



Thai College EFL Students' Awareness of English Polysemy ความตระหนักรู้คำหลายความหมายในภาษาอังกฤษของนิสิตชาวไทย ที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

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Abstract

There have been few studies focusing on English polysemy acquisition in Thai contexts. The present study aims to 1) compare awareness of polysemy in English between first-year and second-year students, and 2) to investigate factors that affect their polysemy awareness. This mixed-method research was conducted with 49 students (25 first-year and 24 second-year) from the Faculty of Education, Naresuan University. The researchers collected data by two research tools: a task on awareness of English polysemous words and a semi-structured interview. After finishing the task, four participants from each group were purposely selected to attend the interview. A quantitative analysis showed that there was not any statistically significant difference between the groups. However, the second-year students slightly outperformed the first-year students. Moreover, possible factors which influenced the awareness of the English polysemy are: the recall ability, the sufficient English exposure, the classroom's emphasis on the semantic relation, and the shared features between the languages.

Keywords: EFL polysemy, Acquisition of English polysemy, Factors of polysemy acquisition

Introduction

Humans rely on vocabularies to convey thoughts and even process information in their brain. To acquire an L2, it is inevitable to acquire its words in terms of phonology, morphology, semantics, and syntax. Nation (2001) stated that learners must learn forms and meanings of words with retrievals, which is to understand what they hear and to respond with storage words. Polysemy, morphologically, is made up of two lexemes; poly means to many, multiple, or more than one thing, sēma is sign in Greek. Polysemy refers to a group of words with identical written and pronounced forms together with related meanings. Linguists elaborate polysemy in the same way as an identical lexical item not containing only a meaning or a sense. It, to be more specific, has the same phonological attribute and also deals with some extended senses (Finegan, 2004; Vincente & Falkum, 2017). Lexicographers normally group such multiple-meaning words 'under the same lexical entry' (Saeed, 2016). To illustrate, compare the following sentences which contain the polysemy word:

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1. She wore a *plain* black dress.
2. A group of wild horses was in *plain* view.

In sentence 1, the term “plain” refers to ‘not decorated in any way’, while in sentence 2 it means ‘clear and easy to see or understand’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Their meanings would be slightly distinct; they share a synonym in simple and an antonym in complex. That is, polysemy is not only phonologically identical but also similar in core meanings together with other peripheral ones (Finegan, 2004).

However, some English words would sometimes have spellings and pronunciations in common; their meanings are totally separate. The sentences 3 and 4 help manifest that.

3. High consumption of *lead* can be harmful to humans.
4. The director *leads* the Department of Irrigation to manage water wisely.

In sentence 3, the term “lead” refers to ‘a kind of heavy poisonous metal’. On the other hand, the word “lead” in the sentence 4 is a verb which means ‘to control a group of people or an organization’, (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Unlike those multiple-meaning words, “lead” function as a noun and as a verb. This term can be classified as another lexical relation: homonymy.

Homonyms refer to lexicons of which meanings are separate items even though their utterance and spelling are alike (Vincente & Falkum, 2017; Nation, 2001; Becker & Bieswanger, 2010). Crystal (2008) and Saeed (2016) correspondingly proposed some attributes of homonymy. First, homonyms are under the same part of speech and have the same written form (e.g., might (n). and might (v.)). Second, despite the same pronunciations, homonyms are of the same syntactic category and vice versa (e.g., pea and pee; and e.g., right (adj.) and right (n.) (adv.), respectively). Third, there are no matching spellings and categories among them (e.g., buy and by), and they are homophonous.

In a Thai context, there have been a few studies regarding English polysemy and/or its acquisition, but a great number of studies still focus on English pedagogy and problems of English vocabulary acquisition and teaching among Thai EFL. For example, Saengmanee (2001) investigated English polysemy word knowledge (PWK) of science college students, revealing that those Thai EFL students had a low awareness of polysemy. Nevertheless, the research yet explored factors resulting in low PWK and did not investigate students in other fields except science.

