

# An Analysis of Grammatical Errors in English Writing of Thai University Students

- Preeyanuch Promsupa
- Patchara Varasarin
- Prapart Brudhiprabha

**Abstract.** *The purposes of this study were to investigate grammatical error types and analyze sources of the errors in English writing. The collected data were from 34 English essays written by 34 Thai second year English majors in one university in Thailand. The data were analyzed based on the framework of grammatical error classification to find the error types, frequencies, percentages, and ranks. Furthermore, plausible causes of the errors were explained by counting on the two error sources: 1) interlanguage errors and 2) intralingual and developmental errors.*

*The research findings revealed that 2,218 grammatical errors were found in both of two main types: morphological errors (81.97%) and syntactic errors (18.03%). Of all two main types, there were 32 error sub-types. The three most frequently found errors were singular/plural errors (30.43%), article errors (21.51%), and preposition errors (5.23%) respectively. In regards to the sources of the errors, both of the interlanguage errors and the intralingual and developmental errors had influences on the errors made in the writing. The interlanguage errors occurred when the students attempted to use their existing knowledge of L1 structures to acquire the target language, but differences between the two languages caused them to apply the structures incorrectly. The intralingual and developmental errors were found because of difficulties and problems within the target language itself. The findings were beneficial for learning and teaching of English writing. They could enable the students to be aware of common grammatical error commission while writing English. In addition, the students might get more understanding of influential sources of errors made. Moreover, the teachers and the syllabus designers could use the results as guidance to design and develop more suitable teaching material and techniques.*

**KeyWords:** English Writing, Error Analysis, Grammatical Errors, Interlanguage Errors, Intralingual and Developmental Errors

## Introduction

English writing is a very important skill which is widely used as a device to facilitate and present students' educational knowledge and occupational opportunities (Chen, 2007). In terms of the educational aspect, three reasons which make this skill necessary are that more international linguists are promoting writing as their field of specialization, more articles and journals are being published in English, and more international students are pursuing their degrees in English speaking countries (Santos, 2000). Besides, the English writing skill also enhances the students' occupational opportunities. More and more companies require their job candidates to have good command of English writing because workers have to use this skill in many types of organization communication such as e-mails, reports, presentations,

sales material, visual aids, etc. With several benefits of the English writing, Thai universities include many English writing courses as compulsory or selective academic subjects in the curriculum for their students with purposes to develop the students' English writing skill and support them to receive better educational and occupational opportunities (Chuenchaichon 2015; Watcharapunyawong and Usaha, 2013). However, Thai students cannot yet master in this skill because they have produced ambiguous written communication due to inability to apply English grammar appropriately in their writing. Evidence of this problem has been revealed through the students' various grammatical errors made in the written tasks (Chuenchaichon, 2015; Likitrarattanaporn, 2002). Those errors could prevent the students to be competent in English writing as Jenwithisuk (2009) stated that communication through a written approach would be accomplished if transmitted messages are error free because the errors can cause total misunderstandings between writers and readers who have different languages and culture backgrounds. The occurrences of errors in English writing can be considered from two main sources: 1) interlanguage errors and 2) intralingual and developmental errors (Brown, 2000). The errors seem to be a negative production of English writing, but a study of Error Analysis (EA) yields English writing learning and a pedagogical process. EA can express what aspects in grammar are difficult for the learners, and obtaining feedback stimulates their new attempts to successfully approximate the target language (Myles, 2002). Even if there were some studies of grammatical error analysis, the students still produce grammatical errors. That is because the characteristics of the errors are varied according to each particular learner and learning context, so they may have different needs and individual difficulties (Chuenchaichon, 2015). Therefore, in order to improve the students' English knowledge and design proper teaching material and courses, it is important for researchers and English teachers to initially investigate the English proficiency levels of each particular group of students, and to know what the most important English learning units are that the students should undertake through their errors (Suwannaset, 2013). Consequently, it is worthwhile to use Error Analysis to find particular problems of using grammar in English writing encountered by Thai second year English majors. The research objectives are to find out answers of the following research questions:

- 1 What types of grammatical errors are found in the English writing of Thai students?
- 2 What common grammatical error types are frequently used in their English writing?
- 3 How do interlanguage errors and intralingual and developmental errors plausibly affect the grammatical error commission in their English writing?

