

## **“How Tagmemics Can Help the EFL User to Write Better English Constructions”\*\***

\*Asst.Prof.Dr.Vinit Phinit-Akson

From several years of experience in teaching English to EFL users in Thailand at several institutions at the tertiary level [Thammasat University, Dhurakijpundit University, Huachiew Chalermprakiet University, and the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce] in writing subjects and in other subjects which involve some degree of writing [English for Economists, Business English], I have found that traditional approaches used in teaching Thai EFL users to write English constructions have proved to be ineffective. This fact is borne out by the consistent syntactic errors at all levels of writing by Thai EFL users, from the beginning level of guided composition right up to paragraph writing, essay writing, and report writing.

Writing English constructions, EFL users regularly commit syntactic errors at the clause and phrase levels which tend to detract from their efforts at English composition. In other words, the prevalence of syntactic errors gets carried over into more advanced writing particularly at the paragraph and essay stages.

Such common errors committed by EFL users in writing English include : “the omission of the subject” in clauses and phrases; the “lack of a verb” in clauses and phrases; the “mis-use of adjectives”, particularly the “misuse of multiple adjectives”; the “mis-use of adverbs”; and, other syntactic errors which stem mainly from the intricacies of English inflections [which EFL users haven’t mastered].

---

\*Asst.Prof. Dr. Vinit Phinit-Akson was a former Dean of the Faculty of Humanities (now the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences) at Dhurakijpundit University, and a lecturer of the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce : Ph.D. (Linguistics), T.E.S.O.L. Certificate, University of Pittsburgh, U.S.A.

\*\* Paper presented at the Regional Language Centre [S.E.A.M.E.O.] RELC Seminar 2004, April 19-21, 2004 in Singapore.

A “side-effect” of the weaknesses of EFL user is in the “lack of variety” of their writing. Consequently, EFL writing tends to be rather “mundane” and “lacks the variety” of good English writing.

EFL teachers, having to implement the “imposed” course syllabus, have been forced to teach “paragraph writing” and “essay writing” even though their charges [the EFL users] have not been able to produce the very essential “parts of the such paragraphs or essays”, namely the “clauses” [or the “sentences” in traditional terminology] and “phrases”.

Yet, one of the common problems which EFL students often encounter while studying English as a foreign language is the mastery of producing grammatical English sentences, both in their written and spoken forms, but particularly in writing, since writing involves more formal structures.

The application of tagmemics to the teaching of English writing, particularly at the clause and phrase levels, can help EFL users in their endeavors towards producing grammatical English sentences. From this stage, it is only a step or two further in producing grammatically correct English paragraphs and academic essays, the ultimate goals of EFL users.

Tagmemics can be used to instruct EFL users and students to master English syntactic constructions and become more proficient in writing English and overcome common student writing errors.

### Some Common Errors by Users of EFL in Writing English

From experience in teaching writing to EFL students at various levels in several institutions in Thailand, I have found that student output from such endeavors testifies clearly to the fact that many EFL users, indeed, go through a painful process in writing English constructions, particularly at the clause and phrase levels. Moreover, such errors get carried over into the paragraph and essay levels in the latter stages of study.

- (a) A common error committed by EFL users is to “omit” the “verb” in writing English constructions at the clause [sentence] level.
- (b) An equally common error is to write English clause level constructions without using the required “subject”.

- (c) Another common error is that some EFL users often misuse “modifiers” such as adjectives, particularly in cases where multiple-adjectives or modifiers occur.
- (d) Another common characteristic of EFL English writing is that it usually lacks “style” or “variety” as we know it in good written English.
- (e) Other types of errors seem to stem from the fact that English is an inflecting type of language, whereas Thai is an isolating type of language. In writing English, EFL users have to deal with the intricacies of English inflections which in most cases, they haven’t mastered. Hence, the numerous “syntactic errors.”

EFL users/ students who have problems producing syntactically acceptable constructions and who make far too many writing mistakes in syntax, or, syntactic errors, can benefit from further training and practice in writing English constructions at the clause and phrase levels which are the important building blocks, if you will, of writing paragraphs, essays, and academic articles and reports, the ultimate goals of academic writing.

