



Thai EFL Undergraduate Students' Attitudes towards Syntactic Structures in English Writing

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Abstract

This study investigated Thai EFL students' attitudes of difficulties towards syntactic structures in English writing and their evaluation of frequencies in using syntactic structures in their writing. The participants in this study were 30 sophomores, majoring in English from a private university in Thailand. They were asked to fill in a questionnaire concerning syntactic structures in English writing. The instrument in this study was a questionnaire with a five-scale measurement. The descriptive statistical analysis via frequencies and percentages was used to calculate the data analysis. The results in this study show that the participants feel that dependent clauses are difficult for them to use, especially adverbial clauses, reduced adjective clauses and verbless adverbial clauses. Based upon their evaluation towards frequencies of syntactic structures, the participants frequently used existential *there* constructions and adjective clauses in their writing in English. It was highly expected that the results of this study would be useful for English language teachers to gain better understanding of Thai EFL university students towards their difficulties with syntactic structures in English writing. So, English teachers could bring the results of this study to provide improvement to their students.

Keywords: attitudes, syntactic structures, Thai EFL learners, writing

Introduction

What we know when we know a language is a frequently asked question in linguistics classrooms. Most students answer that they know *grammar*. Radford (2009) addressed that to

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know a language is to know the grammar of the language. For example, S, interchangeably known as sentence, can be derived from VP plus NP ($S \rightarrow NP+VP$). This makes the concept of language become different from communication due to their mechanics. Thus, this factor leads one to have effective *linguistic competence*, referring to accurate language production. As a result, the higher proficient skills of *communicative competence* (i.e., speaking and writing) will be developed (Bachman & Palmer, 1982).

Numerous previous studies investigated EFL learners' attitudes towards grammar instructions (Uzan, 2013). The results in those previous studies show that EFL learners feel happy to study English grammar deductively through spelling out grammar rules at the beginning. Nevertheless, it seems that the more grammar was taught, the more grammatical errors were found. This means EFL learners' attitudes towards grammatical instruction is one thing, but students' actual use in their writing reflects a lot of grammatical errors. For example, Sattayatham and Honsa (2007) studied grammatical errors as produced by medical students at Mahidol University, Thailand. The results of this study show that the most frequent errors of Thai EFL learners is articles, referring to *a*, *an*, and *the* at 62.40 percent. Usaha and Watcharapunyawong (2013) examined Thai EFL learner's errors via the concepts of genres, such as narration, description and comparison writing. The results significantly found that sentence structures are the major errors. Saengboon (2017) found that Thai EFL learners had difficulty in using the following sentence. *Many _____ students are worried about their grades* (Saengboon, 2017, p. 31). Thai EFL learners usually used the preposition phrase *of* after the quantifier *many* and this grammatical error occurred at 54 percent. Saengboon (2017) explained this phenomenon as memorization; however, it can be argued that this phenomenon occurs as a result of *generalization* where the quantifier *many of* is generalized with the phrase *a lot of*. In the same year, Promsupa, Varasarin and Brudhiprabha (2017) studied a larger unit of syntactic structures as produced by Thai EFL learners and found the top three errors which include fragment, noun clauses and adjective clauses. Apart from that, Waelateh, Boonsuk, Ambele and Jeharsae (2019) added that passive voice as another frequent error among Thai EFL learners. In Kampookaew's (2020) study, the results complied with Sattayatham and Honsa (2007) in that article were the most frequent errors among Thai EFL learners. These studies reflects that although Thai EFL learners feel comfortable learning grammar deductively in English language classrooms, the argument is that they are faced with difficulties in using many sentence structures when they are asked to produce language themselves, especially in their writing. So, the current study would like to fill the gap by investigating Thai EFL learners' attitudes towards their difficulty in using syntactic structures in the English language.

