

INTERLINGUAL ERRORS IN VIETNAMESE ENGLISH A CASE STUDY ON TRA VINH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines interlingual errors in Vietnamese English from the survey on forty Tra Vinh University (TVU) students, Vietnam, which aims to compare their differences in grammar and how the errors have occurred owing to the Vietnamese interference onto English. The error analysis focuses upon four categories: inflectional morphosyntax, copular ‘to be’, article, and word order. The findings have indicated that in inflectional morphosyntax, the interlingual errors were found in tense and aspect (85%), subject-verb agreement (100%), and noun plural inflection (97.5%), where the suffixal morphemes ‘-s’ and the tense and aspect features were omitted. In a similar way, copulas ‘to be’ were omitted before adjective with 30%. The third category is article when the interlingual errors (100%) occurred in two different ways: omission and confusion. Finally, the three subcategories of interlingual errors in word order were found including noun modifier position within a noun phrase (100%), adjective position within a noun phrase (97.5%), and adverb position within a verb phrase (40%). This paper also provides guidelines and solutions to more successful English use in Vietnamese context and proposes a potential study at lexicon level.*

KEYWORDS: interlingual errors, inflectional morphosyntax, word order, article, copula ‘to be’

INTRODUCTION

In educational settings, English has become the most important foreign language in schools when the Vietnamese national policy was introduced. English as a foreign language (EFL) primary curriculum in which English is taught as a compulsory subject from Grade 3 (Nguyen H.T.M, 2011) and used as a medium of instruction in higher education (Ly, T. T. & Nguyen, T. H., 2018). Additionally, English is considered not only a major foreign language, but also an international language by which people can pursue their dreams of material success and privilege outside their home country (Doan, 2014, Bui & Nguyen, 2015).

Although English plays dominant role in primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions as well as foreign language centres throughout Vietnam, English competence used by Vietnamese learners still remains a big problem, in which grammar is a concerning issue. One of the most recognizable reasons is errors in grammar committed by Vietnamese learners who use English as an L2 in the process of learning. Therefore, in the positive side, error analysis plays vital role as one of the effective solutions to Vietnamese learner’s English improvement as it provides a

fundamental tool and a valuable aid to provide information and explain difficulties faced by L2 learners (Londono, 2008; Candling, 2001).

Evidently, many scholars in the field of Error Analysis have stressed the significance of second language learners' errors. Indeed, errors are unavoidable and a necessary part of learning, and they are visible proof that learning is taking place (Keshavarz, 1994; Chomsky, 1998; Aras, 2017). Weinreich (1991) also considered learners' errors to be of particular importance because making errors is a device the learners use in order to learn. Errors can serve as the feedback to the learners since they are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies learners use to acquire language; and may give valuable insight into language acquisition because they are goofs in the learners' underlying competence (Richards, 1974; Dulay & Burt, 1982; Corder, 1981).

From those reasons, recognizing and analysing errors in Vietnamese English are important, in which interlingual errors in grammar are worth doing in this research.

Aim of Study

This study is guided by three main aims:

- Exposing and analyzing different types of interlingual errors in Vietnamese English grammar in four main groups of categories: inflectional morpho-syntax, copula 'to be', word order, and article
- Making a comparison in differences in grammar between English and Vietnamese in terms of inflectional morpho-syntax, copula 'to be', word order, and article
- Providing guidelines and solutions to more successful English use

This research is to answer these two main questions:

- What differences between Vietnamese and English grammar cause interlingual errors?
- How are interlingual errors in Vietnamese English made from the differences in grammatical system between the two languages?

The **hypothesis** that is tested based on the answer to two questions is:

Interlingual errors are found on each type of categories which consist of inflectional morpho-syntax, copula 'to be', word order, and article.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Error

There are several definitions about error. According to James (1998), error is defined as failure of competence which is systematic violation from rules to which learners have been exposed, or Cunningsworth (1987) states: "Errors are systematic deviations from the norms of the language being learned." Although errors are defined in different ways, several authors (Dulay & Burt, 1982; Norrish, 1987; Lennon, 1991; James, 1998; Cunningsworth, 1987) agree at three common features in the definition of 'error'; those are 'systematic', 'deviation', and 'competence'. In other words, the

definitions meet at one point that errors are systematic deviations reflecting learners' competence.

