

## The Grammatical L1 Transfer of Self-Forms among Asian Learners of English

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Article information	
<b>Abstract</b>	This study investigates L1 transfer patterns in the use of English self-forms (e.g., myself, yourself) among Thai, Chinese, and Japanese English learners. Using data from the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (ICNALE), we examined 1,268 self-form tokens and compared them to native speaker usage from the British National Corpus. Our analysis focuses on syntactic function in argumentative essays, looking at how learners' L1 influences their use of reflexive versus intensive functions in different syntactic contexts. Initial findings show clear patterns of transfer effects: native speakers primarily use self-forms for reflexive functions in core argument positions, whereas Asian learners have a strong preference for using them as oblique arguments after the preposition 'by', implying L1 influence from analogous constructions in their native languages. The findings enhance our understanding of the relationship between register constraints and L1 transfer in learner language, with implications for both theoretical frameworks of cross-linguistic influence and pedagogical strategies in advanced writing instruction.
<b>Keywords</b>	learner corpus research, first language transfer, reflexive pronouns, intensive pronouns, Asian English learners
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### 1. Introduction

Language transfer, characterized as the impact of previously learned languages on the acquisition of a target language (Odlin, 1989), plays an essential role in second language acquisition (L2A). This cognitive mechanism significantly influences learning outcomes (Gass, 1984) and has been thoroughly examined across diverse linguistic fields, especially in vocabulary acquisition (Pasquarella et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2010) and phonological development (Chen et al., 2010; Dickinson et al., 2004; Durgunoğlu et al., 1993).

Syntactic transfer has emerged as another significant area of investigation. Studies have documented how learners' L1 syntactic patterns influence their L2 production, particularly in writing tasks (Cailing, 2017). Research on Chinese students has consistently demonstrated L1 transfer effects in a number of language domains, including general sentence construction patterns, conjunction usage (Kong et al., 2023), and verb forms and morphosyntactic structures (Tang, 2020). These transfer effects tend to diminish as L2 proficiency increases. Similarly,

analysis of the Thai Learner Corpus has shown that intermediate Thai learners exhibit L1 transfer in their use of self-forms, particularly in treating them as oblique arguments with the preposition 'by' (e.g., "Some of it I brought by myself") rather than as appositive intensifiers (e.g., "I myself adorned the room") as proficient writers do (Rhekhhalilit, 2023).

Although substantial research has addressed language transfer, pronoun-related problems—especially reflexive and intensive pronouns,—have received relatively little attention. This disparity emphasizes the need for more research on the grammatical L1 transfer of self-forms among Thai and Chinese English learners—a major but underinvestigated area of study.

Standard English instruction clearly teaches reflexive pronouns—including myself, yourself, and himself. Still, some Asian English learners regularly use self-forms in a way different from that of native English speakers even with their great exposure to and practice in English writing. Take the following sentences as examples:

1. ...when I aspired something and I need to buy by *myself*. (Myself-THA)
2. ...to is money . When I can make money by *myself*. (Myself-CHN)
3. time job . So I can't get money by *myself*. (Myself-JPN)
4. ...novel. What interests her, apparently, is not the remark *itself*, but ‘the degree to which the piece of recall’ (Itself-ENS)

*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

While both *itself* and *myself* function as intensifiers in the above examples, their syntactic structures are different. In Sentences 1-3 written by Asian learners of English (Thai, Chinese, and Japanese respectively), the reflexive pronoun *myself* is used as the object after the preposition 'by'. In contrast, the English native speaker used the pronoun *itself* immediately after its antecedent, the remark.

This study focuses on English learners in China, Japan, and Thailand because their common learning contexts are helpful for studying first language (L1) transfer. In other words, in these countries, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), with formal classroom training, minimal actual exposure, and a focus on grammar for high-stakes exams. This common background reduces confounding variables, allowing for a more targeted investigation of L1 effect.

Furthermore, the reflexive systems in Thai (*/tua.eeŋ/*), Chinese (*/ziji/*) and Japanese (*/zibun/*) provide a strong basis for investigating L1 transfer due to their distinct linguistic features. These features—ranging from Thai's morphological neutrality and local binding preference to the long-distance binding and multifunctional (e.g., intensifier, indexical) roles common in Chinese and Japanese—are critical for understanding how native language syntax influences learners' use of English self-forms. A further analysis of these contrasting systems is provided in Section 2.2.

These differences could be the outcome of first language influence on linguistic transfer among the learners. Consequently, the aim of the present study is to investigate, using learner corpus data analysis, the use of self-forms by English learners from Thailand, China, and Japan.

As a result, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Thai, Chinese, and Japanese English learners use self-forms in comparison with usage patterns attested in a native-speaker reference corpus (the BNC), and what differences can be observed that may point to L1 transfer effects?
2. What patterns of L1 transfer can be identified in their usage of self-forms?
3. How do the syntactic structures of learners' L1s influence their use of English self-forms?

To address these questions, this study employs corpus analysis of learner data from ICNALE: The International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English provided by Ishikawa (2023). This learner corpus was chosen because it focuses on argumentative essays, which naturally stimulate self-form usage in conveying personal attitude and agency, has controlled writing settings that ensure comparable data across multiple L1 groups, and provides a thorough picture of Asian learners' English. Furthermore, the BNC is a perfect reference corpus for contrasting students' linguistic patterns with native speakers' as it addresses all aspects of genuine British English use. It is important to note that the British National Corpus (BNC) was used in this study solely for descriptive and comparative purposes, not as a prescriptive benchmark for learner proficiency. We recognize the significant shift in applied linguistics toward a World Englishes paradigm, which questions the primacy of native-speaker norms. However, in the context of studying L1 transfer, a reference corpus is a methodological requirement. It establishes a data-driven baseline for one native English variety, allowing us to empirically identify grammatical patterns in learner data that are significantly different. This comparison is thus a diagnostic tool used to isolate features for analyzing the cognitive processes of language transfer, rather than a judgment on the accuracy of the learners' English.