Many English language teachers and English language learners hold the standpoint that numerous grammatical features need to be studied. To reflect a personal teaching experience as a language instructor at a private university, English major students are required to study several subjects of grammar and structures in English, equivalent to at least 9 credits. The lists of structural subjects in English include ENG 208 (English Structure for Reading Comprehension), ENG 209 (English Structure for Paragraph Writing), ENG 212 (Applied

English Structure). This does not include other fundamental English subjects, such as ENL 125 (English for Global Exploration) and ENL 126 (English in TED-Technology, Entertainment and Design) where various grammatical features are included for them to study. As a result, students feel overwhelmed by the amount of grammatical study in classrooms and finally take a disliking to the field of grammar, structure and syntax. A study of EFL English language learners' attitudes towards their grammatical difficulties and frequency of structures that students actually use allows English language teachers to understand them better.

Accordingly, once English language teachers perceive their learners' difficulty towards syntactic structures in English, they could help them master their knowledge and increase their confidence towards certain structures. The concrete outcomes can be received from the lower percentage of students who withdraw while studying grammar courses. In addition, the interest of grammar and structural courses can be measured by students' attendance scores and students' interaction and participation in classrooms. As a result, it is believed that students' improvement in unfamiliar grammatical aspects will increase sharply. The concrete outcomes of this aspect can be immediately received through checking students' grades or examination scores. This background information and outcomes of the study lead to the following objectives of the study and research questions.

Literature Review

1. *Syntactic Structure*

Syntactic structure in this study is defined as the way that linguistic units are combined or arranged into larger units, such as dependent clauses and independent clauses (Radford, 2009). In Radford's English syntactic structures, it is believed that the use of language is *systemic*. We employ syntactic structures in order to use language systematically and consistently. The concept of language being systematic and consistent could be exemplified through the process of passivation (Radford, 2009), which contains four steps. Firstly, the object is moved to be landed in the Spec T, or the position of subject. Secondly, the copular *be* is added according to the feature of subject and verb agreement. The main verb in active voice is transformed into the past participle. Ultimately, a *by*-phrase agent is added if necessary.

Another aspect is that each text variety has its own preferences regarding syntactic structures (Wongkittiporn, 2023), which reflect their frequency in actual usage. For example, adverbial clauses of temporality, adverbial clauses of condition and imperatives are common syntactic structures in writing recipes or cookbooks. The factor of time is an important factor for cooking. Overcooking can affect the texture of meat and the taste of food. It is important for the writers to employ appropriate syntactic structures with the right semantic denotations since different genres of writing have their own grammatical preferences. The study of syntactic structures seems to be appropriate and applicable to the levels of university students as most assignments and exams are required to be answered in the mode of written register.

Accordingly, students are required to write a lot and employ appropriate syntactic structures with different genres of writing (Usaha & Watcharapunyawong, 2013).

2. Thai EFL Learners and their Grammar Instructions

The study of English in Thailand has shifted from the focuses of grammar-translation method to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), referring to the shift of language learning to speaking through different activities. According to Chomthong (2014), the grammar-translation method and error correction has never disappeared from Thai societies even though the Ministry of Education, Thailand has suggested various advantages of CLT. It is concerning that Thai students are often taught English grammar in Thai, despite being beneficial to only Thai learners of low proficiency levels in English (Chomthong, 2014). Even worse is that grammar is assessed by the format of multiple-choice testing, which seem impractical when it comes to practice. Code-switching techniques, which use both English and Thai, in grammar learning are considered more beneficial, but they are hardly applied in classrooms. Chomthong's (2014) study reflected that Thai EFL learners are taught a lot of grammar via the Thai language, but finally fail to communicate in English.

The principles of grammar in English are mainly divided into two approaches, which are prescriptive grammar and descriptive grammar. Prescriptive grammar is the category of grammar that English language learners are taught earlier at school, so the notions of grammaticality and ungrammaticality are very important at this point (Radford, 2009). On the other hand, *descriptive grammar* is defined as the actual use of language (Radford, 2009). For example, the question tag *Mary is good, aren't she* is acceptable in Vernacular African American English (VAAE).

There are several classifications of grammar in English. In conventional settings like schools and universities, prescriptive grammar is pedagogically applied in classrooms. In the present day, grammar is not taught in a discrete way. This means that grammatical learning at university levels is presented via the notions of structures or constructions in context so as to support learners to apply certain grammatical structures correctly and appropriately. For example, passive voices are introduced to English language learners via authentic texts, such as newspapers and academic prose. So English language learners learn passive voice with the linguistics elements of the omitted agents, the copular *be* and the past participle, such as *killed* via form, meaning and use at the same time.

