

GRAMMATICAL CHALLENGES IN WRITTEN ENGLISH: A STUDY OF COMMON ERRORS AMONG VIETNAMESE LEARNERS

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Received:	17/8/2024	This research delves into the typical grammatical mistakes made by Vietnamese students when writing in English, with the goal of revealing the particular linguistic difficulties they encounter. Carried out with 57 first-year students with diverse majors at a university in Vietnam, the study examines various levels of English skills, spanning from novice to expert. Participants finished a written grammar assessment to test their grasp of important grammatical elements such as verb tenses, article usage, prepositions, plural forms, subject-verb agreement, and sentence structure. Through both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the research found common mistake trends, with particular struggles seen in maintaining verb tense and using prepositions. These results emphasize the ongoing difficulties Vietnamese learners have with grammar, offering important insights that can help develop specific teaching methods to enhance English language grammatical skills.
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NHỮNG THỬ THÁCH VỀ NGỮ PHÁP TRONG VIỆC VIẾT TIẾNG ANH: MỘT NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ CÁC LỖI THƯỜNG GẶP CỦA SINH VIÊN VIỆT NAM

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 17/8/2024	Nghiên cứu này đi sâu vào những lỗi ngữ pháp điển hình của học sinh Việt Nam khi viết bằng tiếng Anh, nhằm mục đích làm rõ những khó khăn ngôn ngữ cụ thể mà các em gặp phải. Được thực hiện với 57 sinh viên năm thứ nhất với nhiều chuyên ngành khác nhau tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam, nghiên cứu này kiểm tra các cấp độ kỹ năng tiếng Anh khác nhau, từ người mới bắt đầu đến những sinh viên khá thành thạo. Những sinh viên tham gia đã hoàn thành bài đánh giá ngữ pháp bằng văn bản để kiểm tra khả năng nắm bắt các yếu tố ngữ pháp quan trọng như thì của động từ, cách sử dụng mạo từ, giới từ, dạng số nhiều, sự hòa hợp giữa chủ ngữ và động từ và cấu trúc câu. Thông qua cả phân tích định lượng và định tính, nghiên cứu đã phát hiện ra các xu hướng sai lầm phổ biến, với những khó khăn cụ thể được thấy trong việc duy trì thì động từ và sử dụng giới từ. Những kết quả này nhấn mạnh những khó khăn mà người học Việt Nam đang gặp phải với ngữ pháp, đồng thời đưa ra những hiểu biết quan trọng có thể giúp phát triển các phương pháp giảng dạy cụ thể nhằm nâng cao kỹ năng ngữ pháp tiếng Anh.
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1. Introduction

Learning English grammar can be very difficult for Vietnamese students as a foreign language because of the major differences in grammar between Vietnamese and English. Vietnamese has a basic grammatical structure, while English has a more intricate system of tenses, aspects, and agreements as it is an inflectional language. These variations result in consistent and specific grammatical mistakes in the written English of Vietnamese students.

Theories of second language acquisition (SLA) provide a framework for understanding how individuals learn a new language, focusing on the cognitive and linguistic processes involved. Selinker proposed the theory of interlanguage, which describes a linguistic system that blends elements from a learner's native language (L1) and the target language (L2). This evolving system reflects the learner's current knowledge and progresses with more input and feedback [1]. In contrast, the transfer theory highlights the influence of L1 on L2 acquisition, where positive transfer facilitates learning through similarities between the languages, while negative transfer, or interference, often results in errors in the target language [2]. Understanding these theories is essential to explaining why Vietnamese students, whose native language differs significantly from English, commonly make specific grammatical errors.

Errors in language learning are deviations from the norms of the target language. Ellis differentiates between errors, which arise from a lack of knowledge and reflect gaps in the learner's understanding, and mistakes, which are occasional lapses in performance [3]. Errors are persistent, and learners cannot self-correct them, whereas mistakes are inconsistent and can be corrected by the learner. This distinction is crucial for diagnosing learners' difficulties and providing appropriate feedback.

Researchers have classified language learning errors in various ways, focusing on both their form and the language areas they affect. For example, errors can involve addition (e.g., "She can sings"), omission (e.g., "She is teacher"), selection (e.g., "He go to school"), substitution (e.g., "two childs"), and order (e.g., "He always is late"). These errors are frequently categorized into phonological, lexical, grammatical, semantic, and spelling errors. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen identify key types of errors, including omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering, which are essential for developing targeted teaching strategies [4].

