

Research Article

LINGUISTIC INTERLINGUAL ERRORS IN WRITING ENGLISH: MOTHER TONGUE INFLUENCE

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Abstract

It is commonly believed that the first language influences the second language or foreign language. Identifying the areas of difficulty, this study conducts a thorough examination of the errors made by university students in writing English, focusing on a comparison and description of interlingual errors. It involves senior students majoring in English-related fields at a university in Thailand, with their English-written test papers undergoing evaluation and subsequent comparative and descriptive analysis. The collected data facilitates both statistical and qualitative analyses, as it comprises test papers from 100 students. The analysis reveals a prevalent occurrence of typical interlingual errors in writing across the sampled data. Notably, the study highlights that certain error rates are evident in the essay test papers concerning specific writing skill characteristics. Among these, the 'transfer of rules' errors appear with the highest frequency and the most conspicuous findings pertain to 'redundancy reduction' and 'overgeneralization,' with a moderate occurrence of errors in the selected sample. In conclusion, this study's findings suggest issues with the English writing proficiency of the selected students, which could stem from challenges related to compatibility with their native language or deficiencies in their previous English instruction.

Keywords: English Writing, Mother Tongue, Language Interference, Writing Errors

Introduction

Thailand is a country with various ethnic groups. Though Thai people are united by geographical boundaries as the people who speak in Thai language (official and national language in Thailand), there are several ethnic and indigenous languages which differentiate the Thai people in many aspects. English language in Thailand is considered as a foreign language (EFL) which plays a significant role in Thai tourism industry, like other countries. Although this country is ranked as a top attractive visiting point for the tourists around the world, English as an international medium for communication could not find its strong place in the Thai society (EF Education First, 2024); and the application of this language is limited to certain institutions such as travel and tour agencies, airline companies, visiting places, international universities, the western language departments of some universities, etc. in Thailand. In the current communication age, writing is a medium to complete various purposes including academic, business, and professional purposes. Therefore, promoting Thai students' writing skill is significant as they are approaching to become one of the members of the real world as competent graduates who are ready for job.

Obviously, most of the personnel hired in such organizations could be products of the education provider systems in Thailand, among which the translators or interpreters and anyone dealing with English language contribute a critical role in communication. They must employ their language capabilities in full as they must run the communications, either oral or written.

Writing as one of the four skills of a language knowledge is with a special concern for all the Thai education providers. Writing is how individuals articulate their thoughts onto the paper. It is generally known that to write coherently involves a skillful network of the various aspects of a language (Vacalares et al., 2023). To write coherently, therefore, one should write in sentences which are grammatically right, logical and correct in all aspects of appreciation. A key barrier to learning a foreign language (FL) is interference from the learner's native language, particularly in the productive skills of speaking and writing (Jie, 2008).

There would be several obstacles to developing proficiency in English writing; and the errors are committed while writing. In general, the errors appeared in the language being learnt target language (TL) and not due to the native language (L1) is called intralingual errors (Richards, 1971). In describing intralingual errors, these errors are produced based on exposure to the target language partially. In fact, intralingual errors are seen as 'the deviations from the norms of the target language' (Richards, 1974). Use of L1 linguistic knowledge (Thai), as an assistant to compose in the TL (English) is another problematic factor in which the resulted errors are called interlingual errors. Theoretically, interlingual errors are the ones attributed to the L1 and are committed when the learners' habits (patterns, systems, or rules) interfere or prevent the learner from acquiring the patterns and rules of the source language or L1 (Corder, 1974). The L1 intervening the TL in writing process is a phenomenon known as L1 interference. Error analysis can be a method to identify not only the students' writing errors, but also the sources of the errors (Richards, 1974).

Although the present study focuses on interlingual and intralingual factors affecting foreign language writing skills, these concepts are well grounded in the broader field of second language acquisition. In this literature, they are examined through the lens of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957), which predicts learner difficulties resulting from structural differences between the first and target languages. They are also addressed within Error Analysis (Corder, 1967, 1974), which offers a systematic framework for classifying and interpreting errors to uncover their sources. Furthermore, Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972) situates these factors within the evolving linguistic system of the learner, shaped by both first language transfer and developmental processes in the target language. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a coherent foundation for understanding the types of writing errors investigated in this study.