The use of *tagmemics* by the EFL teacher in instructing EFL students at the early stages of writing, can provide a positive effect and help EFL students overcome weaknesses at this introductory stage of writing.

It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate how useful *tagmemics* can be when applied to the teaching of writing to EFL users, particularly at the clause and phrase levels, the building blocks, if you will, of more sophisticated writing. But, prior to applying tagmemics to the teaching of writing, it is necessary to look at some of the basic precepts of tagmemics.

### A Linguistic Approach to Language Description and a Preview of Tagmemics

Any linguistic description of language must meet three basic requirements. The description has to be able to handle the “sounds” of language. It must also be able to handle the “forms” of the language. Finally, it must also be able to handle the “arrangements of such forms” in sentences.

Tagmemic theory is able to handle all three levels or “tiers” of language. Tagmemics can deal with the sounds of language; the forms of language; and, the arrangements of such forms in a three tiered hierarchy of *phonology* [the sounds], *lexicon* [the words], and *grammar* [the arrangements of such forms or words]. In particular, tagmemic theory is able to deal with the syntactic component very well.

Since I shall be looking at how “tagmemics” can help the EFL user to write better English constructions, this paper only deals with the third tier, that is, the “syntactic” or “grammatical level” of English where the “tagmeme” is the smallest unit and various tagmemic constructions [or “strings”] are larger/longer units in the hierarchy.

## Some Background to Tagmemics: Language as Particle Wave and Field

Tagmemics was, initially, formally introduced to the linguistic circle by Kenneth L. Pike in his publication “Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior,” [see Bibliography below]. According to Pike, the units of language description can be described simultaneously as “particle, wave, and field” at all three levels.

### A Static View of Language

Viewed from the “particle” aspect, the units of language are looked at in their “feature mode”. In this feature mode, the language units are described as “clear-cut” particles, with each particle well defined. This is a “static view” of language.

### A Dynamic View of Language

Viewed from the “wave” aspect, the units of language are looked at in their “manifestation mode”. This is a “dynamic view” of language as opposed to the static or “particle view” above.

### A Systemic View of Language

Viewed from the “field” aspect, the units of language are looked at in their “distribution mode”. This is a “systematic or functional view” of language.

By viewing the unit of language description as “particle, wave, and field” simultaneously, tagmemics does not separate the language into three separate parts. Rather, the language unit is simultaneously looked at from three different viewpoints – as a divisible unit; as composed of variants; and, as part of a set of oppositions within a field or matrix system.

## Tagmemics At the Syntactic Level: Correlation of Function and Form Tends to Help EFL Learners

At the syntactic level, the tagmeme unit itself is defined as the “correlation of a grammatical function or slot with the class of mutually substitutable items that fill that slot.”

The tagmeme unit, then, is a “correlation or composite of function” [ie. subject / object /, adjunct, etc] and form” [ie. noun / noun phrase / pronoun; or, verb, verb phrase, etc]. It is not merely a form unit as in other grammatical models. In its manifestation, the “forms” fill the “slots.” By correlating “function” with “form”, tagmemics helps EFL users to understand English constructions at the clause and phrase levels better [see below].

A simple example of a “tagmeme is the notation S:N where “S” is the “subject function” filled by an “N” which stands for the form, being either a noun, a noun phrase, or pronoun.

It should be emphasized from the start that the tagmeme is neither a function nor a filler class by itself. Rather, it is a “correlation of both slot and class”. Therefore, we can abbreviate this description of *the tagmeme at the syntactic level as being a “slot-class correlative.”*

In tagmemics, terminologies such as “predicate {phrase}, place, time, manner and direction” are regarded as FUNCTIONAL. Terminologies such as NP, VP, Aux, Prep-Phrase {relater-axis-phrase in tagmemics} are regarded as FORMAL. The two are not mixed together such as in other linguistics models: in transformational

grammar [TG], for example, Chomsky {1965:106} uses formulas which are intermixed. This is exemplified by PS rules as follows –

Sentence -----	NP + Predicate Phrase
Predicate Phrase -----	Aux + VP {place} {time}
VP -----	V {NP} {Prep-Phrase} {Manner}
Prep Phrase-----	Direction, Place, etc

Note that in the TG model above, “function” [predicate] and “form” [noun phrase] are intermixed.

