Semantic and Syntactic Errors of Using *but* Produced by Thai University Students

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Abstract

Although both *but* and its Thai counterpart แต่ /tɛ′:/ are coordinators, they consist of different sematic and syntactic features. These differences make Thai university students produce errors when making English compound sentences. A group of 50 Thai university students were asked to answer four items designed to find their semantic and syntactic errors. The results were compared and contrasted in the form of percentage. It is found that the group of Thai university students are more likely to produce syntactic than semantic errors when using *but* as a coordinator. Most of their errors are more interlingual than intralingual because they result mainly from the students' faulty partial learning of English, not from their L1 interference.
Keywords: Semantic Error, Syntactic Error, But, Compound Sentence, Thai University Students

Introduction

English is a required subject for all Thai students at school and university levels. It is considered one of the most difficult subjects for Thai students. Except those at international schools or programs, most Thai students speak Thai in daily lives and use English mainly in their English classrooms.

Since English and Thai are quite different in terms of their sound systems, grammar, and vocabulary, Thai university students find it difficult to use English effectively. To improve the four main skills-reading, writing, speaking, and listening-seems to be a serious problem for them. Especially in English writing courses, they can hardly produce correct simple sentences, so writing a paragraph or an essay is an even more difficult task.

Good knowledge of English sentence structures is important for writing. When doing a writing assignment, Thai university students usually think of Thai words and structures first and then translate them into English. Due to L1 transfer, their writing assignments sound unnatural and sometimes incomprehensible. The possible errors produced by Thai university students mainly result from L1 transfer and faulty partial learning of L2.

A study conducted by Hinnon (2014: 177) revealed that the errors produced by Thai university students in English writing include syntactic, lexical and semantic errors, the use of Thai words and structures in English, and a lack of transitional words. Most of the errors are caused by L1 interference. At university levels, all Thai undergraduate students are required to write some short paragraphs during each semester. They are expected to produce

not only simple but also compound and complex sentences. For this reason, conjunctions are useful for combining two sentences. Since English conjunctions are more complicated than Thai ones in terms of their meanings and usage, Thai university students are more likely to produce errors when they use them to link two ideas.

Writing seems to be the most difficult skill not only for Thai university students. In accordance with Decharotchanawirun (2015: 18), writing is the most frequently used skill at the workplace and most of the problems in the English usage at the workplace are found in writing, followed by speaking, reading and listening. Therefore, it is very likely that Thai university students are not good at English writing.

Of all the English coordinating conjunctions, *but* is the most problematic because it has different meanings and usage in English, compared to its Thai counterpart แต่ /tɛ́ʔ:/ The semantic and syntactic features of *but* can help reveal its linguistic components in detail. Consequently, it is vital that Thai university students understand the sources and characteristics of predicted and real errors of using *but* so that they will produce fewer errors and write better assignments. As stated by Sitthirak (2017: 881), Thai university know when and how to use discourse makers in writing.

Since it is a preliminary study on semantic and syntactic errors produced by Thai university students when they use *but* to combine two clauses, the data and samples used in this study are limited. The data were collected from the four questions as shown before each table and the samples included a group of 50 Kasetsart University students who studied Fundamental Writing during the 2018 summer semester. It is one of the required courses for those who have passes Fundamental English I, II and III. The samples were the third-year students from five faculties: Social sciences (10), Science (10), Engineering (10), Humanities (10), and agriculture (10). All of them were non-English-majoring students.

Objectives

This study aims to (1) reveal the semantic and syntactic errors produced by Thai university students when they use *but,* in comparison with แต่ /tɛ́ʔ:/, to make compound sentences and (2) apply the results of the analysis of predicted and real errors for designing English Writing teaching materials in order to reduce the students' possible errors when they use *but*.

Connectors, Coordinators and Compound Sentences

Connectors are required to connect ideas, processes and actions in a logical way in every good piece of writing. In science, the organization of writing is very carefully guided. The previous statement is logically related to the following one. The relations between statements in scientific discourse can be that of summation, contrast, result, cause, similarity, exemplification and addition. According to Downing and Philip (2003, 287-294), the conjunctions convey different meanings: addition, variation, alternation, explanation, contrast, subtraction, and circumstance. As a coordinator, both but and แต่ /tɛ́ʔ:/convey a meaning of contrast. Connectors can be placed in different positions as follows, depending on types of conjunctions, types of sentences, focus of the clauses and styles of writing. Based on Sinclaire et al. (2004), the coordinators can occur between two main clauses and preceded by a comma, or S + VP, coor conj + S + V. However, in conversation, a few of them may be placed at the beginning of the second sentence.