Most of the students educating in the universities in Thailand usually undergo 11 years of formal education where English is taught as a compulsory subject. Yet, a considerable number of these students do not demonstrate a proficiency level commensurate with their length of exposure to English. Many studies conducted to examine English language learning in Thai schools, which reveals that one of the major obstacles in learning English is the influence of the national or Thai language in here.

Statement of the Problem and Significance of the Study

Believing the L1 influences on the second language (L2) or FL, it is often found out that university students speak in a language which is generally referred to ‘vernacular English,’ a mixture of mother tongue and English. The influence of the L1 is clearly shown in the written form as well, which is the basic (main) technique an FL teacher/lecturer employs in testing the proficiency of the students. It has been noted that these students make errors in their written work due to many reasons among which mother tongue interference is highlighted. A recurrence of direct translation from mother tongue into English appeared in the writings of such students (Arsad et al., 2021). The problem of erroneous written English is due to the fundamental education and gets expanded in time. While the previous conducted studies attempted to find correlations between mother tongue and FL or L2, none of them could find the exact areas of the problem with the writing skill of Thai English-major students studying at universities. This study is significant since its error analysis (EA) provides teachers with tools for better understanding of the learners’ problems in the learning an FL. Identifying the areas of difficulty is important for English Language practitioners to develop teaching materials which pay attention to such critical areas.

The Theoretical Framework

Interlingual errors classified into various distinct categories by different scholars are considered as the theoretical framework of seven general categories proposed by Richards (1971) from which three categories have been adopted in this study. These categories as the framework of this study, are ‘transfer of rules,’ ‘redundancy reduction’ and ‘overgeneralization’. These categories were specifically selected because

they comprehensively capture the predominant types of mother tongue interference relevant to Thai English-major students. By focusing on these categories, this study not only applies a considered theoretical model but also addresses a notable gap in targeted analysis of interlingual errors among the advanced learners, thereby building upon and extending Richards' framework within this study.

Review of the Literature

Interlingual interference is a significant factor affecting English writing proficiency among EFL learners, particularly in contexts where English is not the primary language. Numerous studies have investigated the sources, types, and pedagogical implications of interlingual errors, highlighting their impact on writing accuracy and coherence. These errors occur when learners transfer linguistic structures from their L1 to their L2, resulting in deviations in grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. Understanding these errors is crucial for enhancing English writing instruction and reducing the risk of fossilization.

Several studies have explored interlingual errors in EFL learners' writing. For example, analyzing the students' final projects, conducted at a tourism Study Program at a state university in North Bali, it was indicated that interlingual interference primarily resulted from the direct translation of Indonesian syntactic patterns into English (Sari et al., 2021). The researchers suggested that enhancing grammar instruction and increasing exposure to authentic English materials, such as movies and native texts, could improve grammatical accuracy and reduce errors.

Similarly, in research conducted by Murtiana (2019) at a state university in Indonesia, the findings revealed that interlingual errors were more frequent than intralingual errors, with common issues occurring in morphological, lexical, and syntactical structures, using Corder's Error Analysis (EA) theory. Errors such as word unordering, incorrect verb usage, and inappropriate lexical choices were prevalent. The study underscored the dominant role of L1 interference in shaping students' errors and recommended continuous corrective feedback, coupled with extensive exposure to accurate language models, to prevent error fossilization.

Beyond linguistic categories, learner characteristics, such as gender, can also influence error patterns. Research has shown that gender differences can affect both the frequency and type of errors made by students. For instance, a study investigating interlingual errors in students' essays (Gorjian, 2022) found that spelling, word order, and punctuation errors were the most common interlingual errors. A significant correlation between gender and error type was observed, with female students demonstrating a higher tendency toward spelling and word order errors. Moreover, female learners were more likely to engage in direct translation from their L1 to English, resulting in syntactical inaccuracies. This finding emphasizes the crucial role of language proficiency in mitigating L1 interference, highlighting how the ability to effectively use L1 strategies in L2 or FL writing is influenced by the learner's level of proficiency.

