Grammatical Error Correction and Retention in EFL Students: A Case Study of EFL Students in Thailand

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Abstract: *This study aimed to examine grammatical error types, retention of the correction in the students' writing, and their opinions on the error correction. The research was conducted on 30 first year English-major students studying a grammar course of 15 weeks at UttaraditRajabhat University in Thailand. The study analyzed 1,800 sentences, and errors found in the exercises were compared to those of the follow-up tests. The analysis used percentage, means, and standard deviations. The results indicated the most grammatical errors found were errors in verb, the others including errors in determiner, noun, preposition, sentence structure, adverb, and adjective. The correction by group discussion improved writing ability, and retained. The students' opinions on the way of error correction were at high level.*
Key words: *Grammatical errorsWritingCorrection Retention Students' opinions*

I. Introduction

Grammar instruction is essential for school learners inThailand; it is a core course in the national English curriculum. A survey done by Mackenzie (2002: 6) concluded five topics that teachers would like to go to workshops on: to assess and correct students' work, get the most out of task-based learning, use more English in the classroom, and practice critical thinking. After years of English lessons from schools most Thai students were poor in English. They could not transfer grammar from speaking to writing (Kaewmala, 2012). Most teachers corrected errors as they believed this could help improve writing ability. However, there has been widely discussion about the effect of writing grammatical analysis and correction on learners' writing. Some studies showed no benefit from grammaticalanalysis instruction; others revealed it could improve learners' writing. Harris's experiment (1962) implied that studying English grammar had less helpful on the correctness of children's writing supported by several linguists:Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Shoer(1963),O'Hare (1973), and Hillocks, (1986, as cited in Hudson, 2001). Moreover, Truscott's strong suggestion (1996: 328) on abandoning grammar correction in students' writing caused high disagreement. Carroll (1958: 324, as cited in Hudson, 2001) believed grammar was useful that unless the students get a feeling for sentence patterning, their own sentence pattern will show many obvious defects (Chun, 1982, Ferris, 1999, Hudson, 2001). Grammar instruction is necessary for EFL beginners (Pazaver, and Wang, 2009) because the target language has different grammar from their own. The subjects in this study have to learn English sentence structures, word meanings, parts of speech, and how to put words together to make meaningful sentences. Their written sentences would be correct as such, but their writing appeared a number of grammatical errors. Thus, grammatical correction, indirect correction feedback (Asassfeh, 2013: 86), was done by group discussions including the teacher's additional explanations and examples. The errors found in students' writing exercises were compared to those in the follow-up tests. The students' opinions on grammatical error correction were also studied.

PurposeoftheStudy

This study aimed to examine grammatical error types in the writingof the first year English major students studying a grammar course of 15 weeks in the 1/2013 semester at UttaraditRajabhat University in Thailand, retention of grammatical error correction, and their opinions on grammatical error correction.

Review of Related Literature

Thai students are required to learn English as a foreign language in school starting from at least grade 5 up to university level. Generally, most students do not often experience communicating with native speakers or people using English. In school, English grammar is considered significant as appeared in school and university English syllabi focusing communication integrated listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. However, most university students are poor in English, they have problems in communication. This is because English is not used as the medium of instruction, students have learned grammar in Thai; listening, speaking, and reading were in English contexts explained in Thai. Most remote schools, or even good schools in towns have students practice role playing, they rarely communicate in real situations. They transferred thoughts firstly into writing,

and practiced speaking based on their written sentences. Thus, writing was possibly very important for them to improve speaking.

Teaching grammar to EFL students is necessary because they don't understand the differences between the Thai and English languages. Knowing the differences contributes to reduce mother tongue interference, and it is usable of written communication (Weaver, 1998). In the grammar class the target students learned English basic structures, tenses usage and verb forms, subject and verb agreement, parts of speech, their functions and positions in a simple, compound, and complex sentences along with writing exercises. The tasks showed an ineffective sentential writing. It is in doubt whether or not grammatical analysis and correction was beneficial to writing ability.