The paper focuses on qualitatively examining certain cases where L1 transfer seems to affect usage patterns. Knowing how L1 transfer influences self-form use has significant theoretical and practical consequences. Theoretically, it increases our knowledge of how cross-linguistic influences shape the acquisition of complicated grammatical components. Regarding pedagogy, it can guide the creation of focused teaching tactics for Asian English language students, especially in the field of advanced writing training.

## 2. Literature Review

The acquisition of English self-forms presents a significant challenge for second language (L2) learners, particularly those from Asian language backgrounds such as Thai, Mandarin, and Japanese, where native reflexive systems differ typologically from English. This literature review attempts to predict and explain potential areas of negative first language (L1) transfer by comparing the syntactic and semantic systems of English self-forms to those found in these three Asian languages. To accomplish this, the review will first discuss the dual reflexive and intensive functions of English forms, followed by an overview of the corresponding systems in Thai, Mandarin, and Japanese. The study will conclude by summarizing the findings to highlight key systemic differences and discussing their direct implications for L2 acquisition and instruction.

### 2.1 The formation and functions of English self-forms

English self-forms are classified into two categories based on number: singular forms (such as *myself*, *yourself*, and *herself*) and plural forms (such as *ourselves* and *yourselves*).

They are composed of the intensifier morpheme *-self*, object (or dative) forms in the third person, and possessive forms in the first and second person, following Siemund (2002).

**Table 1**

*English Self-form Inventory*

Basis	Singular self-forms	Plural self-forms
Possessive-based	myself, yourself	ourselves, yourselves
Dative-based	himself, herself, itself	themselves

A substantial body of research (e.g., Gast & König, 2002; König & Siemund, 2000; Kroeger, 2004; Siemund, 2002, 2003; Wardhaugh, 1995) has investigated English self-forms and has determined that they serve in two primary functions: reflexive and intensive (or emphatic). Researchers examining this topic highlight the syntactic and semantic distinctions underlying these two functions which will be emphasized in this section.

### 2.1.1 Reflexive Functions

A self-form is reflexive when it serves as a mandatory argument for a verb, demonstrating that the subject and object are the same entity—a relationship known as co-reference. As Bhat (2004) points out, English self-forms are used specifically to describe this relationship. The presence of a reflexive pronoun is therefore necessary for the sentence's grammatical integrity and removing it would render the phrase incomplete.

Consider the following examples.

5.  $I_i$  taught  $myself_i$  how to play the guitar during the summer.
6.  $I_i$  taught  $her_j$  how to play the guitar during the summer.

The reflexive self-form *myself* is introduced in Example 5, which shares a referent with the subject antecedent ( $I$ ). In other words,  $I$  and *myself* both refer to the same person in the actual world. In contrast, Example 6 illustrates an instance in which the subject and object have distinguishing referents, i.e., they are associated with distinct individuals, which requires the use of the object pronoun.

### 2.1.2 Intensive Functions

A self-form is intensive (or emphatic) when used as an optional element to emphasize a noun, typically the subject. Unlike reflexive pronouns, intensifiers are not mandatory arguments, so they can be removed from a sentence without affecting its grammatical structure.

Intensive forms are classified by their syntactic position into two types:

- Adnominal intensifiers are adjuncts to a noun phrase (NP), used to emphasize the head noun (e.g., "the headmaster himself").
- Adverbial intensifiers appear within the verb phrase (VP), often at the end. These can be sub-categorized as exclusive, which are linked to events, or inclusive, which are associated with states.

Consider the following examples:

7. *John<sub>i</sub>* always repairs his car *himself<sub>i</sub>*

In sentence 7, the intensifier *himself* functions adverbially to emphasize that the action is solely performed by John. This typological distinction emphasizes the unique syntactic duties and emphatic functions that intensives can fulfill within English clauses.

To summarize, English self-forms are classified into two categories: reflexive anaphors and intensifiers. The primary distinction is grammatical necessity: reflexive anaphors are required complements to verbs or prepositions, whereas intensifiers are optional elements that can be removed without affecting grammaticality. Adverbial intensifiers modify verb phrases, while adnominal intensifiers attach to noun phrases.

Understanding the distinction is critical for theoretical and pedagogical purposes. It adds to our understanding of how cross-linguistic interference influences L2 acquisition and helps us develop targeted teaching strategies for learners, particularly those from Asian language backgrounds. To identify potential L1 transfer issues, first investigate how reflexive pronouns work in the learners' native languages.

## 2.2 Reflexives in Thai, Mandarin, and Japanese

In addition to the self-forms previously mentioned in English, we intend to provide a comprehensive overview of the research on reflexive pronouns in Thai, Mandarin, and Japanese. This will facilitate comprehension of the distinctions between these forms in the native languages of the learners and in English, their target language.

When considering its morphological and semantic properties, many Thai grammarians (such as Higbie and Thinsan, 2002 and Savetamalya, 1989) recognize */tua.eej/* as the reflexive pronoun in Standard Thai. Ratitamkul (2023) recently conducted an analysis of data collected from the Thai National Corpus, highlighting its key characteristics. She found that the morpheme */tua.eej/* is gender-neutral and can refer to first, second, or third-person antecedents. Semantically, it demonstrates a flexible animacy restriction; while it typically refers to animate antecedents, its use with inanimate entities is not entirely prohibited, as opposed to the stricter requirements in Chinese and Japanese.