English polysemy acquisition among EFL learners

Polysemy is ubiquitous in natural languages. It yield other meanings without inventing others (Vincente & Falkum, 2017), making communication easier as well as confusing at the same time. EFL learners possibly do not have much awareness of multiple-meaning words or are not always aware of such a phenomenon in English. Alnamer (2017) suggested that EFL class lack emphasis on extended meanings. Only primary meanings of polysemous words are introduced. Learners themselves also acquire those first-in-mind meanings rather than their “full dimensions, subtlety, versatility, and shades of meanings”. Matsumoto (2016) found that some Japanese EFL learners while reading failed



to successfully distinguish the polysemic words' ambiguity, because of familiarity with limited primary meaning. When encountering unfamiliar secondary meanings, learners tend to blend those senses of polysemy into one meaning. EFL learners would fail to express their thoughts effectively and clearly (Nataliya & Elena, 2020). Moreover, there is little emphasis on the development of English polysemy's receptions and productions in an English-subject curriculum (Alnamer, 2017). Like the traditional pedagogical context which heavily depends on translation and where multiple-meaning words are taught for their primarily communicated senses, many English textbooks also limitedly introduce English target words to learners with only specific meanings, and dictionaries do not organize senses of those lexicons systematically. They do not show the association of words with their extended senses inclusively (Sawaki, 2020; Ozturk, 2018). Proficiency in English would guarantee that learners would have adequate knowledge of polysemy and/or have awareness of polysemy (Saengmanee, 2001; Wei & Lou, 2015; Alnamer, 2017; Ozturk, 2018; Nataliya & Elena, 2020) even though context cues were given. Hence the current study involved students regardless of their mastery level in the target language (see methodology).

Controversially, Floyed, Goldberg & Williams (2020) proposed that high-frequency words are a 'bridge' to approach new related meanings by English native speakers, even toddlers under the age of four. Vespoor & Lewi (2007) similarly proposed that a combination of core meanings and context cues would be useful for EFL learners. They revealed that the subjects given core senses as well as context cues outperformed those given figurative senses together with context cues. Similarly, Morimoto and Loewen (2007), Makni (2014), and Mitsugi (2016) studied the effect of employing image-schema-based instruction (ISBI) to teach English polysemous words. ISBI is a new instruction of which image-schema represents the concept of the polysemy words, assisting EFL learners in understanding and memorizing the extended meanings. Context cues are still necessary to guess secondary meanings and were further confirmed by Boontam (2016) and Phongpak (2016), whose studies employed data-driven learning instruction (DDL) to teach English polysemous prepositions to young Thai EFL learners through extracted concordance.

Research objectives

The current study aims to

- 1) compare an awareness of English polysemous words among Education-majored first-year students and second-year students at Naresuan University, and
- 2) explore factors that affect their polysemy awareness.

Methodology

Participants

This study selected 49 students of the Faculty of Education, Naresuan University. Half of the subjects were first-year students, and the rest were second-year students.

We hypothesized that the second-year students might have a higher exposure to English than their counterparts. All students were sorted into two groups. First group is 25 first-year students, and second group is 24 second-year students.

Instruments and procedures

The present study is based on mixed methods. To collect the research data, we have applied two instruments. First, the task on awareness of English polysemous words was used to collect a quantitative dataset. The second instrument to gather a qualitative dataset was a semi-structured interview.

To complete the task on awareness of English polysemous words, the participants completed the task (See Appendix A), and the gathering was conducted remotely, due to COVID-19 safety measures. The task had two parts: the sentence production and English to Thai translation. The total score was 45.

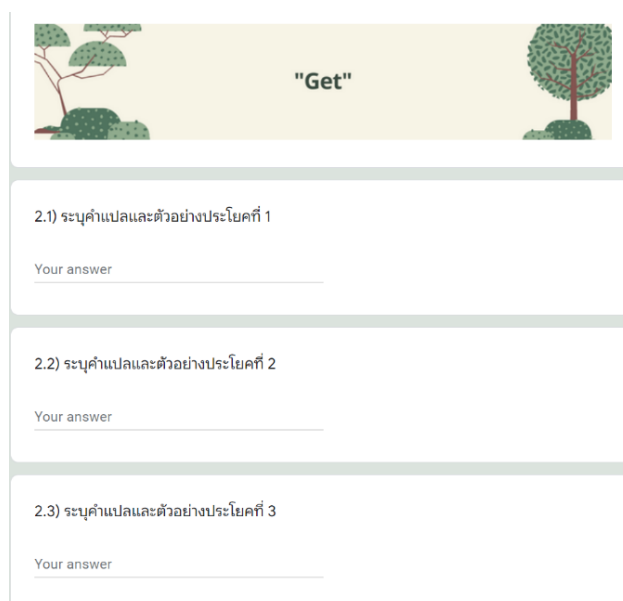
In detail, Part 1 (sentence production) consists of 10 target words (see Table 1.); all of them are polysemous in English.

