

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was, first, to investigate conceptualizations of tense and aspect in English among Thai learners of English at three proficiency levels; and second, to explore the degree of proximity to the native English speaker norms in terms of conceptualizations of time reference and aspectual property among Thai learners at high, intermediate and low English proficiency levels. This study was motivated particularly by the following reasons:

(1) It is generally known that tense and aspect marking of a verb and its meaning is a challenging feature of English for non-native learners to master. Many advanced L2 learners still have difficulty with comprehending and using English tense and aspect properly. Previous research has found that non-native learners of English, particularly those whose L1 lacks morphological and inflectional tense-aspect markers, tend to conceptualize time and aspectual references in English differently from native English speakers. If this is the case, one may assume that grammaticalization of the time reference and aspectual property of English tense and aspect may not be readily available for semantic and pragmatic interpretations by Thai learners of English.

(2) Tense-aspect errors are one of the common errors found among EFL learners and are what teachers of English find the most difficult grammatical element to remedy. In order for teachers to understand where learners' inappropriate usage of tense and aspect originates, it is important to understand to what extent Thai learners of English comprehend tense meanings in terms of time reference and aspectual property when

used in discourse contexts. It is equally important to understand whether their conceptualizations of time reference and aspectual property are consistent with those of native English speakers. Such consistencies and variations in conceptualizations of time and aspect between native English speakers and Thai learners of English are hoped to shed light on problems that Thai learners have in comprehending English tense and aspect, which in turn reflects their difficulty in effective usage of tense and aspect in English.

In this study, a reading text in the form of an email containing 24 items of 8 tense-aspect forms was used to investigate conceptualizations of time reference and aspectual property between native English speakers and Thai learners of English. To respond to those items, a questionnaire with descriptors for time reference and aspectual property was provided so that participants would choose an option that best described their conceptualization for each of the 24 items in the email. The multiple-choice options for time and aspect descriptors were uniform for all 24 contexts.

As the instrument required some metalinguistic knowledge regarding time concepts and descriptors for aspectual properties, native English speakers chosen for this study were all teachers of English in Thai universities. Thai learners of English were classified into 3 proficiency levels: high, intermediate, and low. The high-proficiency group consisted of Thai English language teachers recruited from two universities in Thailand, whereas the intermediate and low groups were undergraduate English major students, who were EFL learners in a Thai university.

In the following three sections in this concluding chapter, the main findings of the study will be presented, followed by the implications drawn from the study. The last section will offer some recommendations for further research.

6.1 The Main Findings of the Study

The data presented in this study revealed how native English speakers (NS) and Thai learners of English (NNS) conceptualized tense and aspect in English. The results also yielded within-group and across-group consistencies and variations in their conceptualizations of time and aspectual references. The findings allow one to see the proximity to the native English speaker norms in terms of conceptualizations of time reference and aspectual property for the present and past tense-aspect markers among Thai learners at high, intermediate and low English proficiency levels.

The analyses of the conceptualizations of time reference showed that only in the present progressive with the present time span were the NSs' conceptualizations of time reference unanimous. Otherwise, NSs demonstrated varying degrees of inconsistency in their choices of time reference. The data revealed that tense-aspect markers associating with one time point (i.e. past, present, or future) showed less within-group variations than those relating to more than one time points (i.e. past with present relevance or before another past event). Thus, the present progressive with present or future time reference and the past simple with past time reference showed the highest degree of consistency among NSs. Conceptualizations of the present simple seemed to be more complex. Unlike the past tense, which specifically makes predication to the past time, the present tense does not straightforwardly make a specific predication to the present time (Aje, 2010). According to Aje, the present

tense conveys a situation that is understood as habitual, state of affairs, or fact, and it semantically has a meaning that cuts across three times: the past, the present, and the future. This allows individuals to make judgment on the basis of their subjective perspectives of time and discourse convention. The tense-aspect forms that denote more than one time such as those with the perfect aspect, which indicate a period of time stretching backward into some earlier time, may allow for subjective perspectives of the referenced time, especially when the lexical verb type is involved.

In terms of time conceptualization among Thai learners of English, the responses of the NNS groups showed a linear increase in the degree of proximity to NSs' norms as the learners' proficiency levels increased across the groups. In other words, time conceptualization of Thai speakers with high proficiency level most approximated the NS norms. The values decreased linearly in relation to proficiency levels. The data show that the present simple and the present progressive denoting the present represented the most accessible time reference for all NNS groups, followed by the past simple. The future time reference of the present simple, in contrast, showed a high degree of variation and distance from NSs' norms for all groups of Thai learners. Time reference of the past perfect progressive appeared to have been conceived of as more difficult for Thai learners to acquire than time reference of the other tense-aspect forms.