Syntactically speaking, empirical data indicate a strong tendency for */tua.eej/* to be clause-bound, appearing in the same clause as the antecedent. The most common grammatical configuration is */tua.eej/* as the direct object, with the antecedent as the subject. */tua.eej/* is versatile and can be found in a variety of contexts, such as possessive noun phrases, subject positions, and prepositional objects. This adaptability, combined with its predominantly clause-bound nature, distinguishes the Thai reflexive system from that of neighboring languages.

In Mandarin grammar, the pronoun */zìjǐ/* is a highly versatile form that functions as both a reflexive pronoun and an intensifier (Tang, 1989; Wang, 2013). As a syntactic reflexive, */zìjǐ/* establishes a binding relationship with a prominent antecedent—typically the subject—to denote coreferentiality. According to Pollard and Xue (1998), a key feature is its ability to facilitate both local and long-distance binding, allowing it to refer to antecedents within or across clauses. However, this long-distance binding is blocked by an intervening subject that mismatches the antecedent in person or count. When used in non-argument positions, */zìjǐ/* acts as an intensifier to emphasize exclusivity or personal involvement. Ultimately, its usage is

driven more by semantic and contextual cues than by fixed grammatical positions, reflecting its versatile role in the language.

Like other reflexives in the abovementioned languages, the Japanese pronoun */Zibun/* (or */Jibun/*) functions in a more varied capacity than merely as a reflexive pronoun (McCready, 2007). Historically, people have employed the term */zibun/* to denote reflexivity, specifically the subject's action upon herself. Even so, long-distance binding describes how it works syntactically and lets */zibun/* refer to antecedents in earlier clauses. This feature consistently interrogates established syntactic frameworks.

Aside from its reflexive function, */zibun/* is an important indexical tool in the Japanese language. It is most commonly a first-person indexical, referring to the speaker of the utterance, but in some dialectal variants it can also refer to the addressee. Many regional dialects, as well as standard Tokyo Japanese, clearly demonstrate this indexical quality. According to Martin (1975, as cited in McCready, 2007), in the early twentieth century, Japanese military discourse began using */zibun/* as a self-referential term to address higher-ranking officials. This historical development demonstrates how pragmatic constraints, and social hierarchies influenced the evolution of */zibun/*'s functions beyond simple reflexivity. It is also very important to remember that */zibun/* might be a logophoric pronoun in some speaking contexts, indicating the most intimate thoughts or feelings of the character rather than the speaker's. */zibun/* is employed in daily language mostly according to pragmatic limits, especially those concerning interpersonal relationships and conversational dynamics. By stressing the very particular links between syntax, pragmatics, and wider discourse structures, all these parts show the flexibility of Japanese pronouns.

### 2.3 Comparative Analysis and Implications for L2 Acquisition

Table 2 summarizes the systemic distinctions between English self-forms and reflexive systems in Thai, Mandarin, and Japanese. These differences have important ramifications for L2 learning and teaching.

**Table 2**

*Key Typological Differences in Self-Form Systems: English vs. Thai, Mandarin, and Japanese*

Feature	English	Thai	Mandarin	Japanese
Morphological marking	Yes	No	No	No
Person/gender marking	Required	None	None	None
Long-distance binding	No	Limited	Yes	Yes
Intensifier function	Separate	Integrated	Integrated	Limited
Indexical function	No	Yes	No	Yes
Animacy restriction	No	Flexible	Strong	Strong

The structural differences between these language systems suggest three primary areas of potential L1 transfer in English acquisition. First, the morphologically simple nature of Asian reflexives (*/tua.eeŋ/, /ziji/, and /zibun/*) contrasts sharply with English's complex person-number-gender agreement system, potentially leading to agreement errors in self-form usage. Second, while English restricts reflexive binding to local domains, both Mandarin and Japanese permit long-distance binding, with Thai showing limited cases. This typological difference may result in non-target-like applications of English reflexives beyond their permitted syntactic domains. Third, the multifunctional nature of reflexive forms in Thai and Mandarin, where a single form serves both reflexive and intensifier functions, differs from English's distinct reflexive and intensive uses. This functional overlap could lead to difficulties in distinguishing and correctly applying these separate functions in English.

These predicted areas of difficulty are well-documented in learner corpus studies (Rhekhililit, 2023; Wang, 2013) and have direct implications for English language pedagogy. The findings suggest that advanced English instruction for Asian learners should specifically target: (1) the morphological complexity of English self-forms, (2) the strict locality conditions on English reflexive binding, and (3) the functional distinction between reflexive and intensive uses. Such targeted instruction could help mitigate L1 transfer effects and improve learning outcomes.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Data collection

The investigation employed two corpora: a reference corpus and a learner corpus. The learner data was obtained from the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (ICNALE), which was established by Ishikawa (2023) at Kobe University. The ICNALE is one of the largest publicly available learner corpora, consisting of more than 10,000 essays and speeches written by college and graduate students from ten Asian countries/regions, as well as native English speakers. The corpus encompasses EFL (China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand) and ESL (Hong Kong, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Singapore), thereby facilitating a comprehensive examination of English varieties among Asian students.

The written component of ICNALE comprises two specific topics that are accompanied by controlled argumentative essays. In contrast to the second topic (SMK), which compels students to debate whether smoking should be entirely prohibited in all restaurants nationwide, the first topic (PTJ) encourages students to evaluate the significance of part-time employment for college students. After showing agreement or disagreement with the two subjects, participants were asked to support their answers with evidence and reasoning.