Since prescriptive grammar is the main approach to teach Thai EFL learners in classrooms, some Thai teachers apply the grammar-translation method, or spelling out rules at the beginning. On the other hand, other English language teachers in Thailand apply an inductive method or the repetitive presentation of certain syntactic structures in context until a rule can be figured out. Even though there are two common approaches to practice in classrooms, Thai EFL learners prefer the former one (Azad, 2013; Canh & Barnard, 2009; Hmedan & Ismail, 2016). Grammatical rules can be precisely remembered; however, learners seem to be face with difficulties in actual use.

When using English, Thai EFL learners are likely to have their first language interference of L1 interference. To avoid this problem, Arakkitsakul (2019) provided six recommendations for Thai instructors to know before starting an English grammatical lesson. In English grammar, there are the concepts of time, articles, word order, adjectives, passive voice and modal verbs. In terms of temporality, Thai is different from the English language in that the verbs in the Thai language exclude temporality, while the verbs in English carry past and present tenses via the inflectional derivations of morphemes, such as *works* or *worked*. The second issue is that Thai learners have the problem of the usage of articles since they are grammatical features that do not appear in the Thai language. Thirdly, word order, or the position of adjectives is another important aspect. This is because the position of adjectives in Thai and in English are opposite. In Thai, the placement of adjectives is located after nouns. The fourth point is voice, such as active and passive voice. The active and passive voice cannot be used interchangeably, but the passive voice is used for certain reasons, such as putting emphasis on the patient, or the one who receives the energy of the action. The last point is about modal verbs, such as *can* and *may*. While the modal *can* is deontic, referring to the ability to do something, the modal *may* is epistemic or personal subjectivity. When English language teachers of Thai EFL learners have an awareness concerning the gap between the two languages, learners' academic achievement could be gained more easily.

3. Attitudes towards English Language Learning

Attitude, interchangeably known as *opinion*, is commonly shared by a group of people (Baker, 1992). There are different types of attitudes such as attitudes towards people who speak a foreign language, attitudes towards learning a certain subject and attitudes towards languages. It is believed that teachers who are aware of learners' attitudes towards language could help students gain academic or language achievements. The theory of attitudes in this study follows Baker (1992) and Garrett (2010), well-known academic researchers in the field.

According to Baker (1992), an emeritus professor at Bangor University, the senses of attitude were introduced to refer to desires, preferences, beliefs and thoughts. The measurement of certain attitudes can be investigated by different stratifications either an individual person or a community who share some common goals. Aside from that, attitudes can be specifically investigated in depth through different variables, such as socioeconomic status, educational levels, levels of language proficiency, age and gender. The results from surveys of attitudes, including different indicators, allow the researchers to prognosticate the target group's opinions and their beliefs consistently and systematically.

Baker (1992) addressed the term *attitude* and its three relevant components, which are cognition, affect and readiness for action. For the first one, cognition is defined as belief. For example, if Thai EFL learners believe that syntactic structures in English are important, they will hold a positive value towards grammar in English. The second component is feeling. The feeling could be exemplified into like, hate, anxiety and difficulty. For example, when Thai EFL learners were surveyed, they could express their affective component concerning

difficulty in using certain grammatical features. The last component is conation or action. It is defined as the person's readiness for action. If someone has a positive belief, although having a feeling of difficulty towards grammatical study in English, he/she may be ready to enroll in a grammatical course to study. In other words, this means that they may take action, or actually do it. However, it is important to note here that having positive attitudes towards English grammar does not mean that he/she will be ready to study English. So, attitudes can be isolated from actions.

Even though most fundamental concepts of attitudes as presented by Garrett (2010), a professor of social psychology of language at Cardiff University, are similar to Baker's (1992) ideas, Garrett (2010) added one crucial point. Attitudes are not an innate quality, but they are acquired from personal experience, family and social environment. To apply this to the pedagogical environment in classrooms, if English teachers make their students feel that grammar classes are tough, such as too many rules given and giving inadequate practice, students may verbally or non-verbally present their negative attitudes towards grammar studies. In terms of family, singing English songs together with fathers and mothers could help create better environment and this leads to kids' positive attitudes to enjoy learning English. Accordingly, both families and teachers can help create learners' positive attitudes towards English language learning.