## Literature Review

### Errors in English Writing

Writing is a complex process and difficult task even in the first language because effective writing production requires several components including contents, organization, and language competence (Richards and Renandya, 2002). Unquestionably, it becomes more complicated and difficult task for Thai students who learn English as a foreign language because of the target language knowledge inefficiency of the Thai students (Chuenchaichon, 2015; Watcharapunyawong and Usaha, 2013). Having inadequate grammatical knowledge of Thai students became one of the main problems which prevent them to be successful in the English writing because they still produce many common errors of English grammar (Chuenchaichon, 2015). Brown (2000, p.217) explained the errors as "noticeable deviations from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of

the L2 learner". The errors are systematic deviations, which occur when L2 learners have not learned something and consistently make them wrong, so the errors reveal L2 learners' competent levels in the target language (Brown, 2000; Norrish, 1983). Ellis (2008) and James (1998) provided more information that the errors are unnoticeable points for the L2 learners. They reflect the gaps in the learners' knowledge because they cannot identify if the errors are correct or incorrect, so the errors occur finally. Brown (2000) and Coder (1981) stated that the learners may believe that their languages are correct, and they do not know the correct forms should be. Even if the learners acknowledge the errors, they cannot correct them. The errors are different from mistakes, which are productions of the learners' performance deficiency. The mistakes are related to slips of the tongue, which are generally one-time-only events. The learners who make mistakes have noticed or been taught L2 grammar structures comprehensibly, but they are unsuccessful to apply grammatical rules. The learners are able to recognize deviant forms as the mistakes and correct them if it is necessary. With these reasons, the errors become significant for the study of error analysis because they reveal evidence that the L2 learners use definite systems of language at every point in their language development systems and at the particular points in the situation, whereas the mistakes are not relevant to the error analysis because they are non-systematic.

### **Interlanguage Errors and Intralingual and Developmental Errors**

The interlanguage errors and the intralingual and developmental errors are two sources of errors in L2 learning (Brown, 2000). The first error source called interlanguage errors refers to a negative transfer of the first language, namely L1 interference. The negative transfer takes place from differences between linguistic features of the first language and the target language, and the learners attempt to generalize their prior knowledge and experiences of the first language in learning the target language but apply them incorrectly. This negative transfer leads to error commission and becomes the important source of errors in the L2 learning (ibid). Lado (1971) claimed that differences between linguistic properties of the two languages can be predicted the foreign language learning difficulties, and if the differences are greater, the degrees of expected difficulties are higher. Thep-Ackrapong (2005) pointed out that English and Thai are different at all levels: pronunciation, word, grammar, and text. Therefore, the Thai students have to encounter high degrees of difficulties in L2 writing because most of Thai language systems are different from the English systems. Thai students have considered grammar, which is one of the important components of English writing, very difficult. As a result, the grammatical errors in English writing produced by the students can be made at all times. This following is an interlanguage error made by Thai L2 students.

#### **Example, There is no \*difference between them.**

However, besides the interlanguage errors, the errors can occur because of the intralingual and developmental errors. Richards (1974) explained that the intralingual and developmental errors happen regardless of the L2 learners' first language backgrounds. They reflect the learners' competence at a particular stage and explain some of the general characteristics of language acquisition. Origins of the errors are within the structures of English itself and through learning strategies and teaching techniques in the English language. Under the main source of the intralingual and developmental errors, the errors are resulted from four causes:

1. Over-generalization: it is the blending of two structures in the standard form of the target language. The learners commit errors by using deviant structures based on their

experiences of other structures of the target language. They employ one form or structure in one context and extend its application to other contexts where it should not be applied.

Example, In the past, students \*follow the rule of wearing school uniforms strictly.

2. Ignorance of rule restrictions: the learners apply rules to the contexts where they are not applicable. They result from the failure to observe the restrictions of the existing structures.

Example, Now, parents are important people who can tell the students to wear the school uniforms by \*encourage them.

3. Incomplete application of rules: the learners fail to use the complete knowledge of the target language. The errors occur when the learners think that their communication is accomplished by using simple rules rather than more complicated structures.

Example, Now, a lot of people usually open Bluetooth while they \*using their cell phones.