This study's comparative methodology, which utilizes both a learner corpus (ICNALE) and a native-speaker reference corpus (BNC), aligns with well-established practices in the field of World Englishes. The use of such corpora allows for the identification of general patterns of language change and linguistic divergence in varieties of English around the world. Therefore, the BNC is not employed here as a prescriptive benchmark of 'correctness' but as a descriptive baseline. This approach is essential for systematically identifying unique features in the learners' interlanguage—such as their use of self-forms—which can then be analyzed for evidence of L1 transfer and other developmental processes. As a result, the British National Corpus (BNC), accessible through the BNCweb portal, served as the study's reference corpus. This comprehensive online tool enables comprehensive searches and the extraction of textual,

lexical, and grammatical information from texts written in native English. To establish a baseline against which learner language patterns could be evaluated, we collected 50 tokens for each of the eight self-forms produced by native speakers from the BNC, yielding a total of 400 native-speaker tokens as the benchmark for comparison.

These tokens were chosen using the random sample feature of the corpus interface in an impartial way, so allowing a methodical comparison of learner language patterns with standard usage of British English. It should be noted at this point that the British National Corpus (BNC) was chosen as the reference corpus to provide a broad, genre-general baseline of standard British English usage. This enables the identification of fundamental L1 transfer patterns that differ from common native-speaker conventions. However, we acknowledge that this study does not compare the learner essays to a corpus of argumentative essays written by native speakers that match the genre. While our method is effective at highlighting core syntactic differences, a future genre-matched analysis could provide deeper insights into the rhetorical functions of self-forms in academic writing.

1,268 tokens from the three learner groups—Thai, Chinese, and Japanese—were examined in this study. The selection of Thai, Chinese, and Japanese learners from the ICNALE's ten available groups was deliberate, based on the following linguistic and pedagogical criteria aimed at isolating the effects of L1.

These three languages, Thai (*/tua.eeŋ/*), Chinese (*/ziǐ /*), and Japanese (*/zibun/*), are chosen for their native reflexive systems, which provide a strong foundation for a contrastive analysis. Their characteristics include morphological simplicity, the absence of gender or person marking, and, in the case of Chinese and Japanese, the ease of long-distance binding. This contrasts sharply with the morphologically complex and locally bound reflexive system found in English. Their distinct typological differences make them ideal for investigating potential transfer patterns.

The pedagogical rationale for selecting these three countries stems from their status as significant, comparable environments for English as a Foreign Language (EFL), with English acquisition primarily occurring through formal instruction rather than societal immersion. This common context reduces confounding variables related to the learning environment (e.g., ESL vs. EFL), allowing for a more targeted analysis of L1 influence on learners' writing. Because of their significant linguistic differences and pedagogical similarities, these three groups are especially well-suited to investigating the study's research questions.

The full spectrum of reflexive pronouns—*myself*, *yourself*, *himself*, *herself*, *itself*, *ourselves*, *themselves*, and *yourselves*—were included in the self-forms examined in this study. To provide fair representation of reflexive pronoun usage across the three learner groups, the tokens were carefully taken from the respective sub corpora of ICNALE. A summary of the quantity of self-form tokens may be found in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Distribution of Self-form Tokens Across Learner Groups and Native Speakers*

Self-form	Thai learners	Chinese learners	Japanese learners	Native speakers
myself	46	15	58	50
yourself	157	63	15	50
himself	6	41	12	50

herself	5	3	1	50
itself	22	19	14	50
ourselves	28	141	63	50
yourselves	6	5	2	50
themselves	225	194	127	50
Total	495	481	292	400

It is important to note that specific self-forms, particularly in the learner corpora, the words *herself*, *himself* and *yourselves* were used infrequently. As a result, any further conclusions drawn from these specific pronouns should be interpreted with caution. The study's main claims about L1 transfer are thus based on the strong, high-frequency patterns observed for self-forms such as *themselves*, *yourself*, and *ourselves*.

### 3.2 Data analysis

As mentioned earlier, a total of 1,268 self-forms used by learners were analyzed in this study. In the first phase, researchers conducted a syntactic analysis to differentiate between reflexive and intensive functions of the self-forms, using established criteria.

**Table 4**

*Syntactic Criteria for Identifying Self-form Functions, Based on Grammatical Obligatoriness*

Syntactic functions	Core argument	Omissible
Reflexives	YES	NO
Intensives	NO	YES

*Note.* YES = the criterion applies; NO = the criterion does not apply

Table 4 indicates that self-forms are reflexive when they function as a core argument and, as such, cannot be omitted. Conversely, when they demonstrate the opposite behaviors, they are intensive forms. To be specific, core arguments include both direct objects and prepositional objects that are grammatically obligatory (i.e., whose removal renders the sentence ungrammatical). Oblique arguments introduced by the preposition 'by' (e.g., 'by myself') are classified as intensive forms in this study, as they are omissible without affecting grammaticality, despite their prepositional structure.

To demonstrate data analysis, consider the following examples:

8. I would never be able to forgive *myself*, though a part of me would always know or perhaps only (Myself-ENS)
9. ...I *myself* am guilty, he wrote, in that I want the glass... (Myself-ENS)

*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

In sentence 8, the pronoun *myself* as a direct object that refers to the subject *I*, and its removal would render the sentence ungrammatical. This syntactic behavior classifies it as a reflexive form. However, sentence 9 demonstrates a different usage where *myself*, although referencing the subject, functions as an intensive form. In this case, the pronoun acts to

emphasize the subject and can be omitted without affecting the sentence's grammatical structure since it is not an essential argument of the sentence.

In the same vein, the self-forms in sentences 10 to 12 are classified as intensives as they are omissible and function as oblique arguments occurring after the preposition *by*.

10. ...they go shopping . They have to make money by *themselves* for their enjoyment.  
(Themselves- JPN)
  11. ... after that I can bought new mobile phone by *myself*. (Myself-THA)
  12. ...too much it improves that you can earn money by *yourself*. (Yourself- CHN)
- Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

The syntactic context was subsequently analyzed to identify the differences between native English speakers and Asian learners.