The analyses of the conceptualizations of aspect showed that greater within-group variations existed even among NSs. Across-group variations were also greater with regard to aspectual property than time reference. However, the data revealed consistency in Thai learners' development in their conceptualization of aspect. The lower the proficiency of the Thai learners, the more distant their values were from

those of NSs. Again, aspectual property of the past perfect progressive appeared to be the most difficult to conceptualize for Thai speakers of English. As discussed in the summary part of the previous chapter, the distance in conceptualization of English verb forms that carry progressive and perfect aspects may result from the fact that these two aspects are not perceived by Thai speakers in a clear manner. From a cognitive perspective, Thai speakers may view events differently from native English speakers as a result of different linguistic systems between the two languages. Thai speakers may view events more holistically than native English speakers do. Such typological difference may have some cognitive impacts on the conceptualization of tense and aspect in English and thus impede Thai learners of English from comprehending and producing some tense-aspect forms in which syntactic patterns as well as semantic and pragmatic interpretations are required. In addition, the remoteness of the past time reference may also exacerbate the learners' difficulty in conceptualizing time and aspect. This possibly results from the lack of inflectional forms to convey the past as opposed to the present in the Thai language. If this is the case, it could explain why conceptualizations of a past event with perfect and progressive aspects among Thai learners of English even at the advanced level were most distant from those of NSs.

It should be noted, further, that the aspect of the past progressive was also problematic to Thai learners. The results showed slight deterioration in the learners' developmental pattern. The values deteriorated as the learners' proficiency increased across groups. In other words, the more proficient the learners became, the more distant from the NS norms were the learners' conceptualizations. This finding suggests that aspect is more persistently problematic than time reference. Despite a

dozen or more years of studying English, aspect is still hard to conceptualize and nonnative speakers do not acquire all the aspectual features of English.

The results further suggest that lexical aspect (i.e. the inherent semantic meaning of the verb) and the context in which the verb is used play a crucial role in determining grammatical aspect. We have seen so far that conceptualizations of time reference and grammatical aspect are largely subjective and context-sensitive. Tense is syntactic, while the inherent meaning of verb is semantic, and the interpretations of time and aspectual references in discourse context are pragmatic (Aje, 2010). All these elements are closely intertwined in a complex way, and that is why the challenge of learning with many problematic elements of language requires a clear understanding of both meaning and use of a linguistic form.

6.2 Implications of the Study

From the data presented in this study, the following pedagogic implications can therefore be offered.

Firstly, the findings suggest that non-native learners of English, even at high English proficiency level, experience some challenges when they have to interpret tense meanings in their full functional range. In the English tense-aspect system, a number of factors are in play: (1) time reference and its marker, (2) grammatical aspect, (3) verb meaning or lexical aspect, and (4) context. The tense meanings will become specific when time and grammatical aspect that mark verbs interact with context and lexical aspect. The English tense-aspect system are usually introduced in ESL grammar textbooks by presenting rules, explaining forms in association with time reference and tense meanings. As English tenses and aspects have a variety of

functions, one may assume that all these functions are beyond the terminology and explanations that published materials could possibly provide. The implication is that learners should look at the different functions in a variety of contexts rather than memorizing the more general rule that each tense-aspect form refers to. To have a good understanding of the English tense-aspect system, learners must first be aware of the meanings of time reference and aspectual property in relation to their linguistic forms. Then, they should be encouraged to associate those functions and forms within the context of language use. Generally, learners often know what the correct form is for a given verb, but it is the association of functions and forms in language use that continues to present difficulties. Thus, there is a need for exposure to time and aspect marking in a variety of contexts and for ample opportunities to make choices regarding which forms best convey intended meanings.

Secondly, as lexical aspect is an important factor which motivates choices about the most appropriate tense-aspect form, it should be useful to associate lexico-semantic classes of verbs and time-aspect references with which the verb forms are most suitable in the teaching of the English tense-aspect system.

Thirdly, the data showed that for Thai learners of English, the past simple, the present simple and present progressive with present meanings represented more accessible time and aspectual references than the other tense-aspect forms. This implies that conceptualizations of time and aspect of those forms are considered relatively easy among Thai learners regardless of proficiency levels. It is therefore reasonable that the teaching of the English tense-aspect system should begin with the most easily accessible forms. On the other end, the data further showed that Thai learners of English had difficulty relating time and aspectual references of the past

perfect progressive. This suggests that this tense-aspect marker was conceived of as the most difficult one to access. Thus, teachers need to provide learners with opportunities to see the different possible uses of this form and explain relationships between time and aspectual references within given contexts.

6.3 Recommendations for Further Research

Analyses of non-native learners' comprehension of time reference and aspectual property have, to some extent, shown common developmental patterns in the domain of English tense-aspect markers. However, further research can be conducted in order to qualitatively examine the decision making process of learners as they work on a task that requires them to make choices between tense-aspect markers in given contexts. This can help teachers understand how learners associate between forms and meanings.

Moreover, research into the process in which learners supply and manipulate contexts for the production of forms as well as the reasons for which learners decide to use such forms may further help address the difficulty that learners have in matching the forms with the meanings they would like to express.