Having addressed the principles of attitudes, Garrett (2010) further pointed out how attitudes are measured. What will be measured will be written into a statement. For example, *grammar in English is important to study*. The statement of attitudes is rated by a scale measurement, such as a five-point scale ranging from *strongly unimportant* to *strongly important* (Garrett, 2010). However, the researchers in the field of this study should be aware that the answers provided might not always reflect the truth due to participants' saving face'. To solve this problem, Garrett (2010) suggested that the researchers could counter this issue by concealing the participant's names or make their responses anonymous. Acknowledging that the participants' information will be kept confidential and immediately destroyed at the end of the study is possible to activate the truth.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate English major students' attitudes of difficulty towards syntactic structures in English writing
2. To investigate English major students' self-evaluations towards frequencies of syntactic structures used in their writing

Methodology

1. Population and Sample

Applying convenience sampling method, the population in the study consists of students, majoring in English at Rangsit University, Thailand. Rangsit University was selected because the university was reported as the number one private university in Thailand in 2023

(www.scimagoir.com). The total population sharing the same status of English major students is approximately 1,000 students. Every student, majoring in English at the College of Liberal Arts, Rangsit University is required to take an Oxford Placement Test. The majority of students gained the level of A2, which are their level of English proficiency based upon standardized testing. Since this current study was a pilot study, 30 participants from the whole population were gathered to investigate their attitudes based upon their voluntary willingness. They were the second-year students. According to the demographic information of the participants in this study, 30 students were made up of nine males and 21 females, which were calculated in 30 percent and 70 percent, respectively. The ages of the participants in this study range between 19 and 21 years old. They have approximately 10-15 years of experience in English language learning. The grade point average of the group of participants whose major were English was between 3.51 and 4.00 at 53.33 %. They are also used the syntactic structure textbooks to study.

2. Instrument and Validation

The instrument in this study was a 30-item questionnaire, which are made up of 15 questions concerning difficulties towards syntactic structures (DSS) and 15 questions for their own evaluation regarding frequent use of syntactic structures (FSS) in their writing. The syntactic structures in the questionnaire were adopted from Radford (2009), which is the syntactic structure textbooks used to teach learners majoring in English. Also, there were two-open-ended questions concerning the importance and varieties of syntactic structure.

After the questionnaire was completely developed, three experts were asked to validate the instrument. The three validators are full-time PhD instructors in the field of the English language and language assessment and evaluation from Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI). They each have more than five-year experience in teaching the English Language at Chulalongkorn University.

3. Data Collection

This study used a questionnaire to survey the participants' attitudes. This study adopted convenience sampling method to discover information from the participants (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). Regarding the data collection in this study, the data were collected by several research assistants who were trained to gather information via several steps. Firstly, the research assistants went to the classroom in order to distribute the questionnaire. The research assistants clearly explained the project and the objectives of the study. The questionnaires were distributed at the end of the class so it did not interrupt students' study time. Secondly, students were informed that filling the questionnaire was voluntary. If students were not comfortable to do, it was possible for them to walk outside immediately without any impact on their score or their grade at the end of the semester. Thirdly, the participants who were willing to participate in this research study were given a questionnaire and a consent form. The participants did not need to write their name and student identification numbers into the questionnaire and all information provided were kept

confidential. The research assistants announced that the participants could stop filling the questionnaire anytime if they feel uncomfortable. To ensure that the participants could concentrate on filling their questionnaire, the research assistants would not interfere with them while they filling in the questionnaire. The duration of completing the questionnaire was approximately 15-20 minutes. Finally, the participants were asked to place the consent form and the questionnaire without their name on the table. Then, the participants can leave the classroom. After every participant walks out the classroom, the research assistants collected the filled data by putting the consent forms into one envelop and the questionnaires in another envelop separately before returning them to the researcher. The process of data collect was complied with university ethical consideration. The researcher asked for the ethic code via Research Ethics Office of Rangsit University. The ethics code number is RSUB2023-118.