4. False concepts hypothesized: the learners cannot completely understand target language distinctions, or they perceive inaccurate ideas about language rules. The errors under this cause are sometimes due to poor gradation of teaching items.

Example, He \*is speaks French.

### **Error Analysis (EA)**

Error Analysis (EA) was established by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues in 1967 (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). It emphasizes the significance of errors in L2 learners' interlanguage system (Brown, 2000). The interlanguage, also called a learner language, is a linguistic system used by L2 learners who are not yet fully competent in the target language. The learners also apply some rules of their L1 in production of the target language and create their own language systems, which are different from the L1 and the target language (Brudhiprabha, 2016; Ellis, 2000; Gass, Behney, and Plonsky, 2013). James (1998) noted that EA is processed by comparing between learners' interlanguage and the target language to find out deviant forms, which are judged as the errors. The errors can indicate learners' stages of language learning and reveal the development of hypotheses regarding the rules of the target language. They are considered as evidence of the learners' strategies when they build competence in the target language. EA was proposed on account of the shortcomings of the Contrastive Analysis (CA) which sometimes provides inaccurate and uninformative predictions of L2 learners' errors. The CA processes by comparing the structures of two language systems to find similarities and differences in order to predict possible difficulties that the learners may encounter in an L2 learning situation, and the difficulties could lead to the errors. Nevertheless, characteristics of the interlanguage errors deriving from the studies of Contrastive Analysis also assist to explain some grammatical errors, which occur because of L1 interference (Gass et al., 2013). Brudhiprabha (1972) stated that EA provides useful knowledge to the L2 learners, the teachers, and the researchers because it can lead us to find answers of what grammatical errors learners make, why they make the errors, and how the errors could be explained.

Gass et al. (2013) proposed six steps to analyze grammatical errors committed by the L2 learners, which are collecting data, identifying errors, classifying errors, quantifying errors, analyzing error sources, and remediating. The present study analyzed the research data by following the first five steps of error analysis, which are presented below in Figure 1. However, the sixth step of the error analysis called remediating was not included in this study because it was not relevant to the purposes of this study.

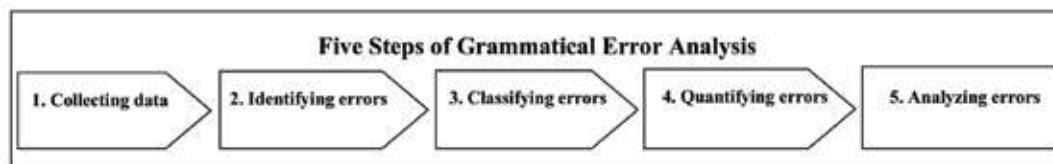


Figure 1 Five Steps of Grammatical Error Analysis

Source: Gass et al. (2013, p. 92)

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

The researcher conducted this study based on mixed methods, which is a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches (Merriam and Associates, 2002; Muijs, 2011). The quantitative part of the study was to investigate the grammatical errors in the students' English writing. The findings were presented in terms of frequencies, percentages, and ranks. The qualitative part of the study was to use content analysis to explain how the interlanguage errors and the intralingual and developmental errors plausibly affected the errors made in the writing.

### Research Instrument

The research instrument employed in this study was 34 English essays written by 34 Thai second year English majors in one private university in Thailand. They were taking the English Essay Writing course in the second semester of academic year 2014.

### Data Collection Procedure

Based on the five steps of grammatical error analysis (Gass et al., 2013), the error analysis started the first step by collecting the last assignments of English essays written by the 34 students. Each student wrote one piece of persuasive essay by selecting one from the three topics based on the textbook: school uniforms, cell phone manners or safety, and global warming. Length of the essay was 300-500 words (A4 paper), and the written task was take home the assignment which needed submission within one week. The researcher asked for permission from the course instructor to have those English essays photocopied. After that the 34 photocopied writings were assigned numbers 1 – 34 instead of students' names for the next step of data analysis.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis followed next steps of grammatical error analysis which were identifying errors, classifying errors, quantifying errors, and analyzing errors respectively. As the step of identifying errors, the researcher identified the errors by comparing the students' sentences with what would be the correct sentences in the English. If the sentences were not in accordance with the appropriate usage or norms of English grammatical rules in the particular contexts, they were judged as the errors. Referring to the step of classifying errors, the errors were categorized according to characteristics of each error sub-type based on the pre-set framework of grammatical error classification, which is adapted from Dulay et al., (1982) and James (1998). The researcher underlined the errors and marked asterisks and codes of errors above the students' deviant sentences such as \*Nfo for noun form errors