#### 4. Results/Findings

##### 4.1 Native Speaker Benchmark: Analysis of Self-Form Functions in the British National Corpus (BNC)

This section establishes a descriptive baseline of native English usage by analyzing 400 self-form tokens randomly sampled from the British National Corpus (BNC). The analysis reveals a clear functional division between reflexive self-forms, which serve as obligatory grammatical arguments, and intensive self-forms, which act as optional modifiers for emphasis. The quantitative distribution of these functions across the eight self-forms is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Frequency Distribution of Reflexive and Intensive Functions in the BNC Sample*

Self-Forms	Reflexive		Intensive		Total (N)
	N	%	N	%	
myself	43	86.00%	7	14.00%	50
yourself	48	96.00%	2	4.00%	50
himself	33	66.00%	17	34.00%	50
herself	39	78.00%	11	22.00%	50
itself	20	40.00%	30	60.00%	50
ourselves	47	94.00%	3	6.00%	50
yourselves	39	78.00%	11	22.00%	50
themselves	40	80.00%	10	20.00%	50
Total	309	77.25%	91	22.75%	400

The overall data confirms that the predominant function of self-forms in native-speaker usage is reflexive, accounting for 77.25% of the tokens (309 out of 400). They are grammatically obligatory, serving as core arguments of a verb or preposition. For instance, a self-form can function as a direct object, as in sentence 13, or as the object of a preposition, as seen in sentence 14- to be distinguished from the omissible prepositional uses with 'by' discussed in Section 4.3.2.

13. The student here may inform *himself* whether he has been favoured by heaven with this truly divine gift. (Reflexive as direct object: himself- ENS )
14. The arguments put forward can be interesting in *themselves*, but their drift is often towards making the context of... (Reflexive as prepositional object: themselves- ENS)  
*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

While the general trend favors the reflexive function, a notable exception is the pronoun *itself*, which is used more frequently as an intensifier (30 instances) than as a reflexive pronoun (20 instances). While less frequent, intensive self-forms serve as optional elements for emphasis and appear in two distinct syntactic positions. First, adnominal intensifiers are placed immediately after the noun phrase they modify to emphasize the antecedent, as shown in sentence 15. Second, adverbial intensifiers typically appear at the end of a verb phrase to emphasize the subject as the sole agent of an action, illustrated in sentence 16.

15. No, he wrote, because Diana *herself* does not acknowledge either that she has been waiting all her life. (Adnominal intensive: herself-ENS )
16. He looked astonished. ‘We’re going to sort it out *ourselves*?’ (Adverbial intensive: ourselves-ENS)  
*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

This quantitative benchmark is essential, as it provides an empirical basis for comparing the patterns observed in the learner corpora. The native-speaker preference for reflexive functions—and the specific syntactic roles of intensives—will serve as a crucial reference point for identifying potential L1 transfer effects.

#### 4.2 Overview of Learners’ Self-Form Distribution Patterns

The analysis of self-form usage among three groups of Asian learners revealed distinct patterns in contextual application and frequency. The distribution of self-forms among Thai, Chinese, and Japanese learners was significantly different as shown above. Each group had distinct preferences for the selection and use of reflexive pronouns.

Thai learners showed a strong preference for specific self-forms, such as *themselves* (225 instances) and *yourself* (157 instances). This pattern suggests a preference for the use of plural and second-person reflexive pronouns, which could be indicative of discourse strategies common in their native language. Also, the high-frequency use of *yourself* suggests that they may rely heavily on direct address forms in their written communication.

The distribution of plural self-forms among Chinese learners was more even, with *themselves* and *ourselves* having significant frequencies (194 and 141, respectively). The preference for plural self-forms may reflect a collective cultural orientation common to Chinese discourse patterns.

Among the three groups, Japanese learners used self-forms the most conservatively, with 292 instances, compared to Thai (495) and Chinese (481) learners. Similar to Chinese learners, Japanese learners’ usage showed a clear preference for the pronouns *themselves* (127 instances) and *ourselves* (63 instances), with little use of the gender-specific pronouns *himself*

(12 instances) and *herself* (1 instance). This pattern indicates a possible avoidance strategy for gender-specific references, which may be influenced by the absence of such distinctions in the first language.

### 4.3 Syntactic analysis of self-forms

#### 4.3.1 Reflexive Functions in Learner Language

Analysis of self-forms across the learner corpora revealed distinct patterns in how reflexive functions were employed. The primary function of reflexive self-forms, serving as core arguments that cannot be omitted, was generally well understood across all learner groups, though with varying degrees of accuracy in application.

##### 4.3.1.1 Analysis of Reflexive Functions in Thai Learner Data

Analysis of the Thai learner corpus revealed systematic patterns in the use of true reflexive pronouns, where self-forms functioned as obligatory core arguments. These uses demonstrated the essential characteristics of reflexive function: they served as core arguments, were grammatically required, and maintained reference to the subject.

##### a. Direct Object Reflexives

Thai learners employed self-forms as direct objects following transitive verbs, particularly in contexts of personal development and social adaptation:

17. If anyone can quit smoking and will help *themselves* reduce the risk of lung cancer and heart disease. (Themselves-THA)
18. teach me something for stay with other persons or help *myself* (Myself-THA)
19. of smoke so we have to do something to protect *ourselves* and our health from the smoke One thing that everyone. (Ourselves-THA)
20. Unless it can teach you about improve *yourself* in society Except working part time have a good things. (Yourself-THA)

*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

In these instances, the self-forms function as essential core arguments where omission would result in ungrammatical constructions.