As previously discussed, effectively utilizing strategies from one's L1 in an L2 or FL requires sufficient proficiency in the L2. Some of the recent studies have investigated how language proficiency impacts the use

of L1-based strategies in L2 or FL writing. For example, Bennui (2008) examined syntactic errors in Thai university students' paragraph writings, such as word order, subject-verb agreement, tense, the infinitive, the verb 'have,' prepositions, and noun determiners, all of which were affected by L1 interference. This insight into the relationship between language proficiency and L1 interference becomes even more significant when considering the structural differences between Thai and English, despite both languages adhering to an SVO (subject-verb-object) sentence structure. Building on this, Ampornratana (2009) further elaborated on the differences between Thai and English, identifying key structural contrasts that contribute to L1 interference in Thai learners' English writing. For instance, in Thai, number, gender, and tense are expressed with separate words, resulting in isolated word forms. Additionally, Thai does not use articles, and adjectives function as noun modifiers while adverbs and adverbial clauses typically modify verbs, either at the beginning or end of the sentence. In terms of word order, classifiers are placed after countable nouns, and Thai follows the basic rule that modifiers precede the items they modify (Ingkaphirom & Isawaki, 2005). An important feature of Thai sentence structure is that elements such as subjects, pronouns, prepositions, and other words that do not significantly alter the meaning can be omitted (Higbie, 2002).

Further supporting this, Suraprajit (2021) analyzed English essays written by 60 Thai university students using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy. The study identified frequent errors such as article omission, misuse of prepositions, and subject-verb agreement problems, along with evidence of direct translation from Thai. These findings highlight the ongoing influence of interlingual interference in the Thai EFL context. Extending the discussion beyond Thailand, comparable findings were reported in other Asian EFL settings. Zhao et al. (2024) investigated the impact of negative transfer from Chinese on the English writing of junior middle school students. Drawing on negative transfer theory, error analysis, and comparative analysis, the study found a high occurrence of grammatical, lexical, and discourse-level errors. Most grammatical errors stemmed from differences in sentence structure, tense, and word order between Chinese and English, while vocabulary errors involved misuse of function words, such as pronouns and prepositions.

In a similar context, Nguyen (2024) explored the influence of Vietnamese on the English writing of freshmen majoring in English. Although the study did not specify a theoretical framework, results from 108 participants showed a strong reliance on Vietnamese structural patterns, with most students admitting to translating directly from Vietnamese while writing in English. Only a minority, who had prior training at language centers, were able to write without depending on their L1. This underscores the need for explicit instruction in structural contrasts between Vietnamese and English. Moreover, the effects of L1 interference have also been observed in multilingual Pakistani contexts. Mushtaq et al. (2023) studied Urdu and Punjabi speakers in middle school and found that L1 transfer significantly affected their English writing, particularly in grammar, sentence structure, and spelling. Complementing these findings, Malik (2022) analyzed essays written by students from five different L1 backgrounds—Punjabi, Pashto, Urdu, Hindko, and Potohari—and found that syntactic errors were more common than semantic ones, with problems in tense, subject-verb agreement, and spelling.

Notably, the Potohari-speaking group produced nearly twice as many errors, suggesting that the degree of L1 influence may vary across linguistic groups. Additionally, Yuan (2021) examined Tamil-speaking college students with intermediate proficiency and reported frequent lexical, morphological, syntactic, and semantic errors in their English essays. The most common problems included omission, misordering, misselection, and direct translation from Tamil. The study emphasized the importance of helping students understand structural differences between Tamil and English to improve their accuracy in writing.

While these studies collectively affirm the impact of interlingual interference on English writing, emerging research has also emphasized the substantial role of intralingual factors. Angguni (2020) found that most errors in student writing were intralingual in nature. Reinforcing this perspective, Tipprachaban (2022) analyzed translation errors among Thai university students and, despite anticipating significant L1 interference, found that intralingual errors—stemming from overgeneralization and rule misapplication—were far more frequent. These findings suggest that while L1 influence remains a significant source of error, internal language learning processes play an equally, if not more, influential role, particularly among learners with limited proficiency in the target language.

These findings indicate that instructional strategies to offer more tailored support for learners and underscore the persistent challenge posed by interlingual errors in EFL writing, particularly in environments where English is learnt as a foreign language. The transfer of L1 structures to English writing continues to be a primary source of errors among students. While prior research has thoroughly documented interlingual errors in EFL writing, there remains a need for more comprehensive, systematic studies focusing on English-major university students in Thailand. This research contributes to the existing literature by offering an in-depth examination of interlingual errors among senior students majoring in English-related fields at a Thai university. Unlike previous studies, which have predominantly focused on general EFL learners, this study specifically investigates errors among students with a stronger academic foundation in English, providing insights into how even advanced learners continue to face challenges with L1 interference.