or \*Vge for gerund errors, etc. Every occurrence of errors was recorded from each sample even if its occurrence was repeated in order to find the frequency of each error sub-type. According to the step of quantifying errors, the frequencies of each error sub-type were calculated into percentages. The results were recorded in a checking form of grammatical error types with frequencies, percentages, and ranks. Based on the last step of analyzing errors, the researcher analyzed the errors of each sub-type to find how the two sources of errors: the interlanguage errors and the intralingual and developmental errors plausibly affected the error production in their writing.

### Accuracy

In order to make the study results accurate, the researcher as an advance learner of English language identified and classified grammatical errors of the 34 English writings by underlying the found errors as well as marking asterisks and codes of errors on the deviant sentences. After that, the English expert was needed to verify the accuracy of the error identification and classification. The researcher randomly selected 10% of the students' original writings together with the writings checked by the researcher to be examined by the expert. The expert and the researcher discussed any disagreement about the error checking.

### Findings

Regarding research question 1, "What types of grammatical errors are found in the English writing of Thai students?" the results showed that the found grammatical errors were identified and classified into the two main types: morphological errors and syntactic errors with their error sub-types.

**Table 1** Error Types Found in English Writing

Main Types	Sub-types	
1. Morphological errors (deviant forms of English writing in a word level)	1) Noun form errors	9) Model/auxiliary errors
	2) Singular/plural errors	10) Adjective errors
	3) Pronoun errors	11) Adverb errors
	4) Present errors	12) Possessive errors
	5) Past errors	13) Preposition errors
	6) Subject-verb agreement errors	14) Article errors
	7) Gerund errors	15) Possessive (determiner) errors
	8) Infinitive errors	16) Demonstrative errors
2. Syntactic errors (deviant forms of English writing in a sentence level)	1) Word order errors	9) BUT-type errors
	2) Run-on/ comma splice errors	10) OR-type errors
	3) Fragment errors	11) SO-type errors
	4) Omission of subjects	12) Noun clause/phrase errors
	5) Omission of verbs/actions	13) Adjective clause/phrase errors
	6) Omission of objects/compliments	14) Adverbial clause/phrase errors
	7) 'There' structure errors	15) Passive voice errors
	8) AND-type errors	16) Comparison errors

As shown in Table 1, the errors were found in both of two main types of morphological errors and syntactic errors. There were 16 error sub-types occurred in the morphological errors, and the syntactic errors contained 16 error sub-types. However, from the research

findings, there was no error found in four error sub-types: future tense errors, sequence of tense errors, parallel errors, and redundancy errors.

The answers to research question 2, “What common grammatical error types are frequently used in their English writing?”, are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** Frequency of All Error Sub-types

<b>Framework of Grammatical Error Classification</b>					
<b>Item</b>	<b>Error Type</b>	<b>Error Code</b>	<b>Error Frequency (Tokens) (f)</b>	<b>% out of Total Errors</b>	<b>Rank (r)</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Morphological Errors</b>				
1.1	Noun errors				
	A. Noun form errors	Nfo	17	0.77	21
	B. Singular/ plural errors	Nsp	675	30.43	1
1.2	Pronoun errors	Pro	78	3.52	5
1.3	Tense Errors				
	A. Present errors	Tpr	34	1.53	12
	B. Past errors	Tpa	11	0.50	24
1.4	Subject-verb Agreement Errors	Sv	94	4.24	4
1.5	Verb Form Errors				
	A. Gerund errors	Vge	61	2.75	6
	B. Infinitive errors	Vin	60	2.71	7
	C. Modal/Auxiliary errors	Vmo	34	1.53	12
1.6	Adjective Errors	Adj	45	2.03	9
1.7	Adverb Errors	Adv	19	0.86	20
1.8	Possessive Errors	Pos	57	2.57	8
1.9	Preposition Errors	Pre	116	5.23	3
1.10	Determiner Errors				
	A. Article errors	Dar	477	21.51	2
	B. Possessive errors	Dpo	25	1.13	17
	C. Demonstrative errors	Dde	15	0.68	22
<b>2</b>	<b>Syntactic Errors</b>				
2.1	Word order errors	Wor	15	0.68	22
2.2	Ill-formed sentence errors				
	A. Run-on/ comma splice errors	Run	39	1.76	10
	B. Fragment errors	Fra	38	1.71	11
	C. Omission of subjects	Osu	39	1.76	10
	D. Omission of verbs/ actions	Ove	24	1.08	18
	E. Omission of objects/ compliments	Oob	31	1.40	14
	F. “There” structure errors	There	24	1.08	18
2.3	Compound sentence structure errors				
	A. AND-type errors	And	26	1.17	16
	B. BUT-type errors	But	29	1.31	15