4. Data Analysis

In the questionnaire, five-Likert scales for the Measurement of Attitudes were adopted (Garrett, 2010). The scales range from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* and from *always* to *never*. According to the measurements of five Likert scale, the data analysis in this study follows descriptive statistical methods via frequency, and percentages are also adopted in this study.

Results

This section answers the two research questions concerning EFL learners' attitudes of difficulty towards of syntactic structures (DSS) and their own evaluation concerning their frequencies of syntactic structures (FSS) used in their writing.

The section answers the first research question *what are English major students' attitudes towards their difficulty of syntactic structure in English writing?* The results of this research question are shown via a pilot study in Table 1.

Table 1

Attitudes of Difficulty towards Syntactic Structures in Writing Skills

	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	I find it difficult to use passive voice.	2 (6.66)	7 (23.23)	9 (30)	7 (23.23)	5 (16.67)
2	I find it difficult to use <i>it</i> -extraposition.	1 (3.33)	7 (23.23)	7 (23.23)	8 (26.67)	7 (23.23)
3	I find it difficult to use non-finite clauses.	1 (3.33)	8 (26.67)	12 (40)	4 (13.33)	5 (16.67)
4	I find it difficult to use adverbial clauses.	3 (10)	10 (33.33)	5 (16.67)	10 (33.33)	2 (6.66)
5	I find it difficult to use verbless adverbial clauses.	3 (10)	7 (23.23)	3 (10)	11 (36.67)	6 (20)

Table 1 (Continued)

	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6	I find it difficult to use related adverbial phrases.	2 (6.66)	7 (23.23)	6 (20)	11 (36.67)	4 (13.33)
7	I find it difficult to use imperative structures.	3 (10)	1 (3.33)	4 (13.33)	15 (50)	7 (23.23)
8	I find it difficult to use noun clauses.	1 (3.33)	2 (6.66)	7 (23.23)	13 (43.33)	7 (23.23)
9	I find it difficult to use appositive noun phrases.	0 (0)	2 (6.66)	10 (33.33)	10 (33.33)	8 (26.67)
10	I find it difficult to use adjective clauses.	0 (0)	3 (10)	7 (23.23)	15 (50)	5 (16.67)
11	I find it difficult to use reduced adjective clauses with past participles.	2 (6.66)	5 (16.67)	11 (36.67)	9 (30)	3 (10)
12	I find it difficult to use reduced adjective clauses with present participles.	3 (6.66)	14 (46.67)	8 (26.67)	3 (6.66)	2 (6.66)
13	I find it is difficult to use raising constructions.	1 (3.33)	2 (6.66)	15 (50)	8 (26.67)	4 (13.33)
14	I find it difficult to use existential <i>there</i> constructions.	2 (6.66)	2 (6.66)	5 (16.67)	11 (36.67)	10 (33.33)
15	I find it difficult to use non-restrictive relative clauses.	1 (3.33)	4 (13.33)	8 (26.67)	8 (26.67)	9 (30)

Table 1 shows students' attitudes towards their own difficulty in using syntactic structures in the English language. According to the result of the study, there were three syntactic structures in English that students feel are difficult. The first structure that is difficult for students is reduced adjective clauses with present participles at 53.33 percent. The second one was adverbial clauses. The percentages of *strongly agree* and *agree* were calculated into 43.33 percent. The third structure that was difficult for students is verbless adverbial clauses at 33.23 percent. The percentages provided in the table complied with their answer in open-ended questions where a number of participants answered that they wanted to learn more about reduced clauses, they could not transform clauses into phrases and they also wanted to learn more about reduced relative clauses.

This section answers the second research question what are English major students' own evaluations towards frequencies of syntactic structures used in their English writing? The results of their own evaluations are presented in Table 2.