##### b. Prepositional Object Reflexives

The corpus also revealed instances where self-forms appeared as required objects of prepositions as illustrated below:

21. ...only study fee but for living cost should pay for *ourselves*... (Ourselves-THA)
22. for your interview. Keep your look and believed in *yourselves* (Yourselves-THA)
23. he want to own his own. He fought with *himself*. (Himself-THA)

*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

These examples represent true reflexive function as the self-forms serve as mandatory complements of their respective prepositions while maintaining subject reference. The patterns demonstrate that Thai learners have acquired competence in true reflexive functions, especially in expressing actions where the subject acts upon itself. Their usage shows grammatical

understanding while revealing culturally influenced preferences in verb selection and thematic focus.

#### 4.3.1.2 Analysis of Reflexive Functions in Chinese Learner Data

##### a. Direct Object Reflexives

Like Thai learners, Chinese learners also showed competence in reflexive functions, as the direct object right after a transitive verb. However, some non-standard collocations appear, such as the non-standard use of “*enforce myself*” where, instead, a native speaker might use ‘*force myself*’ or ‘*push myself*’.

24. Everyone wants to enjoy *himself* at the restaurants so why don't we ... (Himself-CHN)

25. a better life in the society . I will *enforce myself* to study hard. (Myself-CHN)

26. Besides most smokers said that smoking can excite *themselves* when they feel tired or do not want to work... (Themselves-CHN)

*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

The analysis of the Chinese learner corpus revealed distinctive patterns in the use of true reflexive pronouns, where self-forms function as core arguments that cannot be omitted without rendering the sentence ungrammatical.

In these instances, the self-forms function as essential core arguments, where removal would compromise grammatical integrity. The verbs employed in these constructions (such as improve, devote, bury, drop, change, engage, adopt) reflect a focus on personal transformation and academic commitment.

##### b. Prepositional Object Reflexives

The corpus also revealed instances where self-forms appeared as objects of prepositions, functioning as required core arguments:

27. Parttime Job is necessary for college students not only for *themselves* but also for society does n't any kids it just... (Themselves-CHN)

28. They become more confident of *themselves* and they have great powers to work. (Themselves-CHN)

29. more a child and you can take good care of *yourself*... (Yourself-CHN)

*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

These examples demonstrate true reflexive function as the self-forms are structurally required complements of their respective prepositions and maintain reference to the subject.

As a result, the data indicates that Chinese learners have a good grasp of true reflexive functions, particularly in expressing actions where the subject both initiates and receives the action. Their selection of accompanying verbs shows an understanding of the grammatical needs for reflexive pronouns as well as culturally influenced thematic decisions.

#### 4.3.1.3 Analysis of Reflexive Functions in Japanese Learner Data

##### a. Direct object reflexives

Japanese learners exhibited more conservative but precise use of reflexive functions. Their usage often appeared in contexts of personal management and social situations:

30. But as you grow up you have to manage *yourself*... (Yourself-JPN)  
31. In the country people who dislike a cigarette can enjoy *themselves* without being irritated about other's smoke. (Themselves-JPN)  
*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

With special respect to social settings and personal accountability, the examples of the Japanese students show an excellent understanding of reflexive pronouns in both singular and plural forms. Their usage tends to follow standard patterns more closely than the other groups, though with more limited range of application.

b. Prepositional Object Reflexives

Similar to Thai and Chinese learners, Japanese learners also use self-forms as reflexive after a preposition such as on, from and for, as illustrated below:

32. ...you are twenty years old you have to depend on *yourself* ... (Yourself-JPN)  
33. But they have a parttime job they got money from *themselves* (Themselves-JPN)  
34. many researchers . But smoking harms not only smokers for *himself* but also nonsmokers around smoker This is called passive smoking (himself- JPN)  
*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

Analysis of Thai, Chinese, and Japanese learner corpora reveals that learners from all three L1 backgrounds demonstrate basic competence in using reflexive pronouns as direct objects and prepositional objects, maintaining appropriate subject-antecedent relationships. To conclude, Japanese students show more conservative and exact use patterns than Thai and Chinese students, who show more syntactic experimentation and irregular non-standard collocations, even if reflexive constructions are most common in settings of social adaptation and personal development for all groups. These differences suggest varying stages of interlanguage development in reflexive pronoun acquisition.

#### 4.3.2 Analysis of Intensive Self-Form Usage Across Learner Groups

Following the criteria established in Table 4, the *by + self-form* constructions examined in this section are classified as intensive rather than reflexive, as they are omissible without affecting grammaticality. This distinguishes them from the prepositional objects discussed in Section 4.3.1 — such as ‘fight with himself’ or ‘pay for ourselves’ — which are grammatically required and therefore classified as reflexive. With this distinction in place, one important finding from the learner corpora analysis is that, although they differ greatly from native speaker norms, speakers of Thai, Chinese, and Japanese display systematic patterns in their use of English intensive self-forms. In particular, all three learner groups use bare intensive forms (e.g., "I did it myself") remarkably infrequently and strongly favor intensive forms with the preposition "by" (e.g., "do it by myself"). Their acquisition of English intensive functions appears to have been influenced by developmental sequences and L1 transfer effects, as evidenced by this consistent pattern and more subtle differences in the distribution of these forms among the groups.

a. Overwhelming Preference for "By + Self-Form" Constructions

From the data analysis, self-forms with the preposition "by" were used to highlight autonomy and independence by learners from all three language backgrounds—Thai, Chinese, and Japanese. In these cases, the by + self-form construction serves as an optional component that can be left out without compromising the grammaticality of the sentence following the criteria established in Table 4, these constructions are therefore classified as intensive rather than reflexive. While *'by themselves'* was the most frequent form overall, as a general trend across all three groups, a notable pattern emerged among the Thai learners. This group exhibited an exceptionally high frequency of *'by yourself'* (35 instances), a rate five times higher than that of the Chinese learners (7) and over ten times that of the Japanese learners (3). This pattern may be partly attributable to task-based effects if the writing prompts for Thai learners more frequently involved addressing a reader directly. However, it may also reflect pragmatic L1 transfer: direct second-person address is notably more prevalent in Thai argumentative and persuasive writing conventions than in Chinese or Japanese discourse, suggesting that rhetorical norms — in addition to syntactic structures — may shape learner production of intensive self-forms.