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**Framework of Grammatical Error Classification**


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Item	Error Type	Error Code	Error Frequency (Tokens) (f)	% out of Total Errors	Rank (r)
	C. OR-type errors	Or	6	0.27	26
	D. SO-type errors	So	13	0.59	23
2.4	Complex sentence structure errors				
	A. Noun clause/ phrase errors	Ncp	38	1.71	11
	B. Adjective clause/ phrase errors	Adjc	32	1.44	13
	C. Adverbial clause/ phrase errors	Advc	19	0.86	20
2.5	Passive voice errors	Pas	20	0.90	19
2.6	Comparison errors	Com	7	0.32	25
Total			2,218	100%	

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Based on Table 2, the results presented that the students totally committed 2,218 grammatical errors under the 32 error sub-types. The three most frequently found errors were singular/plural errors ( $f = 675$ , 30.43%,  $r = 1$ ), article errors ( $f = 477$ , 21.51%,  $r = 2$ ), and preposition errors ( $f = 116$ , 5.23%,  $r = 3$ ) respectively.

According to research question 3, "How do interlanguage errors and intralingual and developmental errors plausibly affect the grammatical error commission in their English writing?", the research findings revealed that both of two main sources had significant influences on the error production. The possible source of each error sub-type was summarized in the Table 3.

**Table 3** Summaries of Error Sources under Each Error Sub-type

Sources of Errors	Error Sub-types		
<b>1. Interlanguage errors</b>	1) Noun form errors	9) Word order errors	
	2) Singular/ plural errors	10) Run-on/ comma splice errors	
	3) Pronoun errors	11) Fragment errors	
	4) Modal/Auxiliary errors	12) Omission of subjects	
	5) Adjective errors	13) Omission of objects/ compliments	
	6) Adverb errors	14) 'There' structure errors	
	7) Possessive errors	15) Adverbial clause/ phrase errors	
	8) Possessive (determiner) errors		
<b>2. Intralingual and developmental errors</b>			
	2.1 Over-generalization	1) Past errors	
		2) Infinitive errors	
	2.2 Ignorance of rule restrictions	1) Subject-verb agreement errors	8) BUT-type errors
		2) Gerund errors	9) OR-type errors
		3) Preposition errors	10) SO-type errors
		4) Article errors	11) Noun clause/phrase errors
		5) Demonstrative errors	12) Adjective clause/ phrase errors
		6) Omission of verbs/ actions	13) Adverbial clause/ phrase errors
		7) AND-type errors	

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Sources of Errors	Error Sub-types
2.3 Incomplete application of rules	1) Present errors 2) Passive voice errors 3) Comparison errors
2.4 False concepts hypothesized	-

According to the results from Table 3, it showed that both of the interlanguage errors and the intralingual and developmental errors became possible sources of the students' error commission when writing English because both of them were analyzed to be the important causes of found errors. Bases on the error analysis, the influences of L1 interference caused 15 error sub-types, and 18 error sub-types were plausibly resulted from the difficulties and problems within the target language itself.