The early research studied about what grammar type is better for effective learning. Gale (1967) found transformational grammar was better and more studies supported his finding though part of the comparison possibly varied depending on learning process, students' motivation, and course objectives (Bateman and Zidonis 1966, Mellon 1969). On the contrary, Tordoir and Wesdorp (1979) concluded that traditional grammar is best followed by transformational grammar. Pazaver,and Wang (2009) suggested a role of grammar instruction that ESL contexts and being surrounded by English daily were the best way for learners to improve their English proficiency, grammar was for beginning and should be limited when they were in English environment. In this study, grammar analysis and correction followed both traditional grammar and the Phrase Structure Rules (transformational grammar). Grammar was taught alone, but had the students do writing exercises of grammar in contexts.

Last decades the grammatical error analysis and correction has been discussed widely whether it helps improve English ability; and if so, does it retain for a long time? A great deal of research was conducted and the results varied. Martin and Roberts (1966) found that sentences of lesser indexed complexity were recalled more frequently than sentences of greater complexity; and it seemed that the sentence type was found to affect recall, but not in the systematic way predicted by the transformational-grammar model. Weaver (1998) claimed teaching grammar in the context of writing because all students need guidance in understanding and applying those aspects of grammar that are most relevant to writing. Lyster (1998)found that the agreement of form proved more effective at leading to immediate repair than did explicit correction, especially for vocabulary and grammatical errors. Chun (1982) presented that different types of corrective feedback on preposition, past simple tense, and definite article errors helped learners improved the accuracy of their writing. Rujikiatkamjorn (1987) found that students made high grammatical errors in subject-verb agreement, misspelling, inappropriatechoices in particular contexts, tense verb forms and usage, and sentence word order respectively. Others were fragments, plural forms, lack of's possessive form, articles, preposition, conjunctions, and word order in phrases. Also, Murrow (2004) found errors in verbs, nouns, conjunction, articles, pronouns, prepositions, and parts of speech; the number and ranges of grammatical errors were clearly related to the writing topic chosen and use of specific context in writing class, and most of errors related to verb usage. However, a question arose as to whether or not the error correction remains. Li (2010) reported that the effect for corrective feedback was maintained over time; the effect of implicit feedback was better maintained than that of explicit feedback;…and studies conducted in foreign language context showed larger effect sizes than those in second language contexts. In addition, Ferris (2010)claimed that corrective feedback including learners' attitudes, beliefs, and goals play an important role in uptake and retention of feedback.Similarly, Asassfeh(2013) indicated the positive role of corrective feedback in improving students' error detection and error correction ability.

II. Materials

The material used for the analysis were 1,260 sentences randomly taken from seven itemed-writing exercises (6 sentences per exercise for each student), and 600 sentences taken from two tests (the first ten sentences of each composition) which were written by 30 first year English major students studying English grammar in a class for 3 hours a week at UttaraditRajabhat University in the first semester of the academic year 2013. The writing exercises and test tasks were of a similar type - their life, and everyday situations which varied in contents, nevertheless based on the targeted linguistic forms.

III. Methodology

The work, grammatical analysis and correction, was done freely along with the instruction for 15 weeks, but the follow-up was under examination conditions, dictionaries were not allowed to use. The writing exercises were completed both in class and for homework. The writing sets of exercises were based on English basic structures and logical ideas inspired by given pictures with words controlling grammar points. The work was checked, marked errors, and returned to the class for group discussion, and sharing ideas to correct the collected errors which were shown on the screen by the teacher who helped suggest and clarify the problem points. The English basic structures instructed were: 1) subject + intransitive verb, 2) subject + transitive verb,

3) subject + ditransitive verb + indirect object + direct object, or subject + ditransitive verb + direct object+ to / for + indirect object, 4) subject + linking verb + subject complement, 5) subject + transitive verb + object + object complement, 6) structures 1-5 + adverbs of manner / place / time. In addition, the students were instructed lessens on parts of speech, subject-verb agreement, tenses, and word order in noun and verb phrases respectively. The differences of simple, compound, and complex sentences were also instructed.

