AN ANALYSIS OF LEARNER USE OF ARGUMENT STRUCTURE CONSTRUCTIONS: A CASE OF THAI LEARNERS USING THE PASSIVE AND EXISTENTIAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH

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INTRODUCTION

⚜ According to research on *English as a Lingua Franca* (ELF) – an approach to study English used for communication among people speaking different languages, there is universal motivation underlying learners' usage of English.

⚜ There are some general characteristics which are produced by English learners across language backgrounds.

⚜ The notion of ELF encompasses not only the use of English internationally, but also the use and modification of a particular *form* of English which does not necessarily conform to native speaker norms (Seidlhofer 2001; Jenkins 2006; Dewey 2007).

INTRODUCTION

⚜ ELF researchers regard common and systematic forms of deviations as "variations" which are part of the natural process of language contact and language change, rather than "errors" caused by incomplete acquisition of the target language.

⚜ Despite differences in minute detail, different groups of L2 users have developed ELF in a rather similar direction, with general and universal characteristics underlying the use of constructions at all levels.

INTRODUCTION

⚜ So far, a large number of empirical studies of ELF have focused on phonology and pragmatics, with a little description of ELF at syntax (Cogo and Dewey 2006).

⚜ English learners' use of syntactic constructions are expected to deviate from the native speaker norms.

⚜ Yet, such differences should not be completely unexpected and lead to disunity because they are partly governed by the universal principles of second language usage.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

(1) To investigate Thai learners' use of the English constructions, in comparison with the native speaker norms

(2) To analyze the deviations in terms of the general, universal characteristics of ELF

LITERARTURE REVIEW

1. **Construction Grammar**

   Lakoff 1987; Brugman 1988; Fillmore, Kay, and O'Connor 1988; Fillmore and Kay 1993; Lambrecht 1994; Goldberg 1995, 2002, 2009

2. **ELF**

   Seidlhofer 2001; Breiteneder 2005; Cogo & Dewey 2006; Jenkins 2006; Dewey 2007; Jenkins, Cogo, and Dewey 2011

ELF GENERAL & UNIVERSAL CHARACTERISTICS

Repetition	ELF speakers often repeat their words and other speakers' words.
Explicitness and redundancy	Extra words are inserted to ensure clarity of the conversation.
Simplification	Complex forms are replaced by simple, shortened forms. Complex rules are simplified.
Regularization	ELF speakers make use of rule regularizations to make the rules more general and consistent and to avoid exceptions.
Analogy	ELF speakers prefer generalizing uses of expressions to all or more varied contexts on the basis of predominant cases.

LITERARTURE REVIEW

3. **The English Passive Construction**

   Parrott 2000; O'Grady 2001; Finegan 2004; Downing & Locke 2006

4. **The English Existential Construction**

   O'Grady 2001; Collins 2002; Huddleston & Pullum 2005; Downing & Locke 2006

NS NORMS OF THE ENGLISH PASSIVE CONSTRUCTION

Syntax	A passive verb appears in many forms, with various tenses, aspects, and auxiliaries.
	An agent is usually omitted when it is unknown or irrelevant, when it is predictable by the context or world knowledge, and when it refers to people in general.
	An agent is retained when it conveys new information. Typically, it is introduced by the preposition *by*.
Semantics & Pragmatics	The theme functions as the topic of a passive sentence; it usually expresses given information.
	Speakers tend to choose the passive when an agent at sentence-final position is structurally heavy.
Non-Basic Passive	Speakers also use the *get* passive, the ditransitive passive, and the prepositional passive.

NS NORMS OF THE ENGLISH EXISTENTIAL CONSTRUCTION

Syntax	The form of *be* is varied, with various tenses, aspects, and auxiliaries.
	A small group of verbs appears in the construction. Most are intransitive verbs.
	The displaced subject denotes countable, uncountable, or abstract entities; it tends to be long.
	The bare existential structure contains *there*, *be*, and a displaced subject. The extended existential structure has an extension – often a locative or temporal expression.
	Existential sentences often appear in the declarative form and in the simple structure.
Semantics & Pragmatics	The existential construction serves a presentational function.
	The displaced subject typically conveys new information; its position is usually occupied by an indefinite noun phrase.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

SUBJECTS

- Upper-intermediate level English knowledge and skills
- 70 3rd and 4th year English majors, with an average grade of over 3.25 for all English classes

INSTRUMENTS

- The writing task with prompts included two sub-tasks:
  - ✓ picture description
  - ✓ Thai-English translation
- The free writing task

RESULTS

1. Thai learners' use of the English passive construction

2. Thai learners' use of the English existential construction

3. Thai learners and universal characteristics of ELF

THE NUMBER OF PASSIVE SENTENCES AND PASSIVE VERB PHRASES

Task/Sub-task	Number of Passive Sentences	Number of Passive Verb Phrases
Picture description	65	70
Translation	271	277
Essay writing	455	501
Total	791	848

EXAMPLE OF DATA ANALYSIS: PASSIVE AUXILIARIES

Essay Writing		Picture Description & Translation	
Auxiliary	Frequency	Auxiliary	Frequency
be	487 (97.2%)	be	336 (96.8%)
become	6 (1.2%)	get	10 (2.9%)
get	4 (0.8%)	seem	1 (0.3%)
feel	3 (0.6%)	Total	347
look	1 (0.2%)		
Total	501		

THE NUMBER OF EXISTENTIAL SENTENCES AND CLAUSES

Task/Sub-task	Number of Existential Sentences	Number of Existential Clauses
Picture description	121	125
Translation	162	163
Essay writing	244	248
Total	527	536

EXAMPLE OF DATA ANALYSIS: BARE AND EXTENDED EXISTENTIAL STRUCTURES

Essay Writing		Picture Description & Translation	
Structure	Frequency	Structure	Frequency
bare	182 (73.4%)	bare	217 (75.3%)
extended	66 (26.6%)	extended	71 (24.7%)
Total	248	Total	288

THAI LEARNERS AND UNIVERSAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ELF

- When used by native speakers, the two constructions are known to be associated with a variety of basic and non-basic properties.

- When used by Thai learners, the two constructions are simplified and generalized to such an extent that they usually exhibit only the most distinct, fundamental properties in terms of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

- Accordingly, sentences in the two constructions produced by Thai learners are much more limited in terms of structural complexity and semantic and pragmatic value.

THAI LEARNERS AND UNIVERSAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ELF

- Applying such unique usage to the ELF framework, we find that the properties of the passive and existential constructions produced by Thai learners serve to reflect three general and universal characteristics of ELF.

- These include (i) **simplification**, (ii) **regularization**, and (iii) **analogy**.

CONCLUSION

- Compared to the native speaker norms, Thai learners' use of argument structure constructions is much more limited in syntax, semantics, and discourse functions.

- There is the tendency for Thai learners to treat argument structure constructions in English as "idiomatic expressions" or "pre-fabricated chunks".

- Like many deviations found in the phonology and pragmatics of ELF, the motivation of Thai learners' distinct usage of clausal constructions is the need for simplicity and effectiveness in communication.