As defined by Tyners (1987, 75), a compound sentence is a kind of sentences that consists of the three characteristics. First, it contains two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction. Second, a comma comes before the conjunction in a compound sentence. Third, the coordinating conjunction shows the relationship between the two independent clauses, as in *You should eat more, or you'll make yourself ill.* Moreover, Ebbitt and Ebbitt (1982, 203)

add that a compound sentence can be two clauses linked by a semicolon and the second clause is preceded by a conjunctive adverb which is followed by a comma, as in *I am really tired this morning; in fact, I've never been this tired in my life.* (Tyners, 128)

Meanings and usage of *but* and แต่ /tɛ́ː/

Only the meanings and usage of *but* as a coordinating conjunction, not as a preposition, are studied. The usage of but is as follows: (1) to express a difference: *We enjoyed the party, <u>but</u> it was too crowded;* (2) to introduce an added statement which is different from what is said before: *He's very hard-working, <u>but</u> not very careful;* (3) (mainly spoken) to change the subject: *There is a question about the price, <u>but</u> let's talk about that later;* (4) to introduce a polite question, request, or statement: *Excuse me, <u>but</u> how can I get to the toilet, please ?*; (5) (spoken) to express surprise, disagreement, or annoyance: *We ran after him, <u>but</u> he disappeared;* and (6) to say that something does not happen without something else happening: *We never have a good sleep <u>but </u>the dogs bark all night.*

From the above sample sentences, it is evident that *but* is usually placed between two clauses and preceded by a comma. If it is used to combined two short clauses, a comma can be omitted. In spoken English, but can be used a discourse marker to relate a preceding segment and a following one. This usage of but not only expresses a contrastive meaning but also add some interpretation (Fraser: 945).

On the contrary, แต่ /tɛ́ː/ is used to show contrast onlyas in นกบินแต่ปลาว่ายน้ำ (Birds fly, but fis swim), เด็กผู้ชายเล่นฟุตบอล แต่เด็กผู้หญิงเล่นตุ๊กตา (Boys play football, but girls play with dolls). แต่ /tɛ́ː/ is always placed between two clauses with or without a space before it.

Usage of a comma

A cooma is one of the frequently used punctuation marks in English, but it is rarely used in Thai. As proposed by Emery, Kierzek and Lindblom (2000, 163-5), a comma can be used to separate in five different cases as follows: (1) before a coordinate conjunction when it joins two clauses of a compound sentence, as in *His face turned red, but he didn't say a word;* (2) between the items of a series, as in *The land looked brown, parched, lifeless, and ominous*; (3) between coordinate adjectives preceding a noun, as in *the harsh, cold wind (= the harsh and cold wind*; (4) after most introductory modifiers, as in *Unless the flood water receded soon, we're in trouble. To get the best view of the valley, he walked to the edge of the cliff. In fact, there was no way to keep the front door closed*; and (5) after a complex introductory prepositional phrase, except that the subject and verb are reversed or it is a single prepositional phrase, as in *In the name of justice, please help these people.*

Errors

When L1 learners study a second or foreign language, it is possible that they may produce errors. the number of errors depends on the differences between L1 and L2. Specifically speaking, the more different two languages are, the more errors L2 learners may produce. As in the Thai context, Thai people are more likely to produce errors when they use European languages than when they speak Laotian. The reason for this is that Thai and Laotian are more linguistically similar than Thai and European languages.

Actually, English and Thai are totally different in almost all linguistic aspects. Use of English connectors may cause some problems to Thai users of English. As stated by Hoonchamlong (2013), first, unlike English, Thai words or morphemes are not spaced, but they are connected into strings. Second, Thai writers and translators hardly use any punctuation marks to separate clauses and sentences. Use of punctuation marks is considered improper or English-influenced. Finally, spacing is randomly practiced. It is possible to space between clauses or

sentences, before and after numbers and between items in a list. Therefore, it is probable that Thai writers and translators may be influenced by L2 (English) when writing in Thai or translating from English to Thai or by L1 (Thai) when writing in English or translating from Thai to English.