Grammatical errors were collected from seven exercises after each lesson, and from two tests: the midterm and the final. The midterm writing test was done after the four lessons on basic structures, parts of speech, subject-verb agreement, and the simple present tense had been learned. The final examination was after studying the three lessons on tense verb forms and usage, word order in phrases, and the simple, compound and complex sentences. The collected errors were analyzed, and compared between those found in the exercises and the follow-up tests to view the error types, and the retention of grammatical error correction.

The data was analyzed in categories and subdivisions depending on errors existed. Nevertheless, the data was considered to best reflect the most common types of errors and naturally cover the components of sentence structure. In this research, any errors appeared in a sentence were recorded, for examples, (1)I am 18 years old and from Pichai, a small village locate* in western of* Uttaradit. (2) I am studying here because* near my home. (3) I love tolisten _* English song* it make*me to* take a new word and fill myskill hear*.In sentence (1) recording were 'wrong verb form' (used as modifier), and 'unnecessary (of)preposition'. In sentence (2)recording was 'sentence fragment' (missing ofsubject and verbafter the transitional word because).In sentence (3), the recorded errors were 'run-ons' (conjunction missing because), 'preposition missing'(listen to),'plural form missing'(songs), 'inappropriate choice of verb' (helps instead ofmakes), 'incorrect 2nd verb form after 1st verb' (make-take / help-take/ to take was not counted), and'inappropriate choice' (listening skill). The study concluded increase and decrease in the number of errors occurred differently between the exercises and the tests. The results were analyzed in percentage terms, and the figure from the questionnaire was expressed in means and standard deviations.

IV. Findings

The study expressing grammatical errors found in the exercises, ranked respectively according to the number of errors occurred, were errors in verb, determiner, noun, preposition, sentence structure, adverb, and adjective. Each error occurred at the low percentage, but the verb errors were found higher (Table 1). Those found in the tests were errors in verb, preposition, noun, determiners, sentence structure, adverb, and adjective respectively. Each error occurred at the low percentage, but the verb errors were higher similar to those found in the exercises (Table 2). In comparison between subdivisions of each category, each subdivision in the exercises occurred differently from those found in the tests: the errors in **verb, sentence structure, and determinerdecreasedby** 23.02%, 10.05%, and 0.98% respectively, whereas the errors in **preposition, adverb, noun, and adjective increased**by 58.78%, 34.90%, 28.51%, and 8.96% respectively (Table 3).

In comparison among subdivisions of verb errors, the errors in **tense form, wrong verb form after certain verbs, redundancy, subject-verb agreement decreased**by100%,100%, 63.34%, and 26.70%respectively,while **agreement of two verbs**, **unnecessary choice, misspelling, inappropriate choice, unnecessary choice increased** by197.24%, 100%, 100%, and 50.07% respectively (Table 4).

In comparison among subdivisions of sentence structure errors, **redundancy, wrong interrogative and negative form, the confusion between Have and There be, decreased** by 100%, 100% and 64.40% respectively. On the other hand, **Thai patterns, fragments, run-ons, unnecessary BE, increased** by 279.93%, 132.03%, 66.14%, 33.49 respectively(Table 5).

In comparison among subdivisions of noun errors,the errors in **misspelling, and plural form, decreased** by 57.91%, and 2.59%, whereas **possession ('s) missing, capital letters, relative pronoun missing, inappropriate choice, modifier misplacing, and redundancy increased**by 114.41%, 100%, 100%, 63.20, 21.36, 17.41 respectively(Table 6).

In comparisonamong subdivisions of preposition errors, the errors inwrong **verb form after preposition, preposition missing, and inappropriate choicedecreased** by 100%, 31.30%, 1.25% respectively while **unnecessary preposition, and redundancy increased**by 62.90%, and 20.23%(Table 7).

In comparison among subdivisions of adverb errors,the errors in **inappropriate choice decreased** by 64.28%, whereas **misspelling, misplacing, andadverbmissing increased**by 114.25%, 100%, and 100% (Table 8).

In comparison among subdivisions of adjective errors, the errors in **inappropriate choice decreased** by 51.43% while**adjective missing, misplacing, and misspelling increased**by 14.28%,14.28%, and 22.85% (Table 9).

In comparison among subdivisions of pronoun errors,the errors in**pronounmissing, inappropriate choice, and unnecessary pronoun decreased** by 100 % (Table 10).