In using tagmemics, it is necessary to be familiar with a few conventions or notations, as used in writing tagmemic formulas.

## The Tagmemic System's Explicit Naming Process: Some Conventions

One of the features of tagmemics is that at the syntactic level, the tagmemic system is very explicit with regards to the naming process.

At the syntactic level, “function and form” [or, slot and filler] are both named in the position such as: S: N which I mentioned earlier. This is a simplification of the tagmeme as represented by a “subject” [function] slot filled by a “noun phrase/ noun/ or pronoun” [form].

In tagmemics, the “form” [such as noun/noun phrase/ or pronoun in the example above] is named by listing the forms that fill the slot to the right hand side of the “ratio mark or colon” [:].

The “function” is named by giving a label to the syntactic meaning carried by the forms to the left hand side of the “ratio mark” [such as “subject” function in the above example].

When the tagmeme unit is placed in a string [that is, in the syntagmeme or construction], it becomes possible to answer and make clear to the EFL user/student such questions relating to this tagmemic unit itself regarding :

- the role it performs [as subject/ object, etc];
- where it occurs [its distribution];
- what it is [noun, noun phrase, pronoun; verb, verb -phrase etc.]

Such information is readily apparent in tagmemic formulas and this can assist the EFL student in the early stages of writing. Specifically, the use of tagmemics in English writing classes can help EFL users and students overcome common mistakes such as writing constructions which “lack a verb”; or constructions which lack a “subject”; or “misuse of multiple modifiers” mentioned earlier.

In tagmemics, we deal with various types of tagmemes and in writing English constructions at the clause and phrase levels, there are several types of tagmemes involved.

### Types of Tagmemes

Tagmemes can be of the “obligatory” [must occur] variety or of the “optional” [can occur or need not occur] variety. English verbs are, of course, obligatory in an independent clause. So are subjects. Unfortunately, many EFL users are not aware of this requirement and simply “omit” [or forget] “subjects” or “verbs”.

Tagmemes can also be “nuclear” [central] or “peripheral” [surrounding].

Tagmemes can also be in “fixed” or “movable” positions. This can be summarized as follows:

- (a) *obligatory tagmemes* vs. *optional tagmemes*
- (b) *nuclear tagmemes* vs. *peripheral tagmemes*
- (c) tagmemes distributed in *fixed* or *movable* positions

What do such tagmemic terms mean? Specifically,

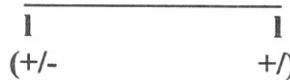
- (a) *Obligatory tagmemes* are those which occur in *every occurrence of the structure*.  
*Optional tagmemes*, however, *occur in some but not all of the manifestations of the construction*.
- (b) *A nuclear tagmeme*, on the other hand, is *central to the construction* in which it occurs, but can be either *obligatory* [necessary] or *optional* [can occur or need not occur].

*A peripheral tagmeme*, however, is a tagmeme that is *not diagnostic* [*not central*] to the construction to which it occurs. Moreover, it is always *optional*. [Peripheral tagmemes are also called *satellite* or *marginal tagmemes*.]

- (c) *Fixed or movable tagmemes* are, as the names imply, either *non-movable* or *movable*.

At the clause level, for example, since nuclear [central] tagmemes are central to the clause level construction, they are represented by such tagmemes as “subject”, “predicate” (object), “locator”, etc. It is possible to have tagmemes which are both “nuclear” and “optional”.

Moreover, *tagmemes are either “movable” or “fixed” in a construction string*, since English has “movable” word order [within acceptable limits]. This feature of English clause level constructions can be formally indicated in tagmemic notation as follows:



For example, the following three clauses /sentences:

- “Thongchai, after all, is a student.”
- “After all, Thongchai is a student.”
- “Thongchai is a student, after all.”

are all perfectly acceptable English string permutations. That is, the phrases can be moved around with certain exceptions. But there are also limitations to permutations of tagmemic strings. Note, that the following example, is not acceptable:

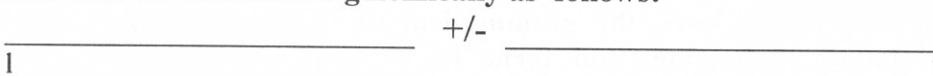
- \* [ungrammatical example] \* “Thongchai, a student is, after all.