Previous studies on grammatical errors among ESL learners reveal the diverse challenges faced by learners from different language backgrounds. Research indicates that the grammatical structures of a learner's L1 significantly influence the types of errors they produce in English. For instance, Spanish learners struggle with subject-verb agreement and article usage due to grammatical differences between Spanish and English [5]. Similarly, Arabic learners often have difficulties with verb tenses and prepositions [6]. For Vietnamese learners, common errors include the omission of articles and incorrect verb tense usage, which can be traced back to the absence of these grammatical elements in Vietnamese [7]. Additionally, issues with pluralization and prepositions are linked to the syntactic and morphological differences between Vietnamese and English. These findings underscore the importance of considering learners' language backgrounds when designing instructional methods.

Comparing English and Vietnamese grammar reveals several key differences that contribute to the errors Vietnamese students make in English. English has a complex system of verb tenses that convey time, aspect, and mood, whereas Vietnamese verbs do not change based on tense, leading to difficulties in using and distinguishing English tenses accurately [8]. The use of articles also poses a challenge for Vietnamese learners since Vietnamese does not use articles, resulting in frequent omissions or misuse in English [9]. Prepositions are another area of difficulty due to their different roles in English and Vietnamese. While English prepositions express relationships between words, Vietnamese prepositions often merge with verbs to form compound words, leading to misuse or omission by learners [10]. Additionally, the absence of plural forms in Vietnamese causes issues with pluralization in English, where students may either fail to mark

plural nouns or overgeneralize pluralization rules [11]. Subject-verb agreement also presents a challenge since Vietnamese verbs remain unchanged regardless of the subject, unlike English, where verbs must agree with their subjects in number and person [12]. Finally, the flexible sentence structure of Vietnamese, which often follows a Topic-Comment structure rather than the rigid Subject-Verb-Object order of English, leads to word order errors in English sentences [13].

Several studies highlight common grammatical errors among Vietnamese students in written English. Nguyen found that Vietnamese learners frequently make verb tense errors due to the lack of a tense system in their native language [14]. Dang and Nguyen observed that article misuse is a common issue, attributed to the absence of articles in Vietnamese [15]. Pham and Doan noted challenges with prepositions and subject-verb agreement, linking these errors to the structural differences between Vietnamese and English [16]. Bui and Le confirmed these findings, emphasizing that verb tense errors, incorrect article usage, and preposition mistakes are prevalent among Vietnamese students [17]. They also pointed out that errors in sentence structure, especially in complex sentences, are common as students often transfer simpler syntactic structures from Vietnamese to English.

The influence of Vietnamese grammar on English writing errors is evident, as direct translation from Vietnamese often leads to inaccuracies. For instance, the lack of tense markers in Vietnamese results in either the omission or incorrect use of tense in English, particularly in past and future tenses [18]. Similarly, the absence of articles in Vietnamese grammar leads to their overuse or omission in English [19]. The different semantic and syntactic uses of prepositions in Vietnamese also pose challenges for learners [20]. Furthermore, the transfer of Vietnamese syntax to English frequently results in incorrect sentence structures, particularly when students attempt to construct complex sentences [21].

The primary goal of this study was to pinpoint and analyze extensively the typical grammatical errors that Vietnamese students commit in written English, exposing their root causes, typically influenced by their first language (L1) impacting the second language (L2). By examining the categories and occurrences of these mistakes, the research aimed to offer useful suggestions for teachers in assisting Vietnamese students in tackling these grammatical difficulties and enhancing their English writing abilities. The study aimed to address the research question:

What grammatical mistakes do Vietnamese students commonly make when writing in English?

2. Methodology

2.1. Settings and Participants

At a Vietnamese university, 57 freshmen from non-English major backgrounds took part in this study. In order to ensure a thorough comprehension of the most common grammatical errors at various stages of language acquisition, these students were chosen to represent a variety of English proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced). While none of the participants was specializing in English studies, all of them had some exposure to English as part of their general education requirements.

2.2. Procedures and data analysis

Information was gathered using a specially created written grammar exercises focusing on prevalent grammatical problems found in the literature review.