Error vs. Mistake

Although some research papers have used two terms 'error' and 'mistake' interchangeably, the distinction between the two are quite clear. Whereas errors are systematic deviations that reflect learners' competence (as explained above), mistakes are unsystematic deviations that are associated with learner's performance (Crystal, 1985; Corder, 1967; Norrish, 1983).

Furthermore, the errors of performance or mistake (Corder, 1981) occur due to a number of factors including lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, memory lapses, physical states, psychological conditions, slips of the tongue, or other aspects of performance (Corder, 1981; Richards, 1985; Gass & Selinker, 2008).

Types of Errors

Many scholars have different classification of types of errors in their own way. Based on the causes of errors, Richards (1974) classified errors into three types of error: Interlingual errors, Intralingual and developmental errors. In the same way, Brown (1980) and James (1988) classified four types of errors: interlingual transfer, i.e. mother-tongue influence, intralingual transfer, context of learning, and various communication strategies the learners use. In a different way of classification, Burt and Kiparsky (1974) suggest fundamentally two types of error: Local Error and Global Error, whereas Norrish (1983) classifies errors into three types, which are Carelessness, First language interference and Translation.

Interlingual Errors

Scholars have different definitions about interlingual errors. Corder (1981) states that these kinds of error occur when the learner's habits (patterns, systems or rules) interfere or prevent him or her, to some extent, from acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language. According to Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), Interlingual errors are said to occur due to L1 interference (negative transfer), similarly defined by other authors (Chelli, 2013; Touchie, 1986; Lado, 1964; Richard, 1974).

In a broader sense, interlingual errors are caused as the result of language transfer. According to Odlin (1989), similarities and differences between the target language and the L1 determine positive and negative transfer, respectively. Interference (negative transfer) is negative influence of the mother tongue (L1) on the performance of the target language (L2) and it takes place when the learners misplace the rules which are not the same in their L1 and L2, consequently incorrect forms or errors are produced (Lado, 1964). However, positive transfer occurs when the rules from L1 are correctly applied to L2 and no errors are made because L1 and L2 patterns are similar.

Previous Researches on Interlingual Errors

Many scholars have conducted researches on interlingual errors with the specific figure-substantiated findings. George in Richard (1974, p.5) found that one-third of the deviant sentences from second language learners could be attributed to language transfer. The findings of interlingual errors were also indicated by Kafipour and

Khojasteh (2012) indicated that seven categories of errors in the data were of interlingual errors (16.19%), whereas Chelli (2013) revealed students' interlingual errors in the use of 'of' preposition and article with 79.15% and 72.85% respectively.

In Iran, the study 'The effective of explicit and implicit corrective feedback on interlingual and intralingual errors' by Falhasiri (2011) indicated that the most errors were interlingual category (71%).

In Spanish, Solano (2014) in the research 'Spanish interference in EFL writing skills: A case of Ecuadorian senior high schools' found that the most common Spanish interference errors into English were misuse of verbs, omission of personal and object pronouns, and misuse of preposition.

The study 'Interlingual errors and intralingual errors found in narrative text written by EFL students in Lampung', Indonesia (Eny, 2016) indicated the inference of L1 (Indonesian) into L2 (English) and the errors that occur due to the influence of TL (target language).

In Thailand, the research paper 'Thai EFL students' writing errors in different text types: The interference of the first language' (Somchai & Siriluck, 2013) revealed that the students committed the errors caused by the interference of the Thai language, which were fallen into 16 categories, e.g. verb tense, article, singular/plural form, subject-verb agreement, etc.

