

Most Frequent Capitalization Errors of Thai EFL Learners in Writing Short Response and Book Review: A Corpus-Based Study

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Abstract

Writing is a challenging task for EFL students. Hence, students need to consider the four conventions in writing such as punctuation, spelling, grammar and capitalization as they further practice on their writing skill. When learners acquire the ability to recognize the learning concepts of errors made, their writing ability can greatly develop. This corpus-based study is primarily focused on finding the most frequent capitalization errors in writing short response and book review of Grade 9 Thai EFL learners of Phoprathapchang Municipal Wittayalai School, Phichit Thailand. This study aimed to point out potential capitalization weaknesses of the Grade 9 Thai EFL by thus promoting awareness of their mistakes which can serve a beneficial help for their holistic growth in language competence. The researchers collected (20) short descriptive essays and (20) book reviews as their corpora. The findings revealed that not capitalizing the proper noun and adjective are the most frequent capitalization error in writing short responses while not capitalizing the first letter of a sentence ranked first in writing book reviews. The researchers suggest to the present facilitators to give more emphasis on the cited errors of their students to give room for improvement. It was also greatly emphasized that these errors are not mistakes but challenges that needed to be addressed.

Keywords: capitalization, error analysis, EFL learners, short response, book review

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most important skills to learn. It directly affects our everyday living in terms of preserving speech. According to (Walsh 2010), writing is important because it's used extensively in higher education and in the workplace. If the students don't know how to express themselves in writing, they won't be able to communicate well with professors, employers, peers, or just about anyone else. Much of professional communication is done in writing: proposals, memos, reports, applications, preliminary interviews, e-mails, and more are part of the daily life of every student.

Good writing leads to clear communication. Hence, we should be aware of the four categories of conventions in writing such as punctuation, capitalization, grammar and spelling to avoid misinterpreting the written words. Harris (1969) argues that in order to make good writing, we need to recognize the components of writing skill such as content, forms, grammar, and mechanics.

In a more specific view, this study focuses on capitalization. Capitalization refers to the use of a capital or uppercase letter at the beginning of a word while the rest of the letters in the word remain small or lowercase. It also serves the purpose of highlighting certain types of words in a sentence like proper nouns, proper adjectives, etc. The importance of capitalization in written English has nicely been described by Siddiqui (2015). He emphasized that capitalization makes communication clear, effective and impressive by giving the text a standard and distinctive appearance. Indeed, capitalization prevents the readers from misinterpretation in any forms of writing.

1.1. The Problem and Its Background

Capitalization error is evident among the written works of Thai EFL learners. This is supported by the study of Hinnon (2014) when she identified the primary root of capitation errors among Thai students. She proposed that there are three sources of errors: negative transfer of the mother tongue, limited knowledge of the target language, and the difference between words and sentence structures of the mother tongue and those of the target language. Hence, L1 contributes a significant effect in writing in the English language as Thai language doesn't use capitalization in writing.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Error Analysis (EA) contributes a great help in revealing the source of errors. The importance of error analysis in research is being described by numbers of scholars. According to Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) the analysis of errors is the method to analyze errors made by EFL and ESL learners when they learn a language. Not only can it help reveal the strategies used by learners to learn a language, it also assists teachers as well as other concerning people to know what difficulties learners encounter in order to improve their teaching. Furthermore, (Hinnon 2014) also confirms that Error Analysis is beneficial after her long period of study of literature related to Error Analysis. She mentions that Error Analysis can let teachers prepare accurate and precise teachings which are suitable for their students. Therefore, Error Analysis is essential in this study since it tries to discover the most frequent capitalization error of Thai EFL learners.

1.3. Research Questions

This study aimed to identify the most frequent capitalization errors of Grade 9 Thai EFL learners of Phoprathapchang Municipal Wittayalai School in writing short responses and book reviews. This aim was achieved by answering the following questions:

- (1) What are the most frequent capitalization errors of Grade 9 Thai EFL learners of Phoprathapchang Municipal Wittayalai School in writing short responses and book reviews?
- (2) What are the significant differences in terms of errors in capitalization in writing short responses and book reviews?

1.4. Significance of the Study

One of the obvious errors in written works of Thai EFL learners is the proper use of capitalization. Hence, this problem should be addressed. It is certainly necessary to find out the most frequent capitalization errors that Thai EFL learners use to promote awareness of their mistakes and develop their writing skills. Consequently, this serves a great help for their holistic growth in language competence. Moreover, the result of this study revealed the most frequent capitalization errors and according to Hesketh (1997); Vosniadou and Brewer (1987), errors can give teachers and their students information about such underlying misconceptions, students' faulty learning processes, and teachers' ineffective instruction.