### Lack of Variety or Syntactic Variation in the Constructions of EFL Student Writing

It is in such “permutations” of syntactic strings that EFL users often have trouble with in writing. Any writing teacher who has read the class assignments of EFL students would have noticed the rather “mundane” characteristics of writing by EFL users. This is largely due to the inability of EFL users to use the varied permutations of English string constructions. However, this could, in fact, be due to a lack of confidence on the part of EFL users also.

One of the features of a good composition or writing in English is the degree of “variety” of the syntactic constructions, particularly at the clause and phrase levels. Most writing by EFL students lack this “syntactic variation” which is both possible/and used in good English, but rarely used by EFL users and students, if at all, in writing.

The following English transitive clause is open to certain kinds of permutations and can be indicated tagmemically as follows:



tCl = + S:N + P:tv + O:N      +/-L:loc      +/- T:tem
---

(a) Jarunee + drives + the car +/- to work +/- on weekdays.  
 [or]

tCl =	+/ - T:tem	+S:N	+P:tv	+/-O:N	+/-L:loc
-------	------------	------	-------	--------	----------

(b) +/-On weekdays, +Jarunee +drives +/- the car+/-to work.

This tagmemic formulation indicates that this particular transitive clause construction has movable tagmemes and that the movable tagmemes are also optional. This helps the EFL user to understand that it is possible in English constructions to have the various syntactic string variations as indicated:

Even the following string is still acceptable:

(c) Jarunee drives the car [on weekdays] to work.

However, not all permutations are acceptable and the following string is not generally acceptable in most native English speaking /user communities: [\*Jarunee, on weekends, drives the car to work.] [ungrammatical].

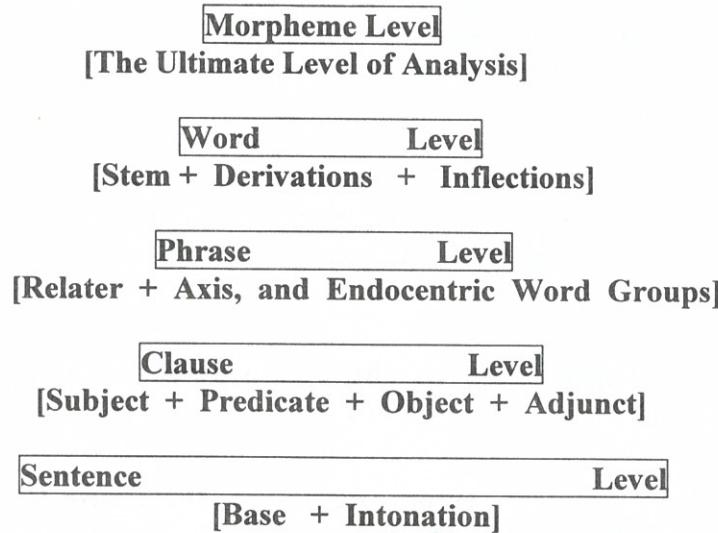
## The Syntagmeme

It is possible to compare tagmemic units with the links in a chain. Similarly, tagmemic units are strung together in constructions. Such constructions [or strings], are called syntagmemes in tagmemics. Technically, the syntagmeme is a potential string of tagmemes where words/morphemes fill grammatical slots.

Before we look at the various tagmemic clauses and phrases, I'd like to look at the syntactic levels of the tagmemic system as a whole.

## The Tagmemic System of Grammatical Levels

In tagmemics, at the syntactic level, the grammatical unit is the tagmeme itself, which is a correlation of function and form. The construction is a potential string of tagmeme units or, syntagmeme. The system, then, is the grammatical hierarchy, arranged in a series of systematic levels such as in the following diagram, where the smallest meaningful unit is the morpheme, and the largest unit is the sentence, which is similar to the clause but includes "intonation". See Diagram 1 below.