The tasks were conducted in a classroom environment to ensure uniformity. Each student completed two sections of the test on different days. Section 1 consists of 24 exercises, divided into 6 parts with 4 exercises in each part, and each exercise is in the form of gap-filling, sentence rewriting, or multiple-choice questions:

- **Part 1:** Verb Tenses (4 sentence-rewriting exercises)
- **Part 2:** Use of Articles (4 gap-filling exercises)
- **Part 3:** Prepositions (4 multiple-choice exercises)

- **Part 4:** Pluralization (4 sentence-correction exercises)
- **Part 5:** Subject-Verb Agreement (4 multiple-choice exercises)
- **Part 6:** Sentence Structure (4 sentence-rewriting exercises)

Section 2 consists of 1 short writing task, where students were asked to write a 7-10 sentence paragraph about a familiar topic, such as their favorite hobby. The task required students to demonstrate their ability to use a variety of grammatical structures, including different tenses, articles, prepositions, plural forms, and subject-verb agreement, while ensuring proper sentence structure. Each participant took both sections, completing a total of 25 tasks (24 structured exercises in Section 1 and 1 writing task in Section 2). Students had 30 minutes to complete Section 1 on the first day, while Section 2 was administered on a different day, with 15-20 minutes for the writing task. All research subjects took the same test, ensuring consistency across the study.

The collected data were subjected to a quantitative and qualitative analysis. The number of errors in each grammatical category (verb tenses, articles, prepositions, pluralization, subject-verb agreement, and sentence structure) was counted and categorized for the quantitative analysis. The frequency of particular types of errors within each grammatical category was also examined to identify and analyze error patterns, such as the consistent use of particular verb tense or the frequent misuse of particular prepositions. In order to comprehend their nature and potential causes, representative examples of common errors were documented and analyzed for the qualitative analysis. The results were presented in the data analysis section through descriptive statistics, highlighting the mean and standard deviation of errors across various grammatical categories, including verb tense, articles, prepositions, pluralization, subject-verb agreement, and sentence structure. This analysis helped identify key areas for instructional focus and provide insights into the specific challenges faced by Vietnamese students in learning English grammar.

3. Findings & Discussion

3.1. Quantitative Results

Table 1. *Descriptive Analysis of Grammar Exercise Errors*

Statistic	Verb Tense Errors	Article Errors	Preposition Errors	Pluralization Errors	SVA Errors	Sentence Structure Errors
Mean	0.67	1.47	0.54	0.96	0.86	1.26
Standard Deviation	0.91	1.05	0.85	1.18	0.72	1.20

Examining the gathered data from the grammar task revealed common issues encountered by students, such as verb tense, article, preposition, pluralization, subject-verb agreement (SVA), and sentence structure errors (see table 1). Analyzing the average and variation for each error type helped to grasp the trends in grammatical problems. Students, on average, committed 0.67 errors related to verb tenses, indicating that such errors were not very common, as most students made less than one error per task. A standard deviation of 0.91 suggested that although the number of errors differed among students, the majority of errors were near the average, with certain students making significantly more or fewer errors. The standard deviation of 0.91 indicated that while the number of errors varied, most students' errors were close to the mean, with some making notably more or fewer errors. The average number of article errors per student was 1.47, signifying that article usage was a more common area of difficulty. The standard deviation of 1.05 indicated moderate variability, meaning that while most students made around 1 to 2 errors, some made significantly more or fewer errors. Preposition errors had a mean of 0.54, showing that they were less problematic for students compared to articles and sentence structure. The standard deviation of 0.85 showed some variability, indicating that while many students made few errors, there were students who struggled more, making several errors. With a mean of 0.96, students made nearly one pluralization error on average. The standard deviation of 1.18 suggested higher variability, indicating a range of proficiency among students, with some making no errors and others making

several. The mean number of SVA errors was 0.86, indicating that this area posed a moderate challenge, with students making fewer than one error on average. The standard deviation of 0.72 showed that most students' errors were near the mean, with fewer outliers making significantly more or fewer errors. Students made an average of 1.26 sentence structure errors, with a standard deviation of 1.20. This higher mean suggested that sentence structure was a significant challenge. The variability indicated by the standard deviation showed a wide range of proficiency levels, with some students making many errors and others making few.