The students' opinions on the correction expressed good attitude to the practice, and the students grammatical problems were in accordance with the errors found in their exercises and tests. The students knew their grammatical errors both by their own editing and the teacher's indication at high level. They wanted to edit and correct their work firstly by themselves, later by the teacher. They required both the class discussion and the teacher to help correct their errors, and they also needed the teacher to help them individually at high level. According to the students, their grammatical and writing problems were lack of vocabulary, English structures, run-ons, and thinking skill at high level.

V.   Conclusions

Analysis of the student work and the follow-up tests revealed a wide range of grammatical errors and some probable retention resulted from indirect grammatical error analysis and correction. Errors in some categories and subdivisions remained, but by less percentage. Except for errors in subdivisions of verb: tense form, wrong verb form after certain verbs, subdivisions of sentence structure: redundancy, wrong interrogative and negative forms,subdivisions of preposition: wrong verb form after prepositions, and subdivisions of pronoun: pronoun missing, inappropriate choice, unnecessary choice, were found to decrease by 100%. On the contrary, subdivisions of verb: misspelling, unnecessary choice, subdivisions of noun: capitalization, relative pronoun missing, subdivisions of adverb: misplacing, unnecessary adverb, and subdivisions of adjective: missing, misplacing, misspelling, were found to increase by 100% and up.

It is quite obvious that grammatical error correction in students' work contributed to effective writing at some levels since the study showed some grammar points found to decrease. Nevertheless, other errors were found to increase owing to perhaps that they were content words which could be used alternatively according to the contexts, and that the students never experienced using these particular words. The decreasing occurrence can be interpreted as retention of the error correction, and it reflects advantages of grammatical analysis and correction. The essential awareness probably involves students' attitudes to English, beliefs and goals (Ferris, 2010), methods of correction and the instruction process, teacher's personality, the English class atmosphere, and especially a longer time, and repetition of grammatical analysis and correction, and the follow-up tests. Besides, the   students' opinions showed that they wanted both the class discussion and the teacher to help correct their errors, and they also wanted the teacher to help them individually at high level. The students had problems on vocabulary, sentence structures, run-ons, and thinking skill at high level.

VI.   Discussion

The results showed that grammatical analysis and correction did work in EFL students, some grammatical points were found decrease by even 100% up such as pronoun, interrogative and negative forms, wrong verb forms after prepositions. The decrease of some errors may be explained by the findings of Martin and Roberts (1966) that most students' sentences were simple sentences,Lyster (1998) that agreement of form such as the past Simple, and article facilitated the correction, Li (2010) that implicit feedback resulted in retaining over time. Besides, retention depended upon learners' attention, attitude and goal (Ferris, 2010). Other errors which were found to increase may need more time for correction and practice because of interference from the mother tongue and less experiences of English use, for examples, Thai patterns, fragments, run-ons, and unnecessary BE which are not similar to Thai syntax increased by high percentage in the follow-up tests.

Most of the research in the past had ESL students as subjects. These students were accustomed to using English in their everyday life like Singaporean students, and so English is used automatically, this may cause error correction more difficult. On the other hand, if EFL students had more experiences in English use which would resultin developing thinking process in English, the correction might work effectively. In addition, if a native speaker instructed and corrected grammar, he/she could not make clear, explain, and raised sentences comparing the different points between the two languages while an English foreign teacher could. Understanding the differences and repetition of correct writing practice could help students apply the knowledge to similar situations later. Yet, if they just remembered, understood, but lacked of practicing regularly, wrong use would occur. It was seen in the English curriculum in Thailand that once emphasized communicative approach which produced learners of parrot speaking, but lacking of the ability to produce sentences of their own. The types of errors found were likely the same as those found by Chun (1982), Rujikiatkamjorn (1987), and Murrow's (2004) which revealed problems in cross linguistic acquisition either in ESL or EFL. Moreover, the students' problems such as run-ons expressed interference from the mother tongue. And problemson thinking skill need intensive learning both the language and culture, more experiences in using English in real situations.