Richards and Schmidt (2019) define an error as a consistent use of wrong or incomplete linguistic items in L2 without knowing. Therefore, learners cannot correct them. On the contrary, a mistake refers to a wrong or incomplete linguistic items in L2 resulting from learners' lack of attention, fatigue, or carelessness. Therefore, mistakes can be corrected if the learners pay more attention when using L2. In this study, Kasetsart University students produce errors when using *but* because there are some semantic and syntactic differences between *but* and แต่ /tɛ′:/, which produce predictable errors. Also, due to the students' levels of understanding, knowledge and proficiency in English, they produce other unpredictable semantic and syntactic errors.

Richards (1974) classifies errors into two types. First, intralingual errors refer to the errors caused by the interference of the learner's mother tongue. They include faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules, and failure to learn conditions where rules apply. Therefore, this type of errors is influenced by Thai. Second, developmental errors refer to the errors that reflect the learner's attempt to construct hypotheses about the language from his/her limited experience of L2 in the classroom or textbooks. They include over-generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, and false concepts hypothesized. Consequently, this types of errors reflects the learner's at a particular stage. Thai is, Kasetsart University students, who are not native speakers of English, produce this type of errors because their knowledge of English is not as complete as that of native speakers.

Ananda, Gani and Sahardin (2014: 89-94) found that most of the errors produced by first graders are fragmented sentences, followed by the absence of verbs, subjects and verbs, a verb in a dependent clause and an independent clause. The study of English errors produced by speakers of other languages has been conducted from the phonological to syntactic levels by means of contrastive analysis.

Sermsuk, Liamnimitr and Pochakorn (2017: 107-9) found 18 types of errors in English sentences written by EFL Thai students. At the sentence level, the errors of punctuation are more frequently found those of subject-verb agreement and capitalization. At the word level, the errors of articles are more frequently found than those of spelling and verbs. From their study, it can be concluded that Thai university students do not know how to use punctuation marks correctly. Moreover, most of the errors are interlingual because they are influenced by the students' first language. A similar study conducted by Promsupa, Varasarin and Brudhiprabha (2017: 99-101) showed that the BUT-type errors were more frequently produced by those of the other coordinators. In addition, this type of errors is intralingual, that is, they are caused by over-generalization or ignorance of rule restriction. Also, Khumpee and Yodkumlue (2017: 144-9) found that most of the errors produced by Thai EFL undergraduate students were punctuation

Methods

This study involves three different parts: data collection, data analysis, error prediction and error analysis.

1) Data collection: The data of this study are divided into four main groups: semantic and syntactic features of *but* and แต่ /tɛ′:/, and the standard structures of *but* and แต่ /tɛ′:/.

1.1) The semantic and syntactic features of *but* are collected from its usage provided in three widely-used English dictionaries: Collins Cobuild English usage (1992), Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2nd edition (2007), and Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005).

1.2) The standard structures of *but* is collected and summarized from the sample sentences given in the three dictionaries.

1.3) The real errors are collected from the answers given by a group of 50 Thai university students who are asked to complete the four items provided.

2) Data analysis

2.1) The semantic and syntactic features of *but* are compared and contrasted with its Thai counterpart แต่ /tɛ′:/ as follows:

> *but*   [+contrast] [+initial] [+/-pre-comma]
>
> แต่ /tɛ′:/ [+contrast] [+initial] [-pre-comma]

2.2) Only two standard sentence structures where *but* occurs are found in the sample sentences.

a. NP + VP, but + NP + VP, as in *Anne's a highly intelligent girl, but she's rather lazy.*

b. NP + VP + but + NP + VP, as in *It was a long walk but it was worth it.*

> Compared with *but*, แต่ /tɛ′:/ occurs only in this structure.
>
> NP + VP + แต่ /tɛ′:/ + NP + VP

2.3) The real errors collected from the answers given in each item are analyzed and classified according to their forms, that is, semantic and syntactic errors.

a. Semantic errors refer to errors caused by using other connectors instead of *but* to show contrast between two clauses, such as *whereas, on the other hand.*

b. Syntactic errors refer to errors caused by using ungrammatical structures after *but* to convey a meaning

3) Error prediction

The possible errors are predicted from the deviations from the standard structures of the connector *but*, which can be summarized in the forms of sentence structures as follows.

3.1) NP + VP. But + NP + VP.

This error is caused by ignorance of rule restrictions because this structure is used in speaking, not writing.