Two other researches on the interference of Arabic learners of English were also investigated: One was conducted by Hemabati (2016), 'An analysis of syntactic errors committed by students of English language class in the written composition of Mutah university and the other research 'Mother tongue interference in the acquisition of English articles by L1 Arabic students' (Thyab, 2016) in Iraq.

Previous Researches on Interlingual Errors in Vietnamese English

Some researches on interlingual errors have been conducted in the areas of grammar. The paper "Old habits die hard: Persistent errors in English written by Vietnamese speakers" (Dam, 2001), Arizona indicated that the interference errors in English written by Vietnamese speakers included copula 'to be', article, verb tense, pronouns and complex sentences introduced by subordinate conjunctions.

Nguyen (2005) in the study 'Vietnamese learners mastering English articles' in the Netherlands found the errors of article that Vietnamese learners made.

The case studies by Dao (2008) at Kiengiang Community College in Vietnam and Nguyen (2014) at Hong Linh high school' indicated that the students had widespread interference errors in tense and aspect, copula 'to be', adverb positions, subject - verb agreement, article errors and so forth.

The research “Some syntactical challenges facing Vietnamese learners of English” (Nguyen, 2015) has revealed syntactical errors including articles, verb tenses, word order, and noun structures.

In the research papers, ‘Negative mother tongue language transfer into English writing learning of first year advanced program students at Vietnam National University of Forestry’(Pham, 2016) and ‘An investigation into common mistakes in paragraph writing of the first-year English-majored students: A case study in Can Tho University, Vietnam’ (Thai et al., 2017) showed that students made errors in tense use, word choice, subject/verb agreement, word order, etc.

Some researches on translation errors were also attributed to negative transfer from the Vietnamese mother tongue onto English. The dissertation ‘An investigation into common errors in Vietnamese-English translation made by third-year English major students at Thu Dau Mot University, Vietnam’ (Nguyen, 2016) and the research conducted by Nguyen (2015) in the research paper ‘Common mistakes in translation practices by students: A case study in FELTE, ULIS, VNU’ in Vietnam National University have shown the common findings that the students made errors due to the interference of the mother tongue.

Although all the researches above directly or indirectly have indicated different types of the evidence-substantiated errors due to the interference of the Vietnamese onto English, some of them do not go further detail about interlingual errors in two different aspects. First, some researches identify errors but do not explain the cause of these errors in detail while these errors were supposed to be due to the interference of the mother tongue (as in Nguyen, 2005; Nguyen, 2015). Second, although the other researches identify the cause of errors due to the negative transfer of the Vietnamese mother tongue onto English, they do not provide the clear distinction between ‘mistake’ and ‘error’ (as in Pham, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A quantitative descriptive method is used in this article, whose main source data were from the questionnaire survey on forty students who are taking non-majored English courses at bachelor’s degree level at Tra Vinh University (TVU), Vietnam. The participants come from different major backgrounds consisting of law, finance-banking, agriculture, etc. The samples were selected randomly provided that they are the same level of study.

Questionnaire

This questionnaire intends to elicit learners’ interlingual errors with the intentionally focal contents. In particular, it consists of three parts that cover all the categories. Part A aims to elicit the interlingual errors on tense, aspect and subject-verb agreement. Part B covers plural noun inflections, article and word order while Part C deals with copula ‘to be’.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section is to answer the two questions and test the hypothesis by analyzing interlingual errors in different categories of inflectional morphosyntax, word order, copula ‘to be’, and article from the questionnaire survey to forty TVU students. The findings are grouped into each separate category and their subsequent discussions. The reason for combining these two subsections into one is to facilitate the overall picture to the flow of information.