1.5. Review of Related Literature

This chapter mainly focused on the supporting research studies connected to the misuse of capitalization of Thai EFL learners and the standard rules of capitalization in English language which are necessary for this study.

1.5.1 Errors on Capitalization

Capitalization errors is one of the most common errors that EFL learners tend to overlook in writing. The study conducted by Challay and Jones (2019) revealed that the Secondary School pupils from three schools in the Bo Municipality, Southern Sierra Leone in western Africa had generally not understood the rule involved in the use of capital letters. The areas where errors were more prominent involved proper nouns, beginning of a sentence, poor background knowledge of letter shapes, overgeneralization and not capitalizing the first word in the closing of a letter.

Moreover, there are numerous studies dedicated to examining the errors of Thai EFL learners. Unfortunately, it was found out that one of the most neglected conventions in their writing is capitalization. This is being supported by the study of Sermsook et al (2017). They examined the language errors in the writings of twenty-six Thai EFL learners in the English essays. The findings of their study explained the cause of errors which is the interference of the Thai language since there is no rule of capitalization in a Thai context. Also, they found out that the research participants had inadequate knowledge of the English rule in the first letter of specific nouns and the first letter of a sentence must be capitalized. These two causes led to the occurrence of the errors. Additionally, Hengwichitkul (2006) analyzed errors in abstracts written by Thai graduate students. It can be concluded from her findings that the differences between Thai and English languages and the complexity of English sentences led to the errors. Also, Nonkukhetkhong (2013) investigated grammatical errors made by first year English major students at Udon Thani Rajabhat University. It was found out that the errors made by the students were the errors of verbs, nouns, possessive case, articles, preposition, adjectives, adverbs, sentence structure, ordering, coordination/ subordination, capitalization, spelling, punctuations, word selection, word formation, ambiguous communication and miscommunication.

It can be concluded from these studies that negative transfer of first language is one of the major causes of error of Thai EFL learners in capitalization. Hence, the researchers decided to conduct this study to address this drastic problem. It was proven that analyzing the learners' errors have been beneficial for the improvement of EFL learners.

1.5.2 Capitalization Rules

Most Thai EFL learners put little importance in following the capitalization rules in the English language. They usually capitalized the words in a sentence they want to emphasize. Therefore, this should be remedied. The researchers compiled information of capitalization rules from trusted EFL websites and references like Your Dictionary.com and The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation: An Easy-to-Use Guide with Clear Rules, Real-World Examples, and Reproducible Quizzes.

Table 1. Rules and Examples of Capitalization in English

Capitalization Rules	Examples
1. Capitalize the first word of a sentence.	Ana likes reading books.
2. Capitalize the first word of a quoted sentence.	He said, "Always guide your children."

3. Capitalize a proper noun and adjective	Mt. Everest is the highest mountain in the world. She is an American.
4. Capitalize a person's title when it precedes the name. Do not capitalize when the title is acting as a description of the following name.	Director Santos Ms. Santos, the director of the school, will suspend the afternoon classes. .
5. Capitalize the person's title when it follows the name on the address	Ms. Santos, Director
6. Capitalize the titles of high-ranking government officials when used with or before their names. Do not capitalize the civil title if it is used instead of the name.	The governor and the president visited the typhoon victims. Governor Alvarado and President Marcos visited the typhoon victims.
7. Capitalize any title when used as a direct address.	Will you make my favorite dish, Chef?
8. Capitalize the points of a compass only when they refer to specific regions.	We have competition in the North. Go south and then turn left.
9. Always capitalize the first and last words of titles of publications, regardless of their parts of speech. Capitalize other words within titles, including the short verb forms Is, Are, and Be.	The King of the Drift
10. Capitalize federal or state when used as part of an official agency name or in government documents where these terms represent an official name. If they are being used as general terms, you may use lowercase letters	The State Board of Equalization collects sales taxes. There are some beautiful states in our country.
11. Do not capitalize the names of seasons.	The winter season is coming.
12. Capitalize the first word of a salutation and the first word of a complimentary close.	My dear Mr. Santos Sincerely yours
13. Capitalize words derived from proper nouns	I must take English and Math.
14. Capitalize the names of specific course titles.	I must take Biology 2.
15. After a sentence ending with a colon, do not capitalize the first word if it begins a list.	These are my favorite hobbies: watching TV, reading books, and surfing
16. Do not capitalize when only one sentence follows a sentence ending with a colon.	I like the work of John Green: his book, Paper Towns, was great.
17. Capitalize when two or more sentences follow a sentence ending with a colon	I like the work of John Green: his book, Paper Towns, was great. Also, Smith was beautiful.
18. Capitalize days, months, and holidays	Tuesday, December, Christmas
19. Capitalize the pronoun I	I don't like her, but I will talk to her.