**Table 6**

*Intensive Self-Forms Used by Three Groups of Asian Learners*

Self-Form	Thai Learners	Chinese Learners	Japanese Learners
by myself	13	3	9
by yourself	35	7	3
by himself	1	4	1
by herself	1	1	0
by itself	0	0	1
by ourselves	8	12	7
by yourselves	0	1	0
by themselves	55	15	18
Total	113	43	39

35. Moreover they will handle their problems by *themselves* because they have to solve many problems while they are... (Themselves-THA)
36. ...job is very interested because we can have money by *myself* and parttime job can help us for manage time do... (Myself-THA)
37. ...they can solve the problems by *themselves* because they need to be independent. (Themselves-CHN)
38. ...too much it improves that you can earn money by *yourself*. (Yourself-CHN)
39. ...they go shopping. They have to make money by *themselves* for their enjoyment. (Themselves-JPN)
40. ...I have to do everything by *myself* like cleaning and cooking. (Myself-JPN)

*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

b. Bare self-forms without prepositions

In contrast to their frequent utilization of by + self-form constructions, Thai, Chinese, and Japanese learners exhibited a notably restricted application of bare intensive self-forms (those devoid of a preposition). This low frequency was a persistent observation among the

three groups, although the specific figures and usage patterns differed. When comparing across the learners, the data indicates an extreme contrast between the use of prepositional forms and bare intensives:

- Thai Learners: Showed the most restricted use, with only three non-standard instances ("yourself" twice and "themselves" once) identified out of 495 total self-form tokens.
  - Chinese Learners: Used bare intensives slightly more often, with nine instances noted out of 481 total self-form tokens, Chinese learners showed a preference for third-person pronouns like "itself" and "themselves" and tended to place them in the subject position for emphasis.
  - Japanese Learners: Demonstrated the highest frequency among the three groups, with fourteen instances recorded, primarily "themselves" (7) and "itself" (4). Notably, their usage appeared in more syntactically standard positions.
41. it's nonsense it doesn't do any good for you *yourself* and other people around you even cause air pollution" (Yourself-THA)
  42. "make you healthy and you will be proud of you *yourself* that you can help others from second smokers" (Yourself-THA)
  43. "another smoking in public places is illegal . Because it *themselves* . And other bad health" (Themselves-THA)

*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

A closer examination of these non-standard forms from the Thai learners reveals specific error patterns that illuminate their interlanguage. The construction 'good for you yourself', for instance, suggests a grasp of the emphatic function of the self-form but a lack of mastery over its syntactic placement, leading to a redundant appositive. The more severe error in 'Because it themselves' demonstrates a fundamental breakdown in pronoun-antecedent agreement, where the plural 'themselves' is incorrectly matched with the singular 'it'. This may indicate that for this learner, 'themselves' is treated as a generic, fossilized marker of emphasis, detached from its grammatical properties of number."

44. "the problem *itself* is difficult to solve..." (Itself-CHN)
45. "we *ourselves* should take responsibility for our study..." (Ourselves-CHN)
46. ... the students *themselves* must try harder to improve. (Themselves-JPN)
47. ... I *myself* want to work part-time. (Myself-JPN)
48. ... The manager *himself* decided to close the store. (Himself-JPN)

*Source: ICNALE Corpus (Ishikawa, 2023)*

In conclusion, the overwhelming preference for the 'by + self-form' construction can be strongly attributed to positive L1 transfer from learners' native languages. The syntactic structures used to express autonomy in Thai, Japanese, and to some extent Chinese, provide a direct template for the English prepositional form. For instance, Thai speakers express this concept using the prepositional phrase 'ด้วยตัวเอง' (dûay dtua-eeng), where 'dûay' is a direct equivalent of 'by'. Similarly, Japanese speakers use '自分で' (jibun de), where the post-particle 'de' marks the means of the action, mapping cleanly onto the function of 'by.' This strong structural correspondence facilitates the acquisition and production of 'by myself.' Conversely, the underuse of bare intensives (e.g., 'I *myself* want to...') suggests negative transfer, as this

adverbial or adnominal emphatic structure lacks a direct, high-frequency equivalent in these learners' L1s. This likely makes the bare form less transparent and harder to acquire, leading learners to rely on the more familiar prepositional pattern. These findings suggest that pedagogical interventions should explicitly address the syntactic differences between L1 and L2 emphatic structures to help learners move beyond transfer-induced patterns.

### 4.3.3 Comparison of the Native and Learner Corpus

Especially for those with Thai, Chinese, and Japanese L1 backgrounds, extensive corpus research and previous studies reveal significant structural differences in the use of intensive self-forms between English native speakers and Asian learners of English. Native English speakers predominantly employ intensive self-forms in two syntactic positions: as adnominal intensifiers immediately following the NP they modify (e.g., "The headmaster himself") and as adverbial intensifiers in VP-final position (e.g., "John repaired the car himself"). These intensive self-forms function as optional adjuncts that can be omitted without compromising grammaticality. In contrast, the Asian learner's corpus demonstrates a marked tendency to use intensive self-forms with the preposition "by" as an oblique or instrumental argument, as in "I planned this trip by myself" or "I must do everything by myself." This usage pattern can be attributed to L1 transfer, as similar constructions exist in Thai (*/tua.eeŋ/* with */dúay/*), Chinese (*/zìjǐ/*), and Japanese (*/zibun/*).