3.2) NP + VP. But, NP + VP.

This error is caused by over-generalization because a comma is usually placed after a similar conjunctive adverb of contrast, like *however,* but not after a coordinator.

Results

1) Semantic and syntactic features of _but_ and แต่ /tɛ′:/

But is used to show contrasts between two ideas and it is placed between two clauses, followed by a clause and preceded by a comma, which can be omitted between two short clauses. The only one difference between *but* and แต่ /tɛ′:/ is แต่ /tɛ′:/ is never preceded by a comma because punctuation marks are rarely used in Thai.

All the answers collected from each item are analyzed, compared, and generalized to show the characteristics of the students' errors when they use the conjunction but to combine two clauses. The results of the students' errors are classified according to their forms as follows.

2) Semantic errors of *but*

Question: *There is still a problem,_____we can talk about it later.*

(2.1) The semantic errors produced by Kasetsart University students when they write their answers to Item 1.1 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Semantic errors of using *but* and the other coordinators produced by Kasetsart University students

Answers	Number of students (N = 50)	Percentage
but	2	4
so	22	44
and	11	22
yet	7	14
for	6	12
or	1	2
nor	1	2

From Table 1, only a few of the students (2%) can use *but* correctly, whereas almost all of them (98%) use the other coordinators instead. Nearly half of them (44%) use *so*, which is a result connector, followed by *and* (22%), *yet* (14%) and *for* 12%). Therefore, the results imply that most of Kasetsart University students do not understand the contrast in meanings between two clauses.

(2.2) The semantic errors produced by Thai university students when they write their answers to Item 1.2 are shown in Table 2.

Question: *She's a very intelligent girl, _____ she's rather lazy.*

Table 2 Semantic errors of using *but* and other contrast connectors produced by Thai university students.

Answers	Number of students (N = 50)	Percentage
but	20	40
in contrast	10	20
whereas	7	14
yet	7	14
on the other hand	2	4
though	2	4
however	1	2
while	1	2

From Table 2, the results reveal that more than half of the students (60%) choose other contrast connectors instead of *but* to show contrast between two ideas, whereas nearly half of them (40%) choose the correct answer. Although the major semantic feature of *but* and the other contrast connectors are [+contrast], their usage and meanings are different. As shown by a higher percentage of those who choose the incorrect answers (60%), it implies that Thai university students still do not know the semantic differences between *but* and other contrast connectors clearly. They seem to rely only on the Thai translations of those connectors without considering their semantic restrictions. As for those who choose the other alternatives instead of but, they are very likely to use wrong contrast connectors in other situations.

3) Syntactic errors of *but*

Directions: Combine the sentences.
It was dark. The traffic was still heavy.
a. It was dark but the traffic was still heavy. (NP + VP + but + NP + VP.)
b. It was dark but the traffic was still heavy. (NP + VP, but + NP + VP.)
c. It was dark. But the traffic was still heavy. (NP + VP. But + NP + VP.)
d. It was dark. But, the traffic was still heavy. (NP + VP. But, NP + VP.)
The syntactic errors produced by Thai university students when they write their answers to Item 2 are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Syntactic errors of using *but* produced by Thai university students

Syntactic structures	Number of students (N = 50)	Percentage
a. NP + VP + but + NP + VP.	9	18
b. NP + VP, but + NP + VP.	36	72
c. NP + VP. But + NP + VP.	3	6
d. NP + VP. But, NP + VP.	2	4

From Table 3, most of the students (72%) can use *but* correctly in terms of its syntactic restrictions. They know that it must be placed between two clauses and preceded by a comma. On the contrary, those who choose (a) (18%) know how to use it to combine two clauses, but they may not know when to omit a comma before it. As for those who choose the incorrect choice (c), they do not know the rule restriction that *but* can be capitalized only in spoken language. Finally, those who choose (d) do not understand clearly the syntactic difference between *but* and conjunctive adverbs. That is, in academic writing, a conjunctive adverb can be capitalized and followed by a comma, whereas *but* can be placed after a comma between two clauses. This results from faulty partial learning of L2. Moreover, most of the Thai university students (72%) use but to join two clauses in the same manner as แต่ /tɛ́ː/ without a comma, probably due to L1 transfer.

