

TRANSFER ERRORS IN ENGLISH WRITING AMONG FIRST-YEAR VIETNAMESE STUDENTS AT DONG NAI UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the transfer errors frequently encountered in the English writing of Vietnamese students at Dong Nai University shedding light on the influence of the Vietnamese language on English composition. By employing error analysis, the research delves into the phenomenon of language transfer, which occurs when linguistic structures and conventions of a student's native language interfere with their second language writing. To achieve its objectives, the study examined 30 English paragraphs composed by first-year students, offering a substantial dataset for analysis. A native-level understanding of Vietnamese played a pivotal role in identifying these errors, enabling a thorough and systematic categorization of the types and subtypes of transfer errors observed. The findings underscore the extent to which linguistic differences between Vietnamese and English shape the challenges faced by learners in producing accurate and fluent English writing. The research not only highlights common transfer errors but also emphasizes the importance of understanding the interplay between native and target languages in language learning. This investigation provides valuable insights for educators, offering a basis to design more effective teaching strategies that address the specific needs of Vietnamese learners of English. By identifying patterns of language transfer, the study ultimately contributes to improving English writing skills and minimizing interference from the native language. Through its detailed analysis, the research advances our understanding of the complexities of second language acquisition in a Vietnamese context.

Keywords: transfer errors, language interference, Vietnamese learners, English writing, error analysis, second language acquisition

I. INTRODUCTION

A 30-hour course on paragraph writing was conducted for first-year students this year. The curriculum aimed to develop the students' ability to produce accurate English paragraphs using basic grammatical structures. Despite seven years of English study and an adequate vocabulary base, most students encountered significant challenges in constructing proper paragraphs, leading to underwhelming performance in the mid-course examination.

During the grading process, recurring errors were noticed in the students' compositions. Sentences like "I very like rice cake" and "Although I was ill but I went to school" appeared frequently. These errors, while incorrect in English, were reflections of Vietnamese syntax, revealing instances of language transfer.

The issue of language transfer inspired further exploration to better understand the difficulties students face in learning English. The study aims to identify prevalent transfer errors and provide constructive feedback to enhance English writing proficiency. Specifically, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the predominant types of transfer errors made by first-year Vietnamese students at Dong Nai University in their English writing?

2. How does the interference of the Vietnamese language contribute to the grammatical and syntactical errors observed in English compositions?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The phenomenon of language transfer, where the structure and rules of a learner's native language influence their use of a second language, has been widely studied in the field of second language acquisition. This literature review aims to explore existing research on the types of transfer errors made by Vietnamese students learning English and the influence of the Vietnamese language on these errors.

Types of Transfer Errors

Research on language transfer has identified various types of errors that learners make when their native language interferes with their second language. According to Odlin (1989), transfer errors can be categorized into phonological, lexical, syntactical, and pragmatic errors. For Vietnamese learners of English, syntactical errors are particularly prevalent due to the significant differences between Vietnamese and English grammar (Tran, 2010).

Studies by Nguyen (2015) and Pham (2018) have shown that common syntactical errors among Vietnamese students include incorrect word order, misuse of articles, and improper use of conjunctions. For example, sentences like “*I very like rice cake*” and “*Although I was ill but I went to school*” reflect direct translations from Vietnamese, where such structures are grammatically correct.

Influence of Vietnamese Language

The influence of the Vietnamese language on English writing can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, Vietnamese is an analytic language with a subject-verb-object (SVO) word order, but it lacks many of the grammatical markers found in English, such as articles and tense markers (Nguyen & Le, 2016). This leads to errors when Vietnamese students write in English, as they often omit these markers or use them incorrectly.

Secondly, the concept of language transfer is supported by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which posits that the differences between a learner's native language and the target language can predict the types of errors they will make (Lado, 1957). In the context of Vietnamese students, the CAH suggests that the lack of inflectional morphology in Vietnamese leads to difficulties in mastering English verb tenses and plural forms (Tran, 2010).

Previous Studies

Several studies have specifically focused on the transfer errors made by Vietnamese learners of English. For instance, Nguyen (2015) conducted an error analysis of English essays written by Vietnamese high school students and found that 60% of the errors were due to negative transfer from Vietnamese. Similarly, Pham (2018) analyzed the written work of university students and identified common errors related to word order and article usage.

These studies highlight the persistent challenge of language transfer and underscore the need for targeted instructional strategies to address these errors. Effective feedback and explicit teaching of English grammar rules that differ from Vietnamese can help mitigate the impact of language transfer (Nguyen & Le, 2016).