Moreover, highlighting the long-term implications of L1 interference and proposes targeted interventions to address these challenges, ultimately enhancing English language teaching and learning outcomes in Thailand, this study categorizes interlingual errors into three distinct types: ‘transfer of rules,’ ‘redundancy reduction,’ and ‘overgeneralization,’ drawing on Richards’ (1971) classification.

Methodology

This study employs both statistical descriptive methods and qualitative analysis to examine interlingual interference in students' English writing. The descriptive statistical method involves summarizing and presenting numerical data, such as the frequency and percentage of each error category, to provide a clear quantitative overview of the prevalence of specific error types (Taylor, 2005). In contrast, the qualitative method focuses on interpreting the content and context of the errors, allowing for an in-depth understanding of

the linguistic patterns and possible underlying causes of mother tongue interference (Trumbull, 2005). The focus of comparison is on the similarities and differences between English and Thai writings, specifically in terms of mother tongue interference, categorized into 'transfer of rules,' 'redundancy reduction,' and 'overgeneralization.'

The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods to describe and interpret the types of mother tongue interference. According to Schwandt (1997), qualitative inquiry involves multiple functions where terms acquire varying meanings in different contexts.

Data Collection

The data were collected from students' written documents, as outlined by Patton (2002), including test papers and assessment scores. The collection process involved analyzing both English and Thai test papers written by 100 senior English major students at a Thai university, who were of various ages and genders, selected randomly, provided informed consent to participate in the study, and whose personal information was kept strictly confidential. These students were assumed to be proficient in English and familiar with essay writing. In the first stage, students were asked to write a 200 to 300-word essay on a given topic in both Thai and English. Writing essay was chosen because they are relatively straightforward, requiring less cognitive load and allowing students to focus on the linguistic knowledge they had learned. This allowed for comparison of the students' writing with the expected output of native English speakers. The errors in the students' writing were categorized based on the types of mother tongue interferences to assess their impact on the comprehensibility of their writing.

Following the error analysis procedure proposed by James (1998), which involves identifying the errors, describing them by types, and determining their causes, students wrote narrative essays of 200-300 words in both their L1 (Thai) and L2 or FL (English). Errors resulting from L1 interference were analyzed and discussed. The study employed a combination of three comparison methods: point-by-point, block, and combination patterns, as discussed by Howard and Jamieson (1999).

The corpus of students' written work was analyzed to identify interlingual errors. Errors were categorized into the three types of interlingual interference based on Richards' (1971) classification system. These errors were then reviewed by English-speaking and Thai reviewers to ensure accuracy in categorization. The results indicated varying frequencies of interlingual errors across the categories, reflecting the influence of Thai on students' English writing. This study contributes to understanding how L1 interference impacts L2 or FL writing and offers insights into how error analysis can inform teaching practices.

Results

The study analyzed test papers in terms of syntax, semantics, and morphology to identify interlingual errors based on Richards' (1971) framework. The findings highlight similarities and differences in errors across the essays. The study presents selected examples in tables, comparing erroneous sentences with their correct forms, covering all three error categories for discussion.

Transfer of Rules

These errors emerge when writers apply linguistic structures from their L1 in an L2 or FL context without achieving native-level proficiency, particularly when engaging in direct translation. Table 1 presents examples of errors categorized under 'transfer of rules.' A common issue among Thai students is the incorrect use of prepositions in English, as illustrated in examples 1, 3, and 7. This challenge arises due to the significant disparity in the number of prepositions between Thai and English; while English contains over a hundred prepositions, Thai possesses a far more limited set.

Another linguistic feature influencing Thai students' English writing is adjective placement. In Thai, nouns precede adjectives, which often leads students to transfer this syntactic structure into English, as seen in example 9, where they produce the phrase 'pilot airplane' instead of the correct 'airplane pilot.' Furthermore, Thai EFL learners frequently have trouble distinguishing adjectives from nouns due to differences in Thai syntax. As a result, they tend to substitute nouns for adjectives or vice versa, as exemplified in example 6.

Another notable finding involves the transfer of Thai rules governing pluralization. In Thai, plurality is indicated using classifiers rather than morphological changes to the noun itself. Consequently, Thai students often omit the plural marker '-s' in English, particularly after adjectives, as seen in example 8. Additionally, examples 2, 3, 4, and 5 reflect more complex analytical patterns, demonstrating the influence of Thai sentence structure on English writing.