## Discussion and Recommendations

### Discussion of Grammatical Error Analysis

By reviewing the researching findings, it showed that the students' proficiency to apply the rules of English grammar was still inefficient because they made several errors under the 32 error sub-types. These errors were commonly found in the findings of the previous studies by Nonkukhetkhong (2013) and Watcharapanyawong and Usaha (2013). Consequently, it could be assumed that the error sub-types found in this study have been common grammatical errors made by Thai students when they write English. However, the error under future tense errors, sequence of tense errors, parallel errors, and redundancy errors was not found. It was because the students might be careful when they used these structures or understand these grammatical rules, thus these four error sub-types might be not the students' problems in this writing. The students produced 2,218 errors in their English writing. The errors found in the morphological errors ( $f = 1,818$ , 81.97%) were greater than the syntactic errors ( $f = 400$ , 18.03%). It could show that the students had encountered more difficulties of English production in the word level than in the sentence level. This result was in line with the previous study of Nonkukhetkhong (2013) about the errors made by English major students in their English essays that the most frequent errors were general grammatical errors (47.41%), which contained similar details to the morphological errors in the present study. The top three of the most frequently found errors in the present study were singular/plural errors (30.43%), followed by article errors (21.51%), and preposition errors (5.23%). It meant that the students needed to focus much more on the use of grammatical rules when writing English, especially these top three error sub-types. Regarding the results from analyzing the error sources, the interlanguage errors caused the students who were not competent in English grammar to tend to rely on Thai structures when producing English sentences. Differences between Thai and English structures could confuse the students to make the errors in their English writing. One example of the singular/plural errors was 'Some people have a lot of \*reason why they do not like wearing the school \*uniform'. The error occurred because the rule of singular/plural forms does not exist in Thai, so the student unmarked the plural endings '-s' after the noun 'reason' and 'uniform' when he/she transferred Thai grammar to English grammar. Moreover, the students might transfer norms of Thai rules into English writings when they attempted to present more complicated ideas or opinions in their written essays. The students would have no idea how to write certain ideas

in English, thus they thought in Thai and translated them to English. However, the direct translations became the deviant sentences. Furthermore, the intralingual and developmental errors also proved their influential roles on the students' errors. The students over-generalized the English structures because some rules were difficult and complex, hence they tended to use their learned English structures to apply with new sentences inappropriately. Besides, the ignorance of rule restrictions was found when the students failed to observe some restrictions of the grammatical rules, so they applied those rules inaccurately. Furthermore, the students tried to use some learnt grammatical structures, but they were able to apply them partly, so the rule applications were still incomplete. Nevertheless, the cause of false concept hypothesized was not found to play any influence on the students' error production.

### **Recommendations from Grammatical Error Analysis**

#### **Recommendations from the Current Study**

The students should be aware of grammatical applications when writing English, especially the top three error sub-types: the singular/plural errors, the article errors, and the preposition errors. The English writing teachers and the syllabus designers could create more appropriate lessons and teaching material to remedy their English grammatical problems by using the research results as guidance. The teachers should instruct the students to realize the importance of using correct grammar in English writing. The teachers should provide the appropriate feedback and explanation of the errors made to the students in order to make them recognize and be aware of the common grammatical error commission, especially the top three common errors. Referring to the analysis of the two plausible error sources: the interlanguage errors and the intralingual and developmental errors, the teachers should distinguish different structures between Thai and English grammar and explain them to the students. The teachers may encourage the students to think in English and use plain English when writing sentences in order to prevent any direct translation of Thai to English. Furthermore, the characteristics of the errors which were caused from the difficulties and problems within English itself should be focused and explained more by the teachers. Implications of these exposed findings might raise the students' understanding and awareness to write English sentences more accurately.

#### **Recommendations for Further Studies**

In the present study, the researcher only analyzed the plausible source of the errors based on the students' final written products. Therefore, researchers of future studies can get more insight into the sources of error commission, which cause Thai students to make those common grammatical errors by providing feedback of the found errors from the research samples and interviewing them why they make those deviant structures. The present study used the persuasive essays as the researcher instrument. The future studies should employ different essay genres to find and compare any similar or contrastive result. Besides doing the error analysis of English essays, the researchers may analyze the common errors found in the other text types, such as e-mails and memos. Different written genres and text types have their dissimilar nature and patterns. The findings of these future studies will provide various dimensions of problematic areas encountered by Thai L2 learners. Consequently, all benefits derived from the research results can lead the English teachers, the course syllabus designers, and the researchers to be able to improve the Thai students' English writing proficiency.

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