The literature indicates that language transfer is a significant factor influencing the English writing of Vietnamese students. Common transfer errors include incorrect word order, misuse of articles, and improper use of conjunctions, all of which stem from the structural differences between Vietnamese and English. Understanding these errors and their underlying causes can inform teaching practices and help improve the writing competence of Vietnamese learners of English.

III. METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in this study included 40 first-year students (7 males) from Dong Nai University, where the researcher also teaches. The students were aged between 20 and 21 years and had more than six years of experience studying English at secondary school in Vietnam prior to the course.

English Proficiency and Learning Background

The students were at an intermediate level of English proficiency, meaning they were not beginners. When asked about their English learning experiences before entering university, a common theme emerged: despite their years of study, they felt they had not developed an adequate level of English proficiency. In high school, their teachers had focused primarily on teaching grammar. As a result, the students learned many grammatical rules and completed numerous exercises in class but had rarely been given opportunities to write in English.

The need to study English and participate in writing activities was driven partly by course requirements and partly by the students' recognition of the importance of acquiring proficiency in English for various reasons.

Data Collection

The data collection for this study was conducted using a cross-sectional approach, wherein data were gathered at a single point in time. Participants were instructed to write a paragraph on one of two topics: “**Studying Abroad**” or “**Life in the Countryside**.” Each paragraph was expected to be approximately 90 -150 words in length. The writing task was administered during a class session, with a time limit of 45 minutes and no access to reference materials. This timing was chosen to ensure that the students’ responses reflected their immediate writing abilities without external aid. The decision to focus on paragraph writing was based on the fact that all participants had recently completed a 30-hour training course in paragraph writing.

Analysis of Written Products

The students’ written outputs were analyzed to identify instances of negative transfer, specifically in the areas of grammar and syntax. Errors were categorized into grammatical errors and syntactic errors. The selection of errors for analysis was based on their relative seriousness and frequency of occurrence.

Error Identification and Analysis

A three-step approach was employed to identify and analyze the transfer errors made by students. The steps involved are outlined in the following table:

Step	Description
1	Initial identification of errors in students’ written paragraphs.
2	Categorization of errors into grammatical and syntactic errors.
3	Analysis of the frequency and seriousness of the identified errors.

Detailed Steps

Step 1: Identification of the Error

- The first step involves pinpointing the exact location of the error within the student’s written paragraph. Underline the words/ phrase / clause which shows the error. For example: This is a place very beautiful. Use caret (^) to indicate omissions. For example: They ^ tired and hungry.

Step 2: Definition and Classification of the Error

In this step, the identified error is defined and classified. This involves two sub-steps:

- a) State the Type of Error: The error is categorized into one of the following types: Verb, Article, Noun, Adjective, Adverb, Preposition, Word Order, or Sentence Structure.
- b) Classify the Error Type: The error is further classified based on its nature, such as Omission, Wrong Combination, Wrong Usage, Inappropriate Construction, or Confusion.

Step 3: Explanation of the Error in Terms of Vietnamese Grammar

The final step involves explaining the error by referencing Vietnamese grammatical rules. This helps to understand how the interference of the Vietnamese language influences the student’s English writing.

Examples of the Approach

- 1. Transfer Error Identified:**
 - My father is ^ farmer.
- 2. Definition and Error Classification:**
 - Type: Article
 - Classification: Omission of the article “a” with profession
- 3. Explanation of the Error:**
 - In Vietnamese, there is no equivalent of the indefinite article “a.”

This structured approach ensures a systematic analysis of students’ transfer errors, providing clear insights into the influence of Vietnamese grammar on their English writing.

Examples of Transfer Errors

Transfer Identified	Error	Definition and Error Classification	Explanation of the Error in Terms of Vietnamese Grammatical Features
<i>My father is ^ farmer.</i>		Article/ Omission of article “a” with profession	Vietnamese lacks an equivalent of the indefinite article “a”.
<i>In the house has a garden.</i>		Use of the adverb of place as subject of the verb “have” instead of there is/ are	Literal translation from Vietnamese, where the structure is used.

Transfer Identified	Error	Definition and Error Classification	Explanation of the Error in Terms of Vietnamese Grammatical Features
<i>I got result exam very good last semester.</i>		Wrong word order/ Following the sequencing of Vietnamese word order	Vietnamese word order differs, leading to incorrect sequencing in English.

This table format clearly presents the examples of transfer errors, their definitions and classifications, and explanations based on Vietnamese grammatical features.