The most prevalent error identified in the study relates to verb tense. Although the essay prompt required students to write about past events, the majority employed the present tense. This widespread issue suggests direct transfer from Thai, where tense distinctions are not marked through verb conjugation. Instead, Thai speakers rely on contextual clues or time-related adverbs to indicate tense. As a result, no verb form modification is observed in their writing, reinforcing the influence of their L1 on their English production.

Table 1 Error Examples Based on 'Transfer of Rules'

	Error examples	Correct forms
1	I graduated in high school	I graduated from high school
2	I never living single I study in ...	I have never lived alone when I was studying in...
3	Them help me every thing	They helped me for everything
4	It make we are know	It made us to know

	Error examples	Correct forms
5	I need to studied about	I needed to study about
6	Education is importance for every one	Education is important for every one
7	At Monday	on Monday
8	All teacher have	All teachers have
9	As a pilot airplane	As an airplane pilot ...

Redundancy Reduction

The learners frequently commit these errors by omitting essential elements or incorporating superfluous ones due to insufficient linguistic knowledge. Table 2 presents examples of redundancy reduction errors, identified within the students' writing samples. In Thai, 'to be' verbs are not used before adjectives, leading many students to perceive them as unnecessary and consequently omit them from their sentences. This pattern is evident in examples 1, 3, 4, and 5.

Additionally, examples 6 and 7 illustrate redundancy reduction errors related to the use of articles. Articles constitute a distinct grammatical category absent in the Thai language, resulting in their frequent omission in English writing. Similar to the omission of 'to be' verbs, Thai learners often exclude articles from sentences. Conversely, example 2 demonstrates an instance where an article was incorrectly inserted, highlighting the inconsistent application of this grammatical feature.

Table 2: Error Examples Based on 'Redundancy Reduction'

	Error examples	Correct forms
1	It very hard for me	It was very hard for me
2	Near the my home	Near my home
3	I so happy, because...	I was so happy, because...
4	I study in high school I live my parents	When I was studying in high school, I was living with my parents
5	That's why every one serious and nervous.	That's why everyone is serious and nervous.
6	Nurse told my brother ...	The nurse told my brother...
7	I went to mall.	I went to the mall.

Overgeneralization

The systematic application of L2 or FL grammatical rules is referred to as overgeneralization. These errors are classified into four categories: grammatical, discourse, phonologically-induced, and lexical errors. Table 3 presents examples of such errors, which are commonly observed among the ESL or EFL learners.

One frequent instance of overgeneralization involves the incorrect application of regular verb conjugation rules to irregular verbs. In English, regular verbs form the past tense by adding ‘-d,’ ‘-ed,’ or ‘-ied,’ yet learners often extend this rule to irregular verbs. This tendency is exemplified in example 2, where the verb ‘take’ is incorrectly converted to ‘taked,’ and in example 3, where ‘think’ is transformed into ‘thinked.’

Additionally, overgeneralization can affect semantic interpretation. As demonstrated in example 1, the student fails to distinguish between the concepts of ‘single’ and ‘alone,’ reflecting confusion in meaning rather than structural application. Such errors highlight the challenges the learners face in acquiring both syntactic and semantic distinctions in English.

Table 3: *Error Examples Based on Overgeneralization’*

	Error examples	Correct forms
1	I never living single I study in ...	I have never lived alone when I was studying in...
2	She taked me	She took me
3	I thinked he was...	I thought he was..

Discussion

Errors in each essay are identified and quantified based on the specified categories, with repeated occurrences contributing to the overall error rate. The influence of the mother tongue is evident, as the data reveals a total of 1,780 errors. Table 4 categorizes these errors in ascending order, from the most to the least frequently occurring.

Table 4: *Error Frequencies and Rates Based on Error Categories*

Categories	Frequency	Rates (%)
Transfer of Rules	1130	63.48
Redundancy Reduction	460	25.85
Overgeneralization	190	10.67

Figure 1 clearly demonstrates that the most significant challenge in English writing among the participants stems from ‘transfer of rules,’ which accounts for the highest error rate at approximately 63%. ‘Redundancy reduction’ follows with a moderate error rate of 26%, while ‘overgeneralization’ exhibits the lowest occurrence at 11%.

