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

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ABSTRACT

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

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Introduction

In Thailand, although the grammar-translation method has long been used to teach foreign languages and many students use translation as a mean to understand English, many students seem to have problems with translating according to a number of studies (Chanasakulniyom, 2010; Pojprasat, 2007; Yodnil, 2006). Translating is a complicated skill. A translator has to interpret a source text, and then put it in another language, keeping the meaning, style, and purpose of the source text, and this requires proficiency in both foreign languages and the mother tongue, as well as specialized and cultural knowledge. However, at the primary level, simple sentences without the inclusion of specialized and cultural content are often used because accurately translating source texts semantically and grammatically is the first step of many translation courses in Thailand. This indicates that Thai students are not familiar with translation despite their familiarity with the teaching method and the learning process.

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

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

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

Literature Review

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

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

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

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

Methods

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

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

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