VII.   Limitations

Some limitations of this study were: firstly, the correction and the follow-up tests were done in the same semester, so it was likely a short time to conclude the retention; secondly, since the errors occurred

randomly depending on the students' choices of what they wanted to write, some errors were probably never found to exist because they avoided using unfamiliar words and structures; and thirdly, the number of the subjects and materials were limited.

VIII. Recommendations for further study

In the later studies, distance between grammatical correction and follow-up tests should be longer and continuously assessed, i.e., every semester, year, and until the last semester of the students' learning program so that the retention is concluded more reliably. In addition, other aspects concerned like a teacher's personality, class atmosphere, a teaching approach, students' behavior while studying, goals and their reading and writing habits should be considered along with the retention report.

Tables

Table 1: Grammatical errors collected from seven exercises(the assessment adapted fromOller(1983)

Categories	Number	Percentage	Assessment
Verb	222	47.13	moderate
Determiner	81	17.19	lowest
Noun	60	12.73	lowest
Preposition	51	10.82	lowest
Sentence Structure	37	7.85	lowest
Adverb	10	2.12	lowest
Adjective	10	2.12	lowest
Total	471	100	

Table 2: Grammatical errors collected from the follow-up tests

Categories	Number	Percentage	Assessment
Verb	209	36.28	moderate
Preposition	99	17.18	lowest
Noun	98	17.01	lowest
Determiner	89	15.45	lowest
Sentence Structure	66	11.45	lowest
Adverb	8	1.38	lowest
Adjective	7	1.21	lowest

Table 3: Comparison of the percentage of grammatical errors among those found in the exercises and the tests

Categories	Exercises	Tests	Differences	Results
Verb	47.13	36.28	10.85	Decrease
Sentence Structure	12.73	11.45	-3.63	Increase
Noun	98	17.01	-3.63	Increase
Preposition	10.82	17.18	-6.36	Increase
Determiner	17.19	15.45	1.74	Decrease
Adverb	2.12	1.38	-0.74	Increase
Adjective	2.12	1.21	-0.19	Increase

Table 4: Comparison of the percentage of <u>verb</u> errorsamong those found in the exercises andthe tests

Categories	Exercises	Tests	Differences	Results
Subject-Verb agreement	33.78	24.76	9.02	Decrease
Tense form	11.71	0	11.71	Decrease
Agreement of two verbs	9.45	28.09	18.64	Decrease
Wrong verb form after certain verbs	4.05	0.00	4.05	Decrease
Inappropriate choice	13.96	20.95	-6.99	Increase
Redundancy	22.07	8.09	13.98	Decrease
Missing	4.95	7.61	-2.66	Increase
Misspelling	0.00	1.42	-1.42	Increase
Unnecessary choice	0.00	3.81	-3.81	Increase

Table 5: Comparison of the percentage of <u>sentence structure</u> errors amongthose found in the exercises and the tests

Categories	Exercises	Tests	Differences	Results
Fragment	12.76	24.24	-11.48	Increase
Unnecessary BE	17.02	22.72	-5.70	Increase
Confusion: have/there be	21.27	7.57	13.70	Decrease
Verb missing	12.76	12.12	0.64	Decrease
Run-ons	6.38	10.60	-4.22	Increase
Thai pattern	6.38	24.24	-17.86	Increase
Redundancy	2.12	0.00	2.12	Decrease
Wrong interrogative and negative form	34.04	0.00	34.04	Decrease

Table 6: Comparison of the percentage of <u>noun</u> errors among those found in the exercises and the tests

Categories	Exercises	Tests	Differences	Results
Plural form	36.66	35.71	0.95	Decrease
Missing	11.66	54.32	-42.66	Increase
Misspelling	26.66	11.22	15.44	Decrease
's (possession) missing	3.33	7.14	-3.81	Increase
Inappropriate choice	10.00	16.32	-6.32	Increase
Redundancy	3.33	9.18	-5.85	Increase
Modifier misplacing	8.33	10.20	-1.78	Increase
Capitalization	0.00	21.42	-21.42	Increase
Rel.pron. missing	0.00	4.08	-4.08	Increase

Table 7: Comparison of the percentage of <u>preposition</u>errors among those found in the exercises and the tests