2. METHOD

The researchers used the quantitative method and error analysis in determining the frequency of errors in Thai students' short responses and book reviews. The researchers gathered the samples randomly and determined the errors in each sample. These errors were recorded as bases for data analysis conducted by the researchers. The results of the error analysis will be discussed in the next section. Furthermore, the researchers collected the samples from the previous written outputs of the participants in this study and used it for error analysis.

Leedy and Ormrod (2001) and Williams (as cited in Apuke, 2017) stated that a quantitative research method deals with quantifying and analyzing variables in order to get results. It involves the utilization and analysis of numerical data using specific statistical techniques to answer questions. Moreover, Aliaga and Gunderson (as cited in Apuke, 2017) described quantitative research methods as the explaining of an issue or phenomenon through gathering data in numerical form and analyzing with the aid of mathematical methods.

2.1. The Participants

The participants of the study were Grade 9 EFL learners of Phoprathapchang Municipal Wittayalai School in Pichit province in the Kingdom of Thailand. These forty (40) learners were chosen randomly as the research participants in this study. The researchers chose the participants under the English Program of the school. These were the students who had lectures with foreign educators and were chosen regardless of sex, gender, and background. Furthermore, the participants of the study were given two different writing activities where their writing skills were assessed. The students range from struggling to advanced learners and their ability in writing is employed in such activities given by the teacher after discussing a lesson. The selection of the participants was randomly selected by the researchers to avoid focusing on those struggling students only or to those average and advanced students only.

English is a foreign language to them and frequency of errors in their writing outputs were noticed to be common and prevalent. Some of them learned other foreign languages including French, Mandarin, and Nihongo aside from English. Moreover, some of them had been taught English in primary school and started learning English since they were young. However, it is also important to note that many of them have little or no background in the English language. There were participants who demonstrated mastery of the target language while some struggled in putting their ideas and opinions in written compositions. Thus, leading the researchers to give recommendations for further improvement.

2.2 The Source of Corpus

The source of corpus chosen in the study were the writing outputs of the students: twenty (20) descriptive essays of Thai EFL secondary students and twenty (20) responses from book reviews. The students were given writing exercises at the end of the lesson and they needed to write about their typical day and the other one was all about a book review from the story “Three Little Pigs.” These are the previous writing outputs of the students gathered by the researchers to be used in this study.

The data were obtained from students' descriptive essays of 50-100 words about their typical day and book review from the story “Three Little Pigs.” The researchers collected the (20) descriptive essays and (20) book reviews from the Grade 9 students as sampling instruments to find the most common capitalization errors among Thai EFL learners' written outputs. The topic was chosen based on typical days of the students related to the lesson “Daily Routines.” The story “Three Little Pigs” was chosen as the sample for book review as it is part of the lesson about sequencing the events in a story.

The data were analyzed using the following formula:

$P = F \times 100 \%$ Notes: P: percentage F: frequency N: number of samples

3. Results and Discussion

The study focused mainly on finding common errors that may have posed challenges in English capitalization rules in the written outputs of Grade 9 Thai EFL learners of Phoprathapchang Municipal Wittayalai School. The findings of common capitalization errors were classified into 19 grammar rules categories which were also the basis of the analysis and discussion. Other data were generalized into the same categories to conduct error analysis.

The following findings presented the rank of the most common capitalization errors in short responses from all data, with 1. Capitalize a proper noun with an adjective, 2. Capitalize the first letter of the sentence 3. Not to capitalize seasons and, 4. Capitalize the first word of the salutation. The rest of the capitalization rules were omitted for no errors of such were found.

In the book review, the following findings presented the rank of the most common capitalization errors from all data with, 1. Capitalize the first letter of the sentence, 2. Capitalize the first letter of the Titles, 3. Capitalize the proper noun with an adjective. The rest of the capitalization rules were omitted for no such capitalization errors were found.

The other parts of the capitalization rules were not considered from the result of the data in ranks because no errors were found to have been registered and were deemed unnecessary. Further contents of the writing tasks, both in short responses and book reports which were unrelated to capitalization were also excluded.

3.1 Cases of Errors with Capitalization

In the written short responses outputs of the Grade 9 Thai EFL learners of Phoprathapchang Municipal Wittayalai School, 9 out of the 20 students made errors in rule number 3 (16 times) which was to capitalize a proper noun with an adjective ranked first. Most errors made in the short responses were,

Example 1: everyday puy has to go.

(Everyday, Puy has to go.)

Example 2: I ate delicious Pork Chops

(I ate delicious pork chops.)

Example 3: I went to walk at the big Park.

(I went to the park.)

In the capitalization of proper nouns, the students were unable to distinguish which words are proper nouns which needed capitalization in contrast to common nouns which didn't need to be capitalized. This was followed by errors in rule number 1 (9 times) which was to capitalize the first letter of a sentence. Among the 20 students, 6 made the errors. Some examples were,

Example 4: Da is my friend. in the morning...