Table 2*Self-Evaluation towards Frequency of Syntactic Structures (FSS) used in Writing*

	Statements	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1	I use passive voice in my writing.	3 (10)	11 (36.67)	11 (36.67)	5 (16.67)	0 (0)
2	I use <i>it</i> -extraposition in my writing.	5 (16.67)	10 (33.33)	11 (36.67)	4 (13.33)	0 (0)
3	I use non-finite clauses in my writing.	3 (10)	7 (23.23)	11 (36.67)	8 (26.67)	1 (3.33)
4	I use adverbial clauses in my writing.	1 (3.33)	12 (40)	15 (50)	2 (6.66)	0 (0)
5	I use verbless adverbial clauses in my writing.	3 (10)	6 (20)	15 (50)	6 (20)	1 (3.33)
6	I use related adverbial phrases in my writing.	3 (10)	10 (33.33)	9 (30)	6 (20)	2 (6.66)
7	I use imperative structures in my writing.	1 (3.33)	13 (43.33)	6 (20)	6 (20)	4 (13.33)
8	I use noun clauses in my writing.	6 (20)	12 (40)	7 (23.23)	4 (13.33)	1 (3.33)
9	I use appositive noun phrases in my writing.	9 (30)	9 (30)	10 (33.33)	1 (3.33)	1 (3.33)
10	I use adjective clauses in my writing.	4 (13.33)	11 (36.67)	15 (50)	0 (3.33)	0 (3.33)
11	I use reduced adjective clauses with past participles in my writing.	2 (6.66)	7 (23.23)	11 (36.67)	10 (33.33)	0 (0)
12	I use reduced adjective clauses with present participles in my writing.	3 (10)	8 (26.67)	10 (33.33)	8 (26.67)	1 (3.33)
13	I use raising constructions in my writing.	3 (10)	3 (10)	12 (40)	10 (33.33)	2 (6.66)
14	I use existential <i>there</i> constructions in my writing.	12 (40)	7 (23.23)	9 (30)	1 (3.33)	1 (3.33)
15	I use non-restrictive relative clauses in my writing.	4 (13.33)	8 (26.67)	10 (33.33)	6 (20)	2 (6.66)

Table 2 represented the participant's own evaluations towards frequencies of syntactic structures used in their own writing. When combining the percentages of always and often together, the results clearly showed that the highest frequency of use is existential *there* constructions at 66.23 percent. The frequency of *it*-extraposition and adjective clauses occurred at 50 percent each. On the other hand, the participants reported that they rarely used reduced adjective clauses with present participles.

Discussion

1. Difficulty of Adverbial Clauses

This section presents the participants' attitudes of difficulty towards syntactic structures (DSS) in English. There are three main points to discuss in this section. The first structure that the participant felt difficult to use is reduced adjective clauses with present participles at 53.33 percent. The second is adverbial clauses. The percentages of *strongly agree* and *agree* are calculated at 43.33 percent. The third structure that the participants felt difficult to use is verbless adverbial clauses at 33.23 percent. The percentages of participants' attitude towards syntactic structures in this study comply with their answers in open-ended questions.

In the open-ended questions, a number of participants answered that they want to learn more about reduced clauses. Another common response was that Thai EFL learners found that they have difficulty using adverbial clauses in English. The reason for this may lie in the fact that adverbial clauses in English contain eight classifications (Swan, 2016). They include temporal adverbial clauses, temporal clauses of condition, adverbial clauses of concession, adverbial clauses of comparison, adverbial clauses of reason, adverbial clauses of place, adverbial clause of results and adverbial clauses of purpose (Swan, 2016). The difficulty that the participants are faced with could be interpreted as an overload of information that they need to study. The difficulty mentioned here includes a huge number of adverbial connectors, such as *while*, *since*, *where* and *as if*. The second difficulty could be explained in terms of *homonym* or the same sound with different meaning. Confusion can also be found between the use of the adverbial clause of place by using *where* and the relative clause using the relativizer *where*. Another point of confusion with the adverbial clause is concerned with the position of adverbial clauses that could either occur at the beginning of the sentence or in the final position of the sentence.