Inflectional morphosyntax

This section covers three subcategories with the approximately equal proportion of errors as follows:

Type of errors	Subcategory	Errors committed (%)	Descriptions of errors
Inflectional morphosyntax	Tense and aspect	85%	Omission of tense and aspect features
	Subject-verb agreement	100%	Lack of subject-verb agreement
	Noun plural inflection	97.5%	Omission of noun plural form

Table 1. Interlingual errors of inflectional morphosyntax

Verbal inflection: Tense and aspect

Those errors occurred in many forms of tense and aspect with 85%. The first error was found when the past marker feature ‘-ed’ were omitted as in ‘Quyen obtain’ instead of ‘Quyen obtained’, or ‘the university celebrate’ instead of ‘the university celebrated’. Another one was ‘-en’ omission like in ‘Nam studied’ instead of ‘Nam has studied’. Another variation in wrong use of form was when the participants got confused in what correct form was used. For instance, they used incorrect feature ‘-ing’ for the correct one ‘-en’. Beside this, the participants substituted different wrong forms of verbs such as passive voice, present tense, present perfect tense, to infinitive, present participle, instead of using marker ‘-ed’ after the verbs.

The omission of this feature is explained as follows. Vietnamese does not morphologically mark tense, aspect or number, which are expressed by time particles and time adverbials (Palmer, 1966; Ngoová, 2016), whereas English is a moderately inflected language that uses morphological morphemes to mark tense and number such as ‘-ed’, ‘-en’ and ‘-ing’ (see Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartivik, 1989, for a detailed description of English grammar). In other words, these features in Vietnamese are always expressed analytically, not by affixation on the verb. For instance, while tense and aspect in Vietnamese are operated by adding separate words in front of the verbs *Toi da bat dau hoc tieng Anh nam ngoai* (I + **past tense marker** + start + English + last year), or *Toi dang hoc tieng Anh* (I + **progressive aspect** + learn + English), English verbs carry the inflections at the end of the words to indicate tense and aspect ‘I **started** to study English last year’ or ‘I **am learning** English’. Furthermore, tense markers are optional in Vietnamese. For example, *Toi bat dau hoc*

tieng Anh nam ngoai or *Toi da bat dau hoc tieng Anh nam ngoai*, both can infer the same tense whether the tense marker *da* 'past tense marker' exists or not (Tran, 2010). Thus, the interlingual errors of aspect are found in a way that these features of aspect '-ing' and '-en' respectively were ignored while it is compulsory in English. Therefore, the interference of the Vietnamese mother tongue onto English occurred as evidenced above when most of the participants freely omitted '-ed' as in 'the university celebrate'.

Verbal inflection: Subject-verb agreement

All of the participants made at least one error within this questions set. For example, they used 'Tra Vinh University really give' instead of 'Tra Vinh University really gives' or 'An Internet-based computer make' instead of 'An Internet-based computer makes'.

These errors in the data have proved that the hypothesis was true, which is explained based on the differences in aspect between the two languages. Whereas English verbs are required to agree with their subjects according to person and number, Vietnamese verb stems neither change nor inflect for person and number (Ngoová, 2016). In other words, verbs in Vietnamese sentences do not mark the subject verb agreement in terms of person, number, case and gender. For example, the verb *song* (to live) keeps its invariant form although the subjects are different: *Anh trai toi song o Texas* (My brother lives in Texas) and *Toi song o Texas* (I live in Texas) (Tran, 2010).

Consequently, learners of English forget to make the agreement between subject and verb in English sentences due to the lack of aspect features in Vietnamese, which was evidenced as the participants lacked '-s' like in 'Tra Vinh University really give'.

Noun plural inflection

The participants failed to run this rule properly on some questions within this question set. Two types of error forms were formed by the participants when they could not recognize noun plural inflection (e.g. *these book*, *one of the best way*, etc). as well as the plural form in relation with verb agreement like 'student were' instead of 'students were' or 'teacher and student are' instead of 'teachers and students are'.

The participants totally lacked '-s' morphemes as their plural makers, which evidenced the negative transfer errors due to the big difference in Vietnamese and English in terms of number feature. Indeed, English language uses inflectional forms to mark tense, aspect, number, etc., therefore English requires the use of plural marker *-s* or *-es* (Erickson, 2001) such as in 'boys' and 'boxes'. In contrast, Vietnamese nouns are not inflected or do not change to a plural form. In other words, they do not in themselves contain any notion of number of amount or it is invariant form (Ho, 2003). In order to convey the notion of plurality, Vietnamese words *nhung* or *cac* such as *nhung cuon sach* for 'books' are used before the nouns. It is this big difference that reflected the L1 influence on L2 noun plural forms in the data above.