(Da is my friend. In the morning...)

Example 5: First she likes eating. second she goes to school..

(First she likes eating. Second, she goes to school...)

Example 6: Bin is my friend. in the morning.

(Bin, is my friend. In the morning...)

This was followed by capitalization rule 11 (5 times), which was to not capitalize names of seasons ranked third, where 2 out of the 20 participants made errors. Some examples were:

Example 7: I like Rainy because it is cold...

(I like rainy(season) because it is cold.)

Example 8: My favorite season is Rain season because...

(My favorite season is the rainy season because...)

These clearly show some flaws in capitalization mastery in terms of words that need not be capitalized. Capitalization rule 12 (2times), which was to capitalize the first word of the salutation and complimentary close followed suit and an example was,

Example 9: dear diary,

(Dear diary,)

Table 2. Different Types of Errors in Short Responses

Types of Errors	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Short Responses			
Capitalize the first word of a sentence.	9	28.12%	2
Capitalize a proper noun and adjective.	16	50.00%	1
Do not capitalize the names of seasons.	5	15.63%	3
Capitalize the first word of a salutation and the first word of a complimentary close.	2	6.25%	4
Total	32	100.00%	

Table 3. Different Types of Errors in Book Reports

Types of Errors	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Book Report			
Capitalize the first word of a sentence.	79	84.04%	1
Capitalize a proper noun and adjective.	2	2.13%	3
Always capitalize the first and last words of titles of publications, regardless of their parts of speech. Capitalize other words within titles, including the short verb forms Is, Are, and Be.	13	13.83%	2
Total	94	100.00%	

In the book review, output from the story “Three Little Pigs”, 18 out of the 20 students made errors in rule 1 (79 times) which was to capitalize the first word of a sentence. Some error examples were,

Example 10: The younger pig house is bricks because the pig is short. the pig want the house is strong,

(The younger pig’s house is bricks because the pig is short. The pig wants the house to be strong.)

Example 11: busy pig and dont think (Busy pig didn't think.)\

Example 12: two little pigs ask for help (Two little pigs asked for help.)

Though the number of errors made on rule 1 of the capitalization rule is remarkably high, this is not surprising because the Thai writing rules do not use capitalization of words at the start of the sentence. Capitalization rule number 9 (13 times) which is to capitalize the first and last word of the titles of publication regardless of their parts of speech followed suit with error samples such as,

Example 13: Three little Pigs

(Three Little Pigs)

Example 14: Three little pigs

(Three Little Pigs)

were commonly made. Out of 20 students, 9 made these mistakes. Capitalization rule 3 (2 times) which is to capitalize proper nouns and adjectives. This error was made by one student alone among the 20 and that is by capitalizing “ the Hunter”, when this does not need to be capitalized.

Example 14: the Hunter...

(the hunter)

4. CONCLUSION

This study is similar to the work of Nguyen et. al, (2021) which stated that common errors in writing of EFL students were analyzed in written activity outputs. Though similar, it is different in terms that the current study focused only on the capitalization errors in written outputs while the latter focused on all grammatical factors such as verbs, adjectives, prepositions, punctuations and further on. From the research findings, it has been evident that capitalization of the first word of the sentence were common errors made in both short response and book review, and was mainly prevalent in the written book report outputs with very high frequency and percentage. This can also be deduced from the study of the Grade 9 Thai EFL learners' written outputs. It is also noticeable that out of the 19 capitalization rules presented in table 1 of this study, only 4 prominent rules were registered to have caused some writing issues. This may be due to the student's mastery of the other capitalization rules or the topics presented did not pose the need for such.

The challenges of error-detection competencies also raised some questions on the language proficiency development of the Grade 9 Thai EFL students. These common errors should be given focus on by their facilitators. When students have the ability to recognize and comprehend the learning concepts of the errors made, their writing abilities would greatly develop. Thus, the researchers emphasized that the errors found in the study are not wrong but challenges that needed to be addressed to help EFL students improve on their writing.

This study made evident that the Grade 9 EFL learners of Phoprathapchang Municipal Wittayalai School, face some challenges in their writing skills especially on certain capitalization rules. An erroneous piece of writing, no matter how small, can affect how they want to portray ideas in written homeworks, reports, letters and other materials they might have in their academic writing. This study is aimed at finding out such weaknesses and finding remediation for improvement.

This study encountered a few limitations. It was not possible to test the validity and reliability because the research tools were based on a single group of learners' written output. What might have posed challenges in capitalization with the grade 9 ESL learners of Phoprathapchang Municipal Wittayalai School, does not have homogeneity. The study can only help in facilitating the current and future facilitators a basis on the learners' room for improvement.

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