This distinction between learner and native-speaker patterns is further clarified by proficiency levels, as documented in previous research. For example, a corpus-based study of Thai learners discovered a notable progression in which advanced or "professional" learners used intensive self-forms more natively (Rhekhililit, 2023). This progression was distinguished by a greater use of adnominal intensifiers (e.g., "The producer itself") and less reliance on the "by + self-form" construction.

The same study found that intermediate-level learners rarely use adnominal intensive self-forms, which are common in native English discourse. Instead, they exhibit a clear tendency to identify intensive self-forms as instruments with the preposition "by," a pattern attributed to first language interference. While the present study did not separate learners by proficiency, its findings of a widespread preference for the "by + self-form" construction among Thai, Chinese, and Japanese learners are consistent with the established developmental patterns. The data suggests that as learners' proficiency improves, their usage patterns will likely converge with native-speaker norms, shifting away from transfer-induced structures and toward more idiomatic adnominal and adverbial intensifiers.

## 5. Discussion: The Grammatical Use of Self-Forms and Language Transfer

The results of the study show clearly how first language transfer affects the grammatical behavior of Asian English students, especially their usage of English self-forms. The frequent preference of "by + self-form" formulations by Chinese, Japanese, and Thai learners suggests a transfer-driven approach in which students project recognizable syntactic patterns from their first language (L1) onto English due to typological differences between their first languages and English. In Thai, the reflexive pronoun (*/tua.eeŋ/*) frequently appears with */dúay/* to express autonomous action. Similarly, Japanese indicates the means or manner of an action by pairing */zibun/* with the instrumental particle */de/* (自分で), which parallels the English prepositional pattern whereas personal agency in Mandarin is expressed through */zìjǐ/*, driven by semantic

equivalence rather than a single particle. The English 'by + self-form' construction is often overused in argumentative writing, where autonomous action is a theme.

Learners' challenges in grasping English reflexive agreement aspects, like person and number distinctions, seem to be influenced by the morphological simplicity of L1 reflexive systems in addition to syntactic preferences. Furthermore, learners may be encouraged to create reflexive constructs that occasionally depart from English location limitations if long-distance binding is allowed in Mandarin and Japanese reflexives. These trends back current hypotheses on the cross-linguistic impact (Gass & Selinker, 1992; Odlin, 1989), which assert that both surface-level similarities and underlying structural incompatibilities between L1 and L2 systems generate expected regions of student difficulty.

These findings are especially important for teachers dealing with L1 background students whose reflexive systems vary greatly from English since they have noteworthy pedagogical implications. Helping students develop awareness of the syntax and function of English self-forms is more effective than the traditional approach of rote memorization of reflexive pronoun lists. Reflexive and intensive pronouns in English serve distinct grammatical functions often confused or combined in students' first languages, such as Thai, Mandarin, or Japanese. Therefore, explicit teaching should use contrastive analysis, which stresses how comparable phrases operate differently across languages, to highlight these variations.

In an L1-aware teaching method, students should be led progressively from basic reflexive constructions to more complex, native-like intensive applications. For instance, rather than relying on overgeneralized structures like "by himself," which indicate negative transfer, students should be instructed to identify when bare adnominal or adverbial self-forms (e.g., "He himself answered") are suitable. Pedagogical interventions should include authentic materials demonstrating self-form use across registers, controlled input/output activities, and awareness-raising tasks. Feedback should also be form-focused and targeted to enable students to internalize appropriate structures and reduce persistent L1-induced errors. By means of methodical and clear problem-solving, teachers can assist learners in using complicated grammatical structures in English more precisely, contextually, and idiomatically.

## **6. Limitations and Future Research**

It is critical to recognize this corpus-based study's limitations. For the general overuse of the 'by + self-form' structure, the results indicate a strong L1 transfer effect; however, the study was unable to fully control for the possible influence of task and topic variables across the three distinct learner corpora. A systematic analysis of the writing prompts that elicited the data was not possible with the available metadata. Therefore, certain differences, such as the high prevalence of "by yourself" among Thai learners, could be partially explained by these task-based effects.

By employing a more controlled experimental design, future studies could expand on these findings. A clearer picture of the factors at work would result from administering identical writing prompts to learners from different L1 backgrounds. This would enable a more accurate separation of L1 transfer effects from topical influence.

In addition, the current study did not distinguish participants based on their L2 proficiency level, which may have obscured self-form acquisition development patterns. Previous research (Rhekhallit, 2023) suggests that proficiency facilitates the transition from

transfer-driven + self-form constructions to native-like adverbs and intensifiers. Future research should employ proficiency-controlled designs, such as ICNALE sub-corpora stratified by TOEIC or TOEFL band, to better understand the link between L1 transfer and proficiency-driven development.

## 7. Conclusion

This study reveals distinct, systematic patterns in the use of English self-forms among Thai, Chinese, and Japanese learners. Thai learners show a marked preference for second-person (yourself) and plural (themselves) pronouns. Chinese learners exhibit a balanced use of plural forms (themselves, ourselves), potentially reflecting a more collective discourse style. Japanese learners, in contrast, adopt a more conservative approach, largely avoiding gender-specific pronouns like himself and herself. The most significant finding across all three groups is the overwhelming preference for "by + self-form" constructions to express autonomy. This pattern contrasts sharply with native English speakers, who favor adnominal and adverbial intensifiers. The findings demonstrate that while Asian learners are competent in using reflexive pronouns as core grammatical arguments, their production of intensive forms is powerfully shaped by L1 transfer. This reliance on syntactic structures analogous to their native languages is the primary factor explaining their divergence from native-speaker norms.

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## 10. Declaration of AI Use

The authors declare that AI tools (Gemini Pro version 3) were used in preparation of the manuscript only (re-checking readability, spelling, grammar, and format of the manuscript). The authors take full responsibility for the content.

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