Although the number of errors were varied in three subcategories, it showed the consistency with the hypothesis that the participants made errors in inflectional morphosyntax and also answered the two main questions of this research.

Copula 'To BE'

This part is examined based on the participants' translation production at the basic sentential levels. The findings have indicated that most students were able to produce the correct form of 'to be' with 70%, while only 30% were wrong when they omitted it such as 'reading very useful' instead of 'reading is very useful', 'he very happy' instead of 'he is very happy'. Another problem is the wrong use in form of copula 'to be' when it comes to tense. More specially, they use 'is' for 'was' in the past tense. This also evidenced the failure of using the right inflectional morphosyntax-verbal tense and aspect.

The percentage of errors proved the truthfulness of the hypothesis despite the variation in number of errors. This is explained due to the interference errors in a way that the participants forgot to add 'to be' to equivalent English sentences. In English, copula 'to be' cannot be omitted in English. However, in Vietnamese, structures with predicative adjective do not require the addition of the verb 'to be', e.g. *no tre* 'he young' means 'he is young' (Ho, 2003).

Apart from this, two important facts are found in this category. First, the participants used many alternatives of English words for the equivalent meaning with the Vietnamese adjective 'rong' (*wide, big*) or 'huu ich' (*good, useful, interesting, helpful*). Another distinctive feature is that they lacked feature '-ing' within a phrase (e.g. 'read book' instead of 'reading book') and also lack plural forms ('book' instead of 'books').

Article

Two main features of errors in article were omission and confusion. First, the students were not able to recognize where article 'the' was used, e.g. 'number of students' instead of 'the number of students'. Second, they got confused with the use between indefinite articles 'a/an' and definite article 'the' like in 'the good mark' instead of 'a good mark'. In addition, they got confused when 'a' and 'an' are used properly like 'a hour' instead of 'an hour'. Although some of the participants were conscious of the use of the articles in some questions but failed to identify the others.

This type of errors is exposed based on the inference of Vietnamese mother tongue. Russel (1993) states that in English there are two articles-the definite 'the, and the indefinite 'a' before consonant or 'an' for vowel. However, there are no exact counterparts in article between English and Vietnamese since Vietnamese language demonstrates article in another way (Dam, 2001). Specifically, English definite and indefinite articles (*a, an, the*) have no exact parallels in Vietnamese which uses a type of word termed *classifier*, the word for *one* to make similar distinctions in nouns (Honey, 1987). For example,

Cai nha (*classifier+house*) = the house

Mot cai nha (one+classifier+house)=a house
Mot trai xoai(one+classifier+mango) = a mango
Mot trai cam (one+classifier+orange)= an orange

Because of this difference, Vietnamese learners got confused in using English article. Consequently, the interlingual errors as shown in the data occurred as the participants freely used ‘a, an, the’ or even omitted them. The hypothesis was quite consistent with this results with the explanation that answered the two main questions given above.

Word order

This section deals with three subcategories: Noun modifier, Adjective, and Adverb. The overall findings with the high number of errors were made seriously in English use by the participants, summarized in the table.

Type of errors	Subcategory	Errors (%)	Description of errors
Word order	Noun modifier	100	Reverse postions of each of these categories
	Adjective	97.5	
	Adverb: <i>Very</i>	100	

Table 2. Summary of interlingual errors of word order

Noun modifier

The questionnaire consists of four questions to check the position of noun modifier. Although some of the participants correctly identified the position of noun modifier within some phrases, they failed to recognize the errors of the other phrases within the same question set like ‘This skirt red’, ‘center service career’, etc.