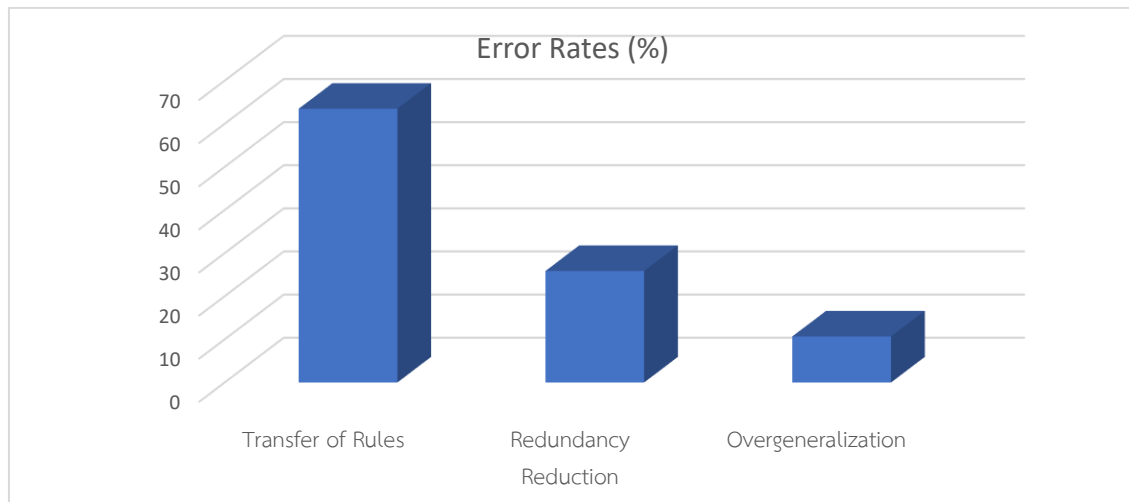


Figure 1 Error Frequencies and Rates Based on Error Categories

Accordingly, the highest rate of committed errors in category of ‘transfer of rules’ indicates that the participants in the related sample employ knowledge of their L1 to the English language situation when they do not have the native-level command of the target language, such as when translating into L2 or FL. They tend to draw on their mother tongue experiences when composing texts, using them to organize information in the target language, and this transfer of knowledge often manifests as errors in their English writing. They have tendency to use their mother tongue experience in their writings, to structure the information in the target language and this knowledge transferring appears as such errors in their writings in English. This type of error may appear different depending on the L1 structure and rules. For this study, it appeared with high frequency of errors in the writings of the participants, as their L1 is Thai which is from a language family and structure significantly different from English. It is essential to acknowledge that the findings are specific to this sample and may not be universally applicable to students from other majors or the whole of the student population. This is because the nature and frequency of interlingual errors can vary depending on the participants’ academic background, learning environment, and disciplinary focus may influence their writing patterns, and similar research involving students from other fields or institutions is necessary before broader generalizations can be made.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings highlight the need for pedagogical strategies that address interlingual errors resulting from L1–L2 transfer. This study highlights significant challenges students face in English writing, particularly interlingual errors and the ‘transfer of rules’ from Thai to English. Despite being in English-related majors, many students demonstrate poor writing proficiency. L1 compatibility is a main issue in here indicating differences between Thai and English grammar, vocabulary, and syntax contribute to writing errors, requiring targeted teaching to address these gaps. Teacher proficiency is another main issue speaking about the quality of

instruction, particularly educators' linguistic expertise, is crucial in helping students navigate these challenges. Educators should adopt explicit teaching approaches focusing on contrastive grammar, vocabulary, and syntactic structures, utilizing error analysis to enhance students' linguistic awareness and facilitate accurate language production. Concurrently, ongoing professional development is essential to equip instructors with the skills and strategies necessary to effectively manage L1 interference in the classroom.

Reassessing teaching methods, integrating language learning with advancements in science and technology, and adapting approaches to meet the evolving global demand for English proficiency, this study emphasizes the need to reevaluate the education system, particularly regarding the recruitment and teaching methods for English major students. At the micro level, the quality of education directly influences students' academic and professional success, shaping their future opportunities. At the macro level, the societal impact is significant, as a well-educated, linguistically proficient workforce contributes to national growth, innovation, and global competitiveness. By addressing the challenges faced by Thai students in English writing, the study calls for improvements in recruitment strategies and teaching methods to benefit both individual students and society at large. These pedagogical demands represent not only a scholarly imperative but also a strategic investment in advancing Thailand's socio-economic progress.

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