**Diagram 1. The Tagmemic Grammatical Levels or Tiers.**

### Tagmemic Grammar

Tagmemic grammar, in its simplest terms, is composed of :

- a set of formulas at the various levels;
- a lexicon of constituent morphemes

As stated earlier, tagmemics centers around well-defined units called tagmemes, which are, the correlation of a functional slot with the filler class. In a linguistic construction, these units combine in syntagmemes or strings of tagmemes. These constructions, as defined and identified above, are grouped at various levels of grammar.

### Tagmemic Formulation

As seen in the previous examples above, in the description of a language, it is possible to set up a series of tagmemic formulas at the natural levels of language, namely, the sentence, the clause, the phrase, and word levels. For our purposes here, I shall be concentrating on the most relevant levels, namely the "clause and phrase levels".

In tagmemic analysis, it is necessary to be precise and elements which can be left out from the sentence/clause structures are marked as optional [+/-]. That is, they may or may not occur; all other elements are marked as obligatory [+]. That is, they must occur.

For the applications of tagmemics to English writing constructions, the “clause” and “phrase” levels are most relevant to the early stages of EFL writing [and which get carried over into paragraph and essay writing at a later stage].

### **The Application of Tagmemics to the Teaching of Writing English at the Clause Level**

In EFL writing, many student errors occur at the clause level. Classroom presentations by the instructor of the following clause types using tagmemic formulation have also proved helpful to EFL students. [1]

### **Tagmemic Formulas for Various Types of Clause Level Constructions in English Writing:**

Although there are several variations in English clause level constructions, the following can be regarded as the “general format”.

#### **(Type 1) Transitive Clause Level Formula -**

<b>tCl = +S:N +Ptv</b>	<b>+O:N</b>	<b>+/-L:RA</b>	<b>+/- T:tem</b>
------------------------	-------------	----------------	------------------

+Tamarine +smashed + the ball +/- aross the court +/- yesterday

This tagmemic formula can be “read” as follows:

“A transitive clause consists of a subject slot [filled by a noun phrase]; a predicate slot [filled by a transitive verb]; an object slot [filled by a noun phrase]; an optional location slot [filled by a relater-axis phrase]; and, an optional temporal slot filled by a temporal phrase.”

## Variations: Clause Types in Written English

English clause level constructions [syntagmemes] can be broadly categorized into “independent clauses” and “dependent clauses” [similarly to traditional grammar].

It is possible to further classify English independent clauses into 3 sub-types as either: (1) transitive; (2) intransitive; or (3) equational.

In tagmemics, a *transitive clause* (Type 1) is a clause which has a verb which can take an object. As we saw earlier, a typical clause level formula for an English transitive clause [type 1] is as follows:

tCl = +S:N	+P:tv	+O:N
+ Paradorn	+served	+an ace.

### (Type 2) Intransitive Clause

In tagmemics, an intransitive clause [type 2] has a verb which can never take an object. Apart from the absence of an object, there is also the inability of intransitive verbs to transform into the passive.

A typical clause level formula for an intransitive clause would be as follows:

tCl = +S:N	+P:iv	+/-L:loc
+ Tamarine	+ went	+/- home

This intransitive clause formula is “read” as follows:

“An intransitive clause consists of a subject slot filled by a noun, a predicate slot filled by an intransitive verb, and an optional location slot filled by a locative”.

Note that unlike traditional grammar, tagmemics defines a transitive clause as having the capacity to take one or more objects. An intransitive clause, on the other hand, is a clause which contains an intransitive verb that never takes an object.

### (Type 3) Equational Clause

An English equational clause (Type 3), on the other hand, is defined as a clause that contains an equational or linking verb. The linking verb connects the subject with the predicate attribute, which may be nominal, adjectival, or adverbial.

A typical tagmemic formula for an English equational clause is the following:

Eqcl = +S:N	+P:equ	+PA:N/ADJ/ADV
-------------	--------	---------------

+Chanachai	+is	+the leader.
------------	-----	--------------

The above equational clause formula is “read” as follows:

“An equational clause formula consists of a subject slot filled by a noun, a predicate slot filled by an equational verb, and a predicate attribute slot filled by a noun phrase.”