4) Semantic and syntactic errors of *but*
Directions: Complete this sentence.
I study hard, but_____.
The semantic and syntactic errors produced by Thai university students when they write their answers to Item 3 are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Semantic and syntactic errors of using *but* produced by Thai university students

Types of errors	Number of students (N = 50)	Percentage
No errors	14	28
Semantic	10	20
Syntactic	18	36
Semantic and syntactic	8	16

From Table 4, more university students (72%) produce errors when they use *but*, whereas only 23% of them produce no errors. Moreover, nearly half of them (36%) produce more syntactic errors, such as verb tenses, sentence structures, than semantic errors. Their sentences are still comprehensible. As for those who produce semantic errors (20%), they produce correct sentence structures but fail to combine two clauses in a contrastive manner. Therefore, their sentences are incomprehensible, though grammatically correct. Finally, 16% of them produce sentences which include both semantic and syntactic errors. Their sentences are both meaningless and ungrammatical.

5) Error prediction
After the semantic and syntactic errors of *but* produced by Kasetsart University students are analyzed, the forms of possible errors can be predicted. Also, the types and sources of errors can be revealed as follows.

5.1) Semantic errors: Due to some semantic differences between *but* and แต่ /tɛ́ː/, it is very probable that Kasetsart University students will use *but* incorrectly in terms of meanings. That is, they may use another coordinator instead of *but,* resulting in wrong semantic relationships between two clauses, such as using *and* or *so* to join two contrast clauses. Therefore, their compound sentences sound incomprehensible. Although *yet* is similar to *but*, it conveys a concessive idea, not a contrast.

Moreover, when they are required to choose the correct answer among similar contrast connectors, they are less likely to choose the wrong ones, such as in contrast, whereas. This may due to the fact that the Thai translations of the other contrast connectors are different from that of *but*. Therefore, they can distinguish their meanings from that of *but* and do not produce many semantic errors.

5.2) Syntactic errors: Since most Thai university students use the correct syntactic structures of but, they are less likely to produce syntactic errors. However, there are two possible answers to this item. Those who choose (a) seem to be influenced by Thai because they do not insert a comma between two clauses and probably do not know the rule of using a comma. On the contrary, those who choose Answer B seem to understand the syntactic structures of but and its usage better than the others. for those who choose Answer c, they seem to lack understanding of using but as a coordinator. Therefore, their answers are considered a sentence fragment. Finally, those who chose Answer d seem to be confused between a coordinator and a conjunctive adverb.

5.3) Semantic and syntactic errors: Most of the sentences produced by Thai university students include syntactic errors. That is, they use wrong tenses or sentence patterns. Only a quarter of them can produce semantically and syntactically correct sentences. It can be predicted that Kasetsart University students are very likely to produce wrong sentences after *but* and they produce more syntactic errors than semantic ones.

Discussion and Conclusion

From this study, it can be concluded that (1) Thai university students tend to produce more syntactic than semantic errors, probably due to the fact that the Thai and English sentence structures are very different; (2) They do not know the semantic differences between *but* and the other contrast connectors clearly. Therefore, they produce semantic errors when using them. actually, each of the contrast connectors not only have different meanings but also have different syntactic structures; (3) The possible errors predicted from the semantic and syntactic differences between but and แต่ /tɛ′:/ are not sufficient because Thai university students produce various forms of errors.

I can be inferred that most of the Thai university students have learned how to use but in its primary sense, that is, to show contrast. This meaning is correctly used because it is similar to that of แต่ /tɛ′:/. However, when but is used a s discourse maker, especially in speaking, Thai students do not know how to use it correctly because this usage does not exist in Thai. Moreover, speaking is a skill that requires more exposure to real communicative situations.

However, it is still the basic principle of the Contrastive Analysis Approach, which helps compare and contrast two different languages; and (4) Most of the errors produced by Kasetsart University are interlingual, due to faulty partial learning of L2. Because the students are in the stage of learning English, they can possibly produce interlingual errors. However, some of their errors are intralingual because they are influenced by their L1.

Recommendation

Since this study is limited to a small group of Thai university students, the results therefore can be applied only to this group. Actually, there are also other important factors that affect errors in L2, such as the students' background knowledge, their English proficiency levels and their majors. Therefore, to conduct a more comprehensive study in the future, the subjects of the study should be classified according to their demographic data.

In the future, there should be a similar study on how Thai university students use the English connectors in both writing and speaking because the connectors can be used in different situations. Also, stylistic features of the connectors are an interesting aspect to be considered.

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