Table 1 Part 1's target multiple-meaning vocabularies

free	get	take	run	play
wear	spring	face	table	head

The participants were asked to select three Thai equivalents of the English appropriately and compose a sentence for each meaning (see Figure 1). However, they were not forced to answer every single item, responding with no answers or leaving them blank. A sentence to be produced with a target polysemous word, regardless of the same semantic category (i.e., verb, noun, adjective), was counted one point. Thus, the task had 30 points (10 x 3) in total. One point was for a correctly selected-Thai-equivalent or an acceptable sentence. Nevertheless, the participants would get no point if they did not answer or find an inappropriate Thai equivalent. Inaccurate rules of writing (in Thai and English) were not the focus but only Thai equivalents of English.

In addition, before distributing the task, we instructed the participants on how to complete the task and allowed them to contact us in case of uncertainties. Importantly, while performing, the subjects must not consult dictionaries.



"Get"

2.1) ระบุคำแปลและตัวอย่างประโยคที่ 1

Your answer _____

2.2) ระบุคำแปลและตัวอย่างประโยคที่ 2

Your answer _____

2.3) ระบุคำแปลและตัวอย่างประโยคที่ 3

Your answer _____

Figure 1 Sentence-production part



Part 2 was a translation, adopted from Alnamer (2017) (see Appendix B). This part had 15 items with three polysemous words (see Table 2). Their meanings are different, according to the contexts.

The participants were required to translate each given sentence into Thai. However, no replying is allowed. One point was for a sentence that is translated with the appropriate Thai equivalent of English. No answer or incorrect L1 equivalent selection is not awarded. The total score was 15. However, grammatical errors detected both in Thai and English were ignored. In Appendix B, we translated all items into Thai, and it was part of grading.

Table 2 Target multiple-meaning vocabularies (taken from Alnamer, 2017, p. 116)

Word	Meaning	Word	Meaning	Word	Meaning
Open	Meaning 1: 'spread out'	Run	Meaning 1: 'move fast'	Make	Meaning 1: 'prepare'
	Meaning 2: 'not cover'		Meaning 2: 'manage'		Meaning 2: 'force'
	Meaning 3: 'honest'		Meaning 3: 'provide'		Meaning 3: 'appoint'
	Meaning 4: 'not hidden'		Meaning 4: 'use'		Meaning 4: 'reach'
	Meaning 5: 'available'		Meaning 5: 'flow'		Meaning 5: 'represent'

Last, the other instrument in the present study is a semi-structured interview. The interview was conducted immediately via Microsoft Teams. Four interviewees were recruited from each group; the eligibility criteria are as follows:

- 1) They must show the highest and the lowest level of polysemous word awareness, and
- 2) They must show the second highest and second lowest level of polysemous word awareness.

The participants were then asked one open-ended question regarding the task: how do you know that the vocabulary has more than one meaning?

Statistical analysis

In the current study, the researchers employed a t-test independent technique on the SPSS software package to demonstrate whether there are significant differences between first-year students and second-year students' answers in each part, based on the hypotheses.

Result and Discussion

Results

The objectives of this study are to examine the awareness of Naresuan University first-year students and second-year students on polysemy in English and to investigate factors that affect their polysemy awareness. This section, therefore, aims to report obtained results for each purpose.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 below provides a detailed analysis of the obtained result, presenting descriptive statistics of the participants' score on the task.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of the score on the task

	College Year	N	Max	Min	Mean	Std. Deviation
The Task (Overall) *Total = 45	First-year students	25	42	12	30.32	7.415
	Second-year students	24	41	17	33.83	6.005
	All participants	49	42	12	32.04	6.922
Part 1: Sentence Production Task *Total = 30	First-year students	25	28	4	17.76	6.534
	Second-year students	24	28	8	21	5.332
	All participants	49	28	4	19.35	6.136
Part 2: Translation Task *Total = 15	First-year students	25	15	6	12.56	2.2
	Second-year students	24	15	7	12.83	1.761
	All participants	49	15	6	12.69	1.981