IV. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The analysis of first-year Vietnamese students' English writing revealed significant patterns in transfer errors. These errors were primarily influenced by the interference of the Vietnamese language, affecting both grammatical accuracy and syntactic structure. The findings directly address the two research questions:

1. Predominant Types of Transfer Errors in English Writing

The study identified recurring grammatical and syntactic errors in students' compositions. These errors were categorized into the following areas:

- **Preposition Misuse:** Many students incorrectly translated Vietnamese prepositions into English, leading to errors such as **They all work in a farm** instead of **They all work on a farm**. Some students omitted necessary prepositions or added unnecessary ones **She replied me** instead of **She replied to me**.
- **Article Misuse:** Due to the absence of articles in Vietnamese, students frequently omitted articles or used them incorrectly. Examples included **Living in countryside is healthy** instead of **Living in the countryside is healthy**.
- **Verb Tense Errors:** The lack of a structured tense system in Vietnamese led students to incorrectly form English tenses. Errors included **I live in the village since I was born** instead of **I have lived in the village since I was born**.

Syntactic errors were also prominent:

- **Omission of the Verb "Be":** Vietnamese often excludes linking verbs, resulting in mistakes such as **People prefer to live in the countryside when they old** instead of **People prefer to live in the countryside when they are old**.
- **Word Order Issues:** Students frequently transferred Vietnamese syntax into English, producing errors such as **This is a place very beautiful** instead of **This is a very beautiful place**.
- **Subordination Errors:** Sentence structures were often misapplied due to Vietnamese interference, leading to constructions like **Because my family is poor, so my parents cannot send me to study abroad** instead of **Because my family is poor, my parents cannot send me to study abroad**.

These findings indicate that students' reliance on Vietnamese language rules significantly impacted their ability to produce grammatically and syntactically correct English sentences.

2. Vietnamese Language Interference and Its Impact on Errors

The study found that the Vietnamese language contributes to grammatical and syntactical errors in several ways:

- **Structural Differences:** Vietnamese sentence structure differs significantly from English. Adjectives often follow nouns in Vietnamese, while in English they precede them, causing word order confusion. Additionally, subordination in Vietnamese does not always require explicit subjects, leading to incomplete sentence formation in English.

- **Absence of Certain English Grammar Elements:** The lack of articles and verb tense markers in Vietnamese made it difficult for students to apply these rules correctly in English. This resulted in frequent article omissions and incorrect tense usage.

- **Direct Translation Issues:** Students often translated Vietnamese expressions word-for-word into English, producing unnatural sentence constructions and incorrect prepositions.

- **Semantic Confusion:** Certain English words have multiple Vietnamese equivalents, causing students to misinterpret meaning and use inappropriate vocabulary in their writing.

The findings confirm that Vietnamese linguistic interference plays a significant role in shaping students' English writing errors. These results highlight the need for targeted instruction focusing on overcoming transfer errors and improving students' grammatical and syntactical accuracy in English.

The accurate use of English prepositions presents a significant challenge for many Vietnamese learners, primarily because multiple prepositions can serve similar functions with subtle differences. For instance, "in," "at," and "on" denote place but differ in usage:

- *They are in the garden.*

- *They are at home.*

- *They live on campus.*

V. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study illustrate the significant impact of Vietnamese language interference on the English writing of first-year students at Dong Nai University. The predominant transfer errors, particularly in prepositions, articles, verb tenses, word order, and subordination, stem from structural differences between the two languages and students' tendency to apply Vietnamese syntax to English writing. These errors indicate a reliance on direct translation, the absence of certain grammatical structures in Vietnamese, and confusion over semantic equivalence in English.

Addressing these challenges requires targeted pedagogical strategies that focus on raising students' awareness of common errors, emphasizing the structural contrasts between Vietnamese and English, and encouraging meaningful language practice. By identifying and correcting these errors, educators can help students develop stronger English writing proficiency and minimize the negative effects of linguistic interference.

VI. LIMITATIONS

Despite its valuable insights, this study has several limitations. Firstly, the scope of the research was limited to first-year students at Dong Nai University, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other student populations with different language backgrounds and educational environments. Secondly, the analysis focused primarily on written compositions, meaning that transfer errors occurring in spoken English were not examined. A more comprehensive study could investigate whether the same patterns emerge in students' spoken communication.

Additionally, this study did not account for individual differences in English proficiency, prior exposure to English instruction, or cognitive approaches to language learning, which may influence the extent to which Vietnamese interference affects writing accuracy. Future research could explore how different teaching methods and language learning strategies can help mitigate transfer errors.

By acknowledging these limitations, further studies can build upon these findings to develop more effective interventions and instructional approaches that enhance English writing skills among Vietnamese learners.

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