

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1. 1 Rationale for the Study

Errors are significant in that they can reflect students' lack of knowledge of a language system. It is also known that the occurrence of errors is common because progress in learning a second language involves the use of new and gradually more difficult structures. However, there is a noticeable consistency in the types of errors made by some students. This unwanted consistency can discourage students as well as teachers when students make certain errors again and again even though they have studied the rules of grammar that they violate (Lalande, 1982). Since it is generally accepted that making errors during the language-learning process is unavoidable (Srichai, 2002; Ancker, 2000; Hedge, 2000; Teo, 1986), error analysis is very useful for language teachers as a tool to discover what types of errors frequently occur and why their learners make those errors. It is also believed that students' errors are good indications of their process of acquiring the second language. Without valuable information from an extensive error analysis, it may be difficult for the teachers to prepare appropriate teaching methods and materials for the students.

As a teaching assistant of the Foundation English I (FE I) course at Prince of Songkla University (PSU), when correcting students' written assignments, I found many errors in their work. Despite the fact that my attempts were made at teaching and explaining language points of each unit, the students still made numerous errors in their written work. Some of the errors were repeatedly made in every assignment and other errors were found in some assignments but not in others. Moreover, most of the errors frequently produced by the students seemed to be grammatical. This raises the question of why the fundamental grammatical errors kept recurring though the students have learned a lot about these aspects for many years. As Freiermuth (1997) suggests, within the classroom limits and under the pressure of having to produce the

target language accurately, students may be nervous, anxious, or excited which can possibly cause them to stumble over familiar structures. But if the students repeated the same errors time and time again, it can reflect the students' lack of knowledge of the target language. In addition, it was found that every single student made mistakes regardless of their proficiency. Although students at all proficiency levels in this course produced grammatical errors, some types of errors occurred only in low-proficiency students' assignments whereas other types of errors were produced by both high- and low-proficiency students. This phenomenon deserves careful attention because errors made by both groups of students clearly indicate that problems exist somewhere in the teaching and learning process.

Although new errors were usually a sign that the students were exploring new uses of language or experimenting with new vocabulary, recurrent errors were not such a good sign. To be able to deal with errors effectively, it is essential for language teachers to first know what kinds of grammatical errors generally occur in students' written assignments. Thus, the researcher felt that there is a need to investigate types of errors made by students with different proficiency levels to better understand their learning problems in order to help them improve their writing performance. This leads to an investigation of the types of errors made by students with high English Entrance Examination (EEE) scores compared to those made by students with low EEE scores, as well as the types of errors the two groups have in common. The findings of this study would contribute directly to FE I course in that they will help raise language teachers' awareness of such errors. It is also hoped that the information obtained from this study would enable FE I teachers to help the students reduce recurring errors in their writing and, accordingly, prepare their teaching techniques and materials to prevent error occurrence in order to help the students develop grammatical knowledge.

1.2 Purposes of the Study

This study focuses on grammatical errors that first-year students with high and low EEE scores at PSU, Hat Yai Campus made in all of their FE I written

assignments and attempts to locate common grammatical errors made by the two groups of students. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What grammatical errors are made by students with high and low EEE scores in their FE I written assignments?
2. What kinds of grammatical errors do the two groups have in common?

1.3 Expected Results

It is expected that both students with high and low EEE scores would commit grammatical errors in their FE I written assignments. Types of errors made by the students in this study might be similar to those found in previous studies although their frequency of occurrence might be different. The researcher hopes that this study will provide valuable information on the frequent grammatical errors for FE I teachers. This will enable them to find appropriate teaching techniques and materials to help both students with high and low EEE scores learn English from their errors and improve their grammatical knowledge and writing skills.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

1. As this study has taken into account both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the number of subjects selected from first-year PSU students was limited to 30 students. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to use the results obtained from such a small sample to draw conclusions that are generalized for all first-year students. However, the findings of this study can be generalized for the specific groups of students that are represented by the subjects.

2. It would be difficult to distinguish whether errors found in this study were systematic or non-systematic errors since those errors were analyzed from the written products of 30 subjects as a group not from an individual student. Therefore, the errors cannot be traced to check their consistency in each student's written assignments.

3. Types of grammatical errors made by the subjects of this study were obtained from the context of four FE I written assignments and might not be generalized to those found in other contexts of study.

1.5 Definition of Terms

In this study, three terms, namely errors, students with high EEE scores, and students with low EEE scores are defined as follows.

1. Errors: grammatical deviations from the adult grammar of native speakers made by students with high and low EEE scores in their FE I written assignments (adapted from Brown, 2000: 217).

2. Students with high EEE scores: 15 students from three faculties i.e. the Faculties of Medicine, Pharmaceutical Sciences, and Dentistry, who attained scores of 71-74 in the EEE at PSU.

3. Students with low EEE scores: 15 students from seven faculties i.e. the Faculties of Management Sciences, Natural Resources, Nursing, Liberal Arts, Agro-Industry, Economics and Law, who attained scores of 34-35 in the EEE at PSU.