Categories	Exercises	Tests	Differences	Results
Inappropriate choice	47.05	46.46	0.59	Decrease
Missing	41.17	28.28	12.89	Decrease
Unnecessary	11.16	18.18	-7.02	Increase
Redundancy	5.88	7.07	-1.19	Increase
Wrong verb form after preposition	1.96	0.00	1.96	Decrease

Table 8: Comparison of the percentage of<u>adverb</u> errors among those found in the exercises and the tests

Categories	Exercises	Tests	Differences	Result
Misplacing	0.00	12.50	-12.5	Increase
Misspelling	20.00	12.50	7.50	Decrease
Inappropriate choice	60.00	37.50	22.50	Decrease
Redundancy	20.00	25.00	-5.00	Increase
Unnecessary	0.00	12.50	-12.50	Increase

Table 9: Comparison of the percentage of <u>adjective</u> errors among those found in the exercises and the tests

Categories	Exercises	Tests	Differences	Results
Missing	0.00	14.28	-14.28	Increase
Misplacing	0.00	14.28	-14.28	Increase
Misspelling	20.00	42.85	-22.85	Increase
Inappropriate choice	80.00	28.57	51.43	Decrease

Table 10: Comparison of the percentage of<u>pronoun</u> errors among those found in the exercises and the tests

Categories	Exercises	Tests	Differences	Result
Missing	25.00	0.00	25.00	Decrease
Inappropriate choice	62.50	0.00	62.50	Decrease
Unnecessary	12.50	0.00	12.50	Decrease

Examples of students' writing

Sentences	Error types

1. Jack looks* his father.	Inappropriate choice
2. Ilikewatch* a movie.	Verb form after a certain verb
3. Tal sent * gift to *son.	Determiners
4. *Father sent a son * letter.	Determiner
5. Bank is run*.	Verb form
6. She *beautiful.	Fragment
7. I and Kan**going to market on *monday.	Word order, verb form, capitalization
8. You look*birds.	Preposition
9. He doesn't swims* in the river in the afternoon.	Verb form
10. Anong*swimming.	Thai pattern, verb form
11. No, it may not rainat* Phrae (a province).	Preposition
12. He was*break his leg at school yesterday.	Past, unnecessary BE
13. Question: Is*he break his leg at school yesterday?	Past (unnecessary BE instead of past form)
14.…because they are* dance good*.	Unnecessary BE, adverb
15. I speak English quite good*.	Adverb
16. My father and mather* is*fruit gardener*.	Spelling, S-V agreement, Plural form
17. I * happy when I live in my house.	Fragment
18. My like* color is blue color*.	Inappropriate choice, redundancy
19. My father*name is Aram, *Mymother* name is Napaporn.	Capitalization, lack of 's (possession)
20. Has* five people in my family.	Confusion: Have / There be
21. He works*is*a farmer.	Redundancy
22. I come from a small family,* my house is a warm place surround*beautiful scenery.	Punctuation (;), Wrong verb form (used as modifier)
I like it a lot* but I can't live with it*.	Punctuation (,) Adverb (place)
23. Is he broke* his leg on* yesterday?	Past, unnecessaryBE,preposition
24. It rains very heavy*and *cause* the damage follow to come to*.	Inappropriate choice (adverb), fragment, verbagreement, Thai pattern
25. Mongkon and his wife works* in Uttaradit.	S-V agreement
26. He not* swims in the waterfall with his friends	Thai pattern
27. A great deal of water are* in the sea.	S-V agreement
28. I go to travel* Korea every year.	Redundancy
29. He kicked the dog is* very hard to bite at him*.	Unnecessary BE, Thai pattern
30. She running* to the bus is* very fast*.	Tense verb form, unnecessary BE, Thai pattern
31. He would like to ride a house* * but hewant* ahandbag.	Misspelling, punctuation (,), S-V agreement
32. They are singing very happy*.	Inappropriate choice (adverb)
33. I'm* like Thai food.	Unnecessary BE
34. I can to study* it.	Verbform after a certain verb
35. At the* last I hope thatI am happy forever whenstudy* English. verb form after a certain word	Unnecessary determiner,

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