in high demand.*

Apparently, many cannot identify the head noun in the sentence. Also, they assume that ‘the efficient’ is a head noun and subject of a sentence. They may probably assume that the punctuation mark, here a comma, indicates a complete idea. Thus, the longer the modifier are, the more problematic they have become to Thai learners. As described above, a word order of modifiers in Thai and English moves in an opposite direction: Thai to the right, English to the left. The pre-modifiers are one of the major aspects learners should pay more attention to.

### **Effects of Post-modifiers**

Comparatively speaking, Thai learners make fewer mistakes in the post-modifiers than in the pre-modifiers. It can be explained that the orders of post-modifiers in the two languages are similar. It is natural that the problems in learning something mostly occur only when there are differences. The more different things are, the more difficult learning becomes. On the contrary, little or no difficulty occurs if things turn out to be more or less similar.

It is true that Thai learners may not make as many mistakes in this category as in the first one. However, if the post-modifiers are longer and more complicated, they can become problematic for the ones who are not skillful enough to analyze the components. The sample sentences given contain long post-modifiers:

*The scandal over the alleged mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners by American troops had been very destructive.*

*A member of a gang of monkeys that has terrorised residents of a Japanese city for weeks has been caught and killed.*

The long post-modifiers move in the same direction as in Thai. Linguistically, it is called a right-branching structure. However, despite the similarity in both Thai and English, it is still possible that Thai learners make errors because the head nouns are post-modified by many words.

Other elements which are particularly problematic for Thai learners are present and past participles. The present participle is a verb with –ing e.g. *working, doing*. The past participle is a verb in the past participle form e.g. *worked, seen*.

The present participle can be a problem for students. For example, they often mistake the word ‘coming’ in the example below as a main verb.

*Light coming from an object has been stretched by the expansion of the Universe to redder wavelengths.*

Although the word order of the post-modifier in English shown in the above sentence is similar to that of Thai, learners are still likely to make errors.

More effects of the post-modifiers on Thai learners can be found when the head noun has a longer post-modifier in the form of the past participle as illustrated in the examples below.

a) *Two studies published on Tuesday re-examine information from the initial outbreak in the Chinese city.*

b) *One of the reasons cited for the high number of deaths from lightning is the large number of people working outdoors.*

As it is the case with the present participle, I have found that many of students mistake the past participles as the main verbs of the sentences. In this aspect, I find it necessary for learners to understand the structure of a relative clause. This is because both the present and past participles are derived from the reduced relative clause. In the examples, the present participle can be rewritten as “Light *that comes from an object has been stretched the expansion of the Universe ...*”. The first past participle can be rewritten as “Two studies *which were published on Tuesday re-examine information from the initial outbreak in the Chinese city.*”

The illustration given so far clearly shows that the modifiers in English can have a great influence on Thai learners. Thus, it is deemed essential to pay more attention to the issue so that Thai learners having thoroughly understood this aspect can read and use English more satisfactorily and efficiently.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the description and illustrations provided so far, it is apparent that modifiers play an important part in English. To help learners to have a firm grip on this aspect, teachers should have learners do as many exercises on the modifiers as possible. In addition to learning the modifiers, getting a new vocabulary will facilitate the learners a great deal. Hence, teachers should teach new English words whenever the time permits. Without adequate words, it is almost impossible to understand the structure well. For learners to properly understand the structure of modifiers, teachers have to work out on how to teach English effectively. They have to rely on a wide variety of the teaching methods to produce maximum results on the learners' part. One method may not suit all occasions and all students. Thus, combining a wide variety of teaching methods will be greatly helpful.

One fact to be accepted is that directly or otherwise Thai learners are influenced by an interference of their mother tongue. Time and again, they may unknowingly use English based on the Thai structure. The issue is also significant and needs more attention from the teacher. One possible way is that the problem can be overcome by extensive practice and regular exercises can be of great benefits to learners.

Teachers should not teach modifiers through only reading. Rather, learners should be assigned to write, listen and even speak the sentences and texts having the modifiers so that learners get familiar with the structure of modifiers. Short and regular passages having modifiers should be assigned to learners to practice and improve their skills.

In order for learners to thoroughly understand the components of the modifiers, they are required to possess the following: adequate vocabulary, knowledge of parts of speech, and working knowledge of grammatical structure. In the teaching and learning process, these three components should be concurrently given attention so that learners know how to use them appropriately.

It is also important to know that one noun in English can be pre-modified by many different parts of speech. In other words, pre-modifiers can be a noun (*a bank manager*), an adjective (*a big car*), a number (*two students*), a demonstrative (*those guys*), a participle (*a developing nation, a snow-covered mountain*). At times these modifiers can come together to modify just one noun (*two small crowded buses*).

It is recommended that having learners study and practice sentences with many modifiers can be highly helpful. After learners have learned and practiced the modifiers used in sentences, they should be exposed to the modifiers used in a longer

reading passage to ensure that learners have firmly grasped the structure and are to profit from what they have learned.

There are precautions and cares teachers concerned should pay attention to. The teachers have to remind themselves that they should be more patient and tolerant with the errors the learners might have made and with the time the learners require to understand. Learning a new language is a time-consuming process. So, learning and understanding the modifiers in English may require weeks, possibly months for some, if not all, students. Thus, students or learners should be allowed more time and space to learn and develop both potential and skills in language at their own pace.

With understanding and caring teachers, favorable atmosphere and sufficient time, learners are in a strong position to learn better, get highly motivated and as a result are expected to perform more satisfactorily.

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