Asawapannarai's (2016) research study concerning the use of contrastive adverbial clauses by Thai EFL learners supports the results of the current study. It was found that Thai EFL learners have limitation in the use of adverbial clauses and positions of adverbial clauses in English. Although the connector *while* can be used in both initial and medial positions of sentences, Thai EFL learners only use the contrastive adverbial clauses *while* in the medial position. In addition, Thai EFL learners mostly used the contrastive connector *however* in the initial position at 93.67 percent and only 6.37 percent are used in the final position. In addition, Leuckert (2005) compared the use of the adverbial connector *while* between British native speakers and EFL learners including Thai EFL learners. The adverbial connector *while* is observed in the sense of temporality and concession. The British native speakers use the connector *while* to refer to concession more than temporality. Oppositely, EFL learners use the adverbial connector *while* with the sense of temporality more than British native speakers. Chuenchaichon (2018) also reported that Thai EFL learners have difficulty in producing adverbial clauses of place. That is because they have confusion between the use of adverbial clauses of place using the connector *where* and relative clauses using the relativizer *where*. This shows limitations in Thai EFL learners' use of adverbial clauses in English. In addition,

EFL learners are faced with the problems of using verbless adverbial clauses, or non-finite clause. According to Hazout (2010), verbless adverbial clauses as in *while watching a movie, John ate ice-cream*, require the notion of inflectional morpheme *-ing*. Most EFL students are confused the homonym of *-ing* between the use of progressive tense and present participial phrases.

2. Difficulty of Reduced Adjective Clauses

As suggested by Arakkitsakul (2019), it is important for English teachers who are teaching syntactic structures to Thai EFL learners to be aware of the use of adjectives as the adjectives between Thai and English are different and this could lead to Thai learners' confusion. Promsupa, Varasarin and Brudhiprabha (2017) also found Thai EFL learners have difficulty in the use of adjective clauses. The results of the current study specifically show that Thai students face difficulty with the use of present participial reduced adjective clauses. This can be explained by two reasons. The first reason is that present participial reduced adjective clauses contain the feature of deletion and inflectional morphological derivation. The second reason is that present participial reduced adjective clauses are not common in every position of the sentence. The explanation is given below.

To begin with, present participial reduced adjective clauses require the users to have the notion of the syntactic mechanic of deletion or omitting relativizers, such as *who* and *that* (Radford, 2009). An explanation of this point is illustrated via examples (1) below.

(1)

(a) Mary *who sits next to your desk*, works so effectively.

(b) Mary *sitting next to your desk* works so effectively.

The italic in example (1a) represents an adjective clause. On the other hand, the italic in example (1b) represents a present participial reduced adjective clause. Syntactically, the production process of present participial reduced adjective clauses in English requires several steps. The first step is to cut the *wh*-expression *who*. The second step is to add the inflectional derivational morpheme *-ing* to the verb *sit* becoming *sitting*. A lack of either the first or second step could result in ungrammaticality. Semantically, present participial reduced adjective clauses in English usually occur with process verbs, activity verbs and accomplishment verbs (Kearn, 2000). They are not commonly used with achievement or stative verbs as in *winning* or *liking*. Pragmatically, the use of present participial reduced adjective clauses is specific as they prefer to be used in the medial position of the sentence. This could be a reason why Thai EFL learners have difficulty with the use of this syntactic structure. Therefore, having the capability to produce this structure requires various branches of linguistic competence, such as morphemes, syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

3. Frequency of Syntactic Structures in Writing

Aside from DSS, this section explains the reasons why the participants prefer to use certain structures in their writing, such as *it*- extraposition and the existential *there*. The structures of *it*- extraposition is used for providing comments, as in *it is good* and *it is necessary*. On the

other hand, the existential *there* is used for introducing that something exists as in *there are two men in the shop* (Swan, 2016). The subjects in both constructions as in *it* and *there* contain little meaning, but they are used to fill in the position of subject. This is because the English subject is required in all clauses. When investigating further, Thai EFL learners do not have the problems of using these two constructions due to their experience of use and exposure. Due to a higher level of exposure, the two constructions had been taught and found in the English materials since their secondary school. This frequent exposure could increase the level of familiarization of the structures. (Sheridan, 2013).

4. Self-Evaluation of Frequencies towards Adjective Clauses and *it*-Extraposition

The participants in this study revealed that they have higher frequencies of using syntactic structures of adjective clauses and *it*-extraposition. To begin this section, examples of both constructions are given in (2).