Table 3 shows all the participants gain the overall mean score on the task, and the overall mean scores in Part 1 (sentence-production) and in Part 2 (translation) at 32.04, 19.35, and 12.69, respectively. Moreover, second-year students outperformed on the whole task (Mean=33.83), on the sentence production part (Mean=21), and on the translation part (Mean=12.83) when compared with the first-year students.

Sentence Production Task

Table 4 Sentence production task

	College Year	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig. (p-value)
Part 1: Sentence Production Task	Freshman	25	17.76	6.534	-1.897	0.064
	Sophomore	24	21	5.332		

*Total score = 30

According to Table 4, the mean scores on the sentence production task performed by first-year students and second-year students are 17.76 (SD=6.534) and 21 (SD=5.332), respectively. Moreover, the p -value is > 0.05 . This indicates that no significant differences were found between the mean score of the two groups.

Table 5 Examples of sentences produced by all the participants with the target polysemy

Item	College Year	Sentence	Thai Equivalent	Evaluation
1	Freshman	Father released the bird from the cage so that the bird could have a free life.	อิสระ (having unlimited movement)	acceptable
2	Freshman	I get dressed.	ได้ (to obtain)	unacceptable
2	Sophomore	I get it.	เข้าใจ (understand)	acceptable



Item	College Year	Sentence	Thai Equivalent	Evaluation
5	sophomore	I can't play guitar.	เล่น (enjoy)	acceptable
6	Freshman	The river gradually wears off the surface of the banks.	กร่อน (to remove or to get thinner)	acceptable
7	Sophomore	I spring look like bunny.	กระโดด (jump)	unacceptable
8	Sophomore	He had a disgruntled expression on his face when he was angry.	หน้า (face)	unacceptable
9	Freshman	I played the table.	กระดานหมากรุก (chessboard)	unacceptable

Table 5 illustrates some examples of acceptable and unacceptable sentences, produced by all the participants. Thai equivalents of English polysemy in the sentences were also provided. As mentioned in methodology, any item replied without the appropriate Thai equivalent of English polysemy had no point and was considered unacceptable. To be specific, some subjects failed to find appropriate Thai equivalents of English

Translation Task

Table 6 Translation task

	College Year	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig. (p-value)
Part 2: Translation Task	Freshman	25	12.56	2.2	-0.479	0.634
	Sophomore	24	12.83	1.761		

*Total score = 15

As shown in Table 6, the first-year students' mean score on the translation task is 12.56 (SD=2.2), compared to the second-year students' mean score which is 12.83 (SD=1.761). The resulting p-value is > 0.05 . The mean score obtained from first-year students has no difference from that of second-year students.

Moreover, Table 7 provides some examples of English translations to Thai obtained from both first-year students and second-year students. The evaluations of each example are also included. Some participants, in particular, were unable to find suitable Thai translations of English.

Table 7 Examples of translated sentences provided by the participants

Item	College Year	Sentence	Translation	Evaluation
1	Freshman	The flowers are all open now.	ดอกไม้บานหมดแล้ว	acceptable
4	Sophomore	The hall of the old house was open to the sky.	โถงบ้านเก่านี้เปิดโล่งให้เห็นท้องฟ้า	acceptable
8	Freshman	The college runs summer courses for foreign students.	ในช่วงหน้าร้อนจะมีนักเรียนแลกเปลี่ยนมา	unacceptable
9	Freshman	She made him her assistant.	เธอแต่งตั้งเขาเป็นผู้ช่วยของเธอ	acceptable



Item	College Year	Sentence	Translation	Evaluation
9	Sophomore	She made him her assistant.	หล่อนให้ความช่วยเหลือเขา (help)	unacceptable
10	Freshman	His eyes showed open admiration as he looked at her.	ดวงตาของเขาแสดงความชื่นชมในขณะที่เขามองเธอ	unacceptable
11	Sophomore	Our van runs on diesel.	รถตู้ของเราใช้น้ำมันดีเซล	acceptable
14	Sophomore	The tears ran down her cheek.	น้ำตาหล่นมาอาบแก้มหล่อน	unacceptable

Interview Responses

The interview questions mainly focus on the factors affecting polysemy awareness. Frequencies and percentage of each factor gathered from all participants are shown in Table 8.