The above clause/sentence types may change from active to passive. Affirmative clauses/sentences may be changed into negative. Such changes are proper to the clause level.

### Conclusion

I would like to conclude with some words on the advantages of the tagmemic approach to language analysis and classroom presentation, especially in teaching EFL students to write syntactically and semantically acceptable English clauses [sentences] and phrases. Tagmemics, however, should be used as a “supplement” to traditional approaches to the teaching of writing.

Writing is a step by step process. In teaching academic writing to EFL students, it would be counter-productive to by-pass some of the preliminary steps because, in doing so, the ultimate goal, that of producing syntactically acceptable paragraphs and essays would be frustrated. It is, therefore, important to assist the EFL users / our students to progress through all of the stages of writing , which must include a proper grounding at both the clause level and the phrase level. Until EFL users and students are able to produce syntactically acceptable clauses and phrases, any student effort in producing acceptable paragraphs and essays [and our efforts as English language teachers to instruct students to do so] would prove rather ineffective and futile.

To re-cap, tagmemics emphasizes the correlation of function and form of linguistic units at clearly defined levels. It presents English structures, especially clause and phrase level structures, in a clear-cut way and is particularly useful in teaching writing in the early stages. The use of tagmemic formulation and the tagmemic concept of correlation of function and form can be effective in helping EFL users and students to produce more acceptable English constructions at the clause and phrase levels. Consequently, tagmemics can be an “effective teaching tool in the writing classroom”.

Moreover, tagmemics is an advanced form of structuralism which treats language as a form of behavior which can be reinforced, and as such, is useful in language instruction and learning, particularly in writing due to its formal nature. Such constructions, of course, should be used in specific and socially acceptable communicative situations.

Not only that, but tagmemics is also “generative,” in the sense that it is a sentence [clause] generator. Through the use of formulas and a sophisticated lexicon, numerous and innovative sentences can be produced by the EFL users.

The use of tagmemic formulation can be applied to English writing to generate an infinite number of syntactically, semantically, and communicatively acceptable English clauses and phrases.

The use of tagmemic formulation also allows for the presentation and permutations [variations] of linguistic strings. This helps in both the presentation of English language material and the learning of the basic forms, patterns, and functions of English syntax in communicatively acceptable contexts.

Tagmemic formulation can also be used to represent “compound sentences” and “complex sentences.” For example, a compound sentence can be easily analyzed using 2 formulas connected by a “conjunction”. Complex sentences can also be dealt with in similar fashion.

Tagmemics also defines the various levels of constructions in a clear-cut manner. The tagmemic conventions and symbols used in tagmemic formulas are straight-forward and self-explanatory. Once taught and mastered by EFL users of English, they can be readily applied and interpreted.

Because of these characteristics and features, tagmemics can be useful in training students to write syntactically and semantically acceptable English at the clause and phrase levels, the important foundations for paragraph and essay writing, the ultimate goals of teaching writing and composition.

#### Bibliography

Cook, Walter A. (1967). *The Generative Powers of a Tagmemic Grammer*. in Blansitt, E., Jr. (Ed.). Monograph Series on Languages and Linguistics No. 20. Washington D.C. : Georgetown University School of Languages and Linguistics.

Longacre, Robert E. (1960). String Constituent Analysis. *Language*, 36, pp. 63-88.

Pike, Kenneth L. (1967). *The Hague : Language : in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior*. the Hague : Mouton & Co.

\_\_\_\_\_. (2002). Communicative Language Teaching : A Viable Approach to Teaching EFL/ESL in a Global Setting. *The DPU Language Journal*, 1, 1, pp. 1-22.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1999). *English for International Trade (A Tagmemic Approach)*. Bangkok : Dhurakijpundit University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1994). *Linguistic Structure of English : A Course in Applied English Linguistics*. Bangkok : Chulalongkorn University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1972). *A Tagmemic Contrastive Analysis of Some English and Thai Question Constructions*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1976). *Trends in Linguistics : A History of the Main Developments in Linguistic Research*. Bangkok : Thammasat University Press.