(2)

(a) English, which is so important to study, is chosen as my second language.
(Adjective clause)

(b) It is important to study English as a second language. (*It*-extraposition)

Semantically, the two structures as exemplified in (2) are alternatively used for the same semantic denotations. They are normally used for the sake of subjectivity or giving comments or personal opinions (Wongkittiporn, 2021). Students at university level are always encouraged to write their own comments, showing opinion and evaluation after studying a certain topic in classes as mini assignments. Based on observations, the usage of these structures usually appears in students' reflections.

When taking a closer look, there is another structure that students could use it to express their own opinion such as raising constructions, as in *it seems important to study English*. However, approximately 40 percent of the participants in this study evaluate that they rarely or never use this syntactic structure in their own writing. It is deduced that this structure is not a structure that the students with the A2 level of English proficiency are familiar with.

5. Self-Evaluation of Frequencies of Existential *there* Constructions

The results in this study show that the existential *there* constructions are frequently used at 63.23 percent. An example of existential *there* constructions, referring the syntactic structure (Swan, 2016) to report fact, is given in (3).

(3) There are jam, butter and a loaf of bread in the basket.

Example 3 is the structure that most students evaluated that they use more frequently than others. There are several reasons to explain this phenomenon. Linguistically, the students are always taught that the subject in the English language is required in all clauses (Radford, 2009). Omitting the subject in English results in ungrammaticality. So, most students realize this rule in English by adding the subject *there* as the subject of the sentence. To explain this based upon student's levels of proficiency, Zhang (2016) reported that existential *there* constructions are usually employed by EFL learners with low levels of proficiency. This

information is concordant with the current study where all participant's level of proficiency is only A2.

Conclusion

This study investigates Thai EFL English major students' attitudes toward difficulty in using syntactic structures in English and frequency of syntactic structures as used in their writing. Once English teachers know that students have difficulty in certain syntactic structures in English, they can help support and develop their knowledge. The difficulty with grammar and sentence structure could be reduced to support the quality of their writing.

The participant demonstrated that they frequently use only certain structures in their writing, such as existential *there* constructions as shown in the first sentence, *it*-extraposition as shown in the second sentence. Students with A2 level of proficiency have very limited ability to use a variety of syntactic structures in their writing. Students tend to have problems of using complex sentence structures mostly as they do not have enough opportunity to practice using complex structures in their academic life. English language teachers avoid encouraging students to use complex sentence structure because students may make errors in their writing. Thus, the pedagogical implication in this aspect is that having enough practice of using various complex structures in classrooms is important. Although students might make several errors at the beginning, their errors can be helped to be collected by their peers and English teachers.

This links to the first research questions that A2 students mostly face difficulty with the use of dependent clauses, such as reduced adjective clauses, adverbial clauses and verbless adverbial clauses. This does not mean that they never try to use these structures in their writing, but they might experience teachers' comments of ungrammaticality and they do not know how to produce these syntactic structures accurately. Accordingly, focusing on the teaching of dependent clauses would reduce students' difficulty with these syntactic structures and this could help upgrade their writing.

However, the results of the current study are limited to only English language learners with the level of A2 proficiency. Generalizing the results of this study is not applicable to other English proficiency levels. It is important to note that the results of the study might vary according to different groups of participants.

Recommendations

Regarding pedagogical implications of the study, English language teachers in university setting could apply the results and discussion in this study as the focus of teaching syntactic structures for writing in English. This allows us to know students' difficulty and problems in their writing and we could directly fix the problems. For example, teachers should spend more time in classrooms to discuss about reduced adverbial clauses and reduced adjective clauses. More exercise for them to practice should be provided to support their need. For

example, students may be asked the reason when and why people use active voice and passive voice. For example, what are the differences between *the company was established on 1980* and *John established the company in 1980*. While one focused on the establisher, the other focuses on the action. For future research students, it is recommended that future studies in this field could add more data collection and investigation with non-English major students is highly recommended.

Ethical Conduct

Since this current study investigated university students, ethical conduct was taken into consideration. The researcher asked for the ethic code via Research Ethics Office of Rangsit University. The ethics code number is RSUB2023-118.

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