Table 8 Challenging factors in acquiring polysemy of the participants

Factor	Example of Statement	n	f	%
Classroom's emphasis on polysemy	- I normally listen to my lecturer and I write down words' meanings. About 1 or 2 per word. I never think that a word can have that many meanings. - I focus on only words in my textbooks. They are part of the coming final English examination.	8	5	62.5
Exposure to English	- We (Thai EFL learners) hardly have a chance to use English all the time. Watching films or listening to songs in English helps me gain words in different meanings - I rarely have a chance to communicate in English in daily life. My English teachers always speak Thai. - You will never know secondary meanings if you don't have a chance to use it in daily life	8	7	87.5
Recall ability	- I cannot tell an extended meaning without context. Listing a meaning by a meaning seems too difficult. - I know a word can have more than a meaning, but it is impossible to remember all of them. My major is not English.	8	8	100
Similarity in senses between Thai and English	- Sometimes, if English extended senses are close enough or shared with those of Thai, it is not much difficult to memorize.	8	4	50
Note: *n = number of participants *f = frequency				

Table 8 demonstrates that all participants agreed that memorizing polysemous words contributed to successful acquisition. Approximately, 87.5 percent faced an issue with English exposure. Of 62.5 percent, they did not pay much attention to English polysemy in classrooms. Finally, the resemblance in senses between Thai and English, according to half of the learners (50%), influences their English polysemy awareness.



Conclusion

The first objective is to compare the awareness of English polysemous words among Education-majored students at Naresuan University between 25 first-year students and 24 second-year students. The second research purpose is to explore the factors that influence their polysemy awareness. The participants were asked to complete the task on polysemous English words awareness, which was divided into the sentence-production and the translation section, and were interviewed after the test. In addition, the results of the study are interpreted, and some recommendations are provided.

This study revealed that even though the Naresuan University second-year students slightly outperformed their counterparts in both the sentences-production and the translation parts, there were no statistically significant differences between the groups.

Discussion and Recommendation

The findings reflect that the subjects did not have much awareness of polysemy in English. They, on the other hand, had low production skill notwithstanding knowing the alternation of senses. Some reasons to account for this. For one thing, some of the subjects might not be conscious of the sense, according to many no-answers left or no more than a reply for each item in Part 1 (sentence-production task). They relied on their first L1 association with the target known words and overlooked other senses. This is supported by Matsumoto (2016) and Imamee (2016). Another potential reason is the participants lacked production skills and retrieval of shifting senses. In other words, they probably know extended meanings, yet they cannot recognize and retrieve them to answer. The researchers considered this based on responses in Part 2 (translation task) as most of the items were replied properly. Unlike Part 1, the translation task required less production skills and context clues helped them select Thai equivalents of English easier. In fact, the learners made use of their exposure to the L2 to remove opacity among senses (Alnamer, 2017; Ozturk, 2017; Wei & Lou, 2015). Also, the target words were common among them.

Next, we should pay more attention to pedagogical strategies. For instance, considered the grammar-translation method (GTM) normally found in EFL classrooms is less effective in teaching English vocabulary (polysemy) than image-schema-based instruction (e.g., Makni, 2014; Mitsugi, 2016) similarity-based instruction (e.g., Vardidze, 2020). Unfortunately, the interview reported the GTM was employed in English classes. In addition, this study found many items in Part 1 (sentence-production) were left unanswered and were selected Thai equivalents of English inappropriately. Through the GTM, English instructors cannot put much emphasis on polysemy but deliver only in-context meanings. This is an unfavorable-learning environment for EFL learners. Albaladejo, Coyle & Laurios (2018) confirmed the positive result of storytelling and incidental vocabulary gain made by the subjects. Even though the target words in their study are not polysemic, it is worth fostering and adapting teaching procedures.