While Vietnamese and English noun phrase structures are similar with three parts (pre-modification + head noun+ post-modification), the elements arranged in this structure are quite different, in which noun modifier is a case. Whereas in English, noun modifier pre-modifies a head noun, it post-modifies the head noun in Vietnamese (Nguyen, 2004; Diep, 2005). For instance, in Vietnamese, the noun phrase *vuon cau* ‘garden areca’ means ‘areca garden’ (i.e. the order of *vuon* and *cau* within this noun phrase is reversed whereas it must be in opposite position in English).

Adjective order

This category is grouped into four questions whose phrases are put in the wrong order in order to check the students’ recognition. The findings showed that some of the participants could recognize some wrong use of some phrases e.g. ‘books interesting’, but failed to recognize the other phrases within the same question set, e.g. ‘tuition fee low’.

The reason for this is owing to the differences in position of adjective and noun between Vietnamese and English. While adjectives are placed after nouns in Vietnamese, they precede nouns in English (Ho, 2003; Tang, 2007; Phuong Lien, 2014). Consequently, those interlingual errors in Vietnamese English occurred due to the Vietnamese negative interference onto English.

Adverb order

This focuses on eliciting the proper position of ‘very’ within the same set of question type. Although some of the participants were able to recognize the wrong use of phrases, e.g. ‘very enjoy’, or ‘very disappoints’, they could not recognize the other phrases such as ‘very love reading’ or ‘very like’. Thus, each participant failed to identify at least one wrong phrase within this set of questions.

Indeed, the positions of adverbs in Vietnamese verb and adjective phrases are constructed slightly differently from those in English. The most frequently used adverbs in Vietnamese are the two intensifiers *rat* and *lam*, both of which have ‘very’ as their English equivalent; however, each appears in different positions (Ho, 2003; Diep, 2005). For example, some adverbs such as *rat* ‘very’, *hoi* ‘little’, *tuyet* ‘absolutely’, which show the degrees of the verbs or adjectives they modify, always precede the verb or adjective, e.g. *rat thich* ‘like very much’, *rat dep* ‘very beautiful’. However, some adverbs, e.g. *lam* ‘very’, *qua* ‘very’, which also show degrees of verbs or adjectives, always follow a verb or an adjective, e.g. *thich lam* ‘like very much’, *doi qua* ‘very hungry’. Therefore, whereas English exists one form ‘very’, there are two different word groups as its counterparts in Vietnamese, e.g. *rat* and *lam*. In addition, while in English the position of the modifier depends on whether the head of the phrase is a verb or an adjective, in Vietnamese that depends only on the type of the modifier itself. Since there is only one form of ‘very’ in English, Vietnamese learners confuse to place it before or after the verbs because ‘very’ has two counterparts in Vietnamese which both can placed after or before the verbs. This unparalleled structure in the intensifiers between the two languages explains the occurrence of the interlingual errors in Vietnamese English as evidenced above.

All the evidence supported the hypothesis that interlingual errors were found on this category ‘word order’ along with the differences between two languages that caused this type of errors.

CONCLUSION***Conclusion***

This paper examined interlingual errors in Tra Vinh University students with regard to four categories: inflectional morphosyntax, word order, copula ‘to be’, and article. The hypothesis was tested true with fairly high percentage in the survey findings when all categories were found interlingual errors without exception. The reason for these errors is owing to the interference of the Vietnamese mother tongue onto English grammar.

Implication

This paper has provided English learners, teachers and researchers with the theoretical background and detailed explanation of interlingual errors in English owing to the interference of Vietnamese. This might be a helpful reference source as a remedy or solution to dealing with such errors when using English. For the Vietnamese learners of English, these research findings will raise their consciousness about the differences in grammar between the systems of two languages in order to minimize the negative

transfer of the Vietnamese mother tongue onto English. In addition, this study might support Vietnamese English teachers as a possible solution toward the learners' improvement during the English learning process.

Future research

Apart from this, this survey has truly raised a new idea for future research in vocabulary level. More specially, the next study may focus on word choice since the findings in Copula 'To Be' showed that the participants used different alternatives of English words when they translated the same word in Vietnamese.

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