Exposure to the target language is attributed to polysemy awareness. It should be noted that this term refers to either in- and out-of-class contexts. An unfavorable-learning English environment was reported in this study. English classes were taught in Thai, not leading to insufficient exposure to English. Out-of-class language learning (or OCLL) through media (e.g., viewing TV programs or films, listening to songs, playing computer games, paper-based or online



reading in English) is investigated for its advantages on language learning over formal learning (e.g., Peters, 2018). Similarly, one of the interviewees used films and songs to learn new words. These activities, in fact, are less restricted, more motivating, and entertaining when compared to direct learning; therefore, OCLL should be promoted for EFL learners. However, whether enhanced-technology OCLL succeeds in promoting learning or not relies on learners' competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Fathali & Okada, 2016).

Suggestions for future studies

The remote collection probably resulted in the invalidated data, for the participants might have consulted dictionaries while completing the task. Moreover, some subjects did not show much cooperation; their replies were submitted late, and they refused to give an interview. Based on the limitations above mentioned, future studies should:

1. reduce the number of questions to prevent fatigue,
2. adapt and/or revise or create a new tool which is comprehensive,
3. study the participants from different fields (e.g., social science, engineering, medicine) and/or compare their similarities and differences,
4. investigate factors affecting polysemy awareness through different kinds of research interviews.

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Appendix A

Directions: define the following words in Thai, and compose a sentence for each meaning in English.

The answer pattern is [definition/sentence] as in the example below.

Answer 1: ห้าง/ I looked around the room.

Answer 2: ที่ว่าง/ The old wardrobe took up too much room.

1. Free

1.1) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 1

1.2) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 2

1.3) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 3

2. Get

2.1) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 1

2.2) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 2

2.3) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 3

3. Take

3.1) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 1

3.2) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 2

3.3) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 3

4. Run

4.1) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 1

4.2) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 2

4.3) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 3

5. Play

5.1) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 1

5.2) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 2

5.3) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 3



6. Wear

6.1) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 1

6.2) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 2

6.3) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 3

7. Spring

7.1) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 1

7.2) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 2

7.3) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 3

8. Face

8.1) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 1

8.2) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 2

8.3) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 3

9. Table

9.1) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 1

9.2) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 2

9.3) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 3

10. Head

10.1) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 1

10.2) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 2

10.3) ระบุคำแปลและประโยคที่ 3



Appendix B

Direction: Translate these sentences into Thai.

1. The flowers are all open now.
มวลดอกไม้เบ่งบานสลอน
2. Can you run as fast as Mike?
เธอวิ่งเร็วเท่าไมค์ได้หรือเปล่า
3. She made coffee for all of us.
หล่อนได้ชงกาแฟไว้ให้เราแล้ว
4. The hall of the old house was open to sky.
ห้องโถงของบ้านหลังเปิดออกโล่งเห็นท้องฟ้า
5. He has no idea how to run a business.
เขาไม่รู้ว่าจะทำธุรกิจอย่างไรเลย
6. They made me repeat the whole story.
พวกนี้ทำให้ฉันต้องเล่าเรื่องเดิมซ้ำอีก
7. She was always opens to her parents.
หล่อนไม่เคยมีความลับกับพ่อแม่เลย
8. The college run summer courses for foreign students.
มหาวิทยาลัยเปิดสอนกระบวนวิชาภาคฤดูร้อนให้แก่นักศึกษาต่างชาติ
9. She made him her assistant.
หล่อนแต่งตั้งเขาเป็นผู้ช่วยของหล่อน
10. His eyes showed open admiration as he looked at her.
หล่อนแต่งตั้งเขาเป็นผู้ช่วยของหล่อน
11. Our van runs on diesel.
รถตู้ของพวกเราใช้น้ำมันดีเซล
12. Do you think we will make Dover by 12?
คุณคิดว่าเราจะไปที่โดเวอร์ก่อนเที่ยงได้ไหม
13. What options are open to us?
แล้วมีอะไรให้เราเลือกได้บ้างละ
14. The tears ran down her cheek
หยาดสาหร่ายน้ำตาไหลเอิบอาบทั่วแก้มสาวผู้นั้น
15. You have made my nose too big. [For example: in a drawing]
แกวาดจมูกฉันออกจะใหญ่ไปเสียหน่อยนะ