Examining the collected data from the grammar task showed that students struggled most frequently with article usage and sentence structure, displaying higher averages and more variability in errors. Students frequently left out articles in sentences, such as saying "She is teacher" instead of "She is a teacher," or mixed up the order of words, like saying "He always is late" instead of "He is always late." Errors in verb tense, preposition usage, and subject-verb agreement (SVA) posed challenges despite being less frequent. Examples could be using verb tenses incorrectly, like saying "He go to school" instead of "He goes to school," or using prepositions wrongly, such as "in the car" instead of "on the car".

In summary, the analysis revealed that article errors and sentence structure errors were the most common issues among students, while preposition and verb tense errors were less frequent. The variability in the number of errors suggested a diverse range of proficiency, highlighting the need for targeted instruction in specific areas where students had struggled the most. This information can guide educators in developing focused teaching strategies to address these challenges effectively.

3.2. Qualitative Results

The qualitative analysis of student errors revealed patterns that suggested underlying influences from their native language (L1) on English grammar (L2). One prominent issue was the misuse of articles, likely due to the absence of articles in Vietnamese. Many students tended to omit articles in English sentences or use them inconsistently, especially with indefinite articles like "a" and "an," as seen in sentences such as "I have car" instead of "I have a car." This suggested a lack of familiarity with article rules in English, which were non-existent in their L1.

Similarly, verb tense errors often reflected confusion with tense distinctions, as Vietnamese did not use verb conjugations to indicate tense. Students frequently defaulted to the simple present or past tense when more complex tenses (e.g., present perfect or past continuous) were required. For instance, a common error like "I study English for three years" instead of "I have studied English for three years" highlighted difficulties in grasping the nuances of tense in English.

Preposition errors often stemmed from literal translations from Vietnamese to English, as preposition usage differed between the two languages. Students commonly made mistakes in preposition choice, such as using "in" instead of "on" when referring to dates, likely due to differences in how prepositions functioned in their native language.

Sentence structure errors further reflected L1 interference. Vietnamese sentence structures were typically more flexible, allowing for word order variations that differed from English syntax. This led to mistakes such as "She very like music," where students struggled with subject-verb-object order and word placement in English sentences.

These qualitative findings suggested that the most common grammatical errors were not merely isolated mistakes but were deeply rooted in students' native language patterns. Addressing these challenges would require targeted instruction that explicitly contrasted English grammar rules with Vietnamese structures, helping students to recognize and overcome L1 interference.

3.3. Discussion

The errors made by Vietnamese students learning English were significantly influenced by the grammatical structures of Vietnamese due to the fundamental differences between the two

languages. Vietnamese verbs did not change for tense, which caused mistakes like "had leaved" instead of "had left," as students were not accustomed to modifying verb forms to show time. Similarly, students frequently omitted or misused articles, leading to phrases such as "a interesting movie" instead of "an interesting movie" and "a salt" instead of "the salt." This issue arose due to their unfamiliarity with using articles to indicate specificity, a concept absent in Vietnamese.

Students also struggled with prepositions, often combining them with verbs as they did in Vietnamese. This resulted in errors such as "over the table" instead of "under the table," indicating difficulty in using English prepositions independently to convey spatial relationships. Pluralization posed another challenge; because Vietnamese did not use morphological changes to show plurality, students made errors like "two childs" instead of "two children" and "the womans" instead of "the women."

Subject-verb agreement mistakes were also common, as students often used "enjoy" instead of "enjoys" in sentences like "My family enjoy going to the beach" and "are winning" instead of "is winning" in "The team are winning." This occurred because Vietnamese lacked subject-verb agreement, making it difficult for students to apply this rule in English. Additionally, students often created run-on sentences like "I went to the market, I bought vegetables" and misused commas in sentences like "My brother who lives in New York is coming to visit," failing to punctuate non-restrictive clauses correctly due to Vietnamese's more flexible sentence structure.

These findings aligned with earlier studies on the grammatical errors made by Vietnamese learners of English. Previous research also identified frequent article usage errors, especially with indefinite articles, due to the absence of articles in Vietnamese grammar [22]. Studies found that learners often struggled with distinguishing between "a" and "the," a difficulty reflected in this study as well. Verb tense errors were another common issue previously noted, with a particular challenge surrounding the correct use of perfect tenses, such as "I have study" instead of "I have studied" [23].

Prepositional errors were consistent with those reported in prior research, where learners were found to struggle with directly translating prepositional use from Vietnamese to English [24]. Similarly, issues with pluralization, particularly with irregular forms, have been documented, and this study reinforced that students frequently omitted or incorrectly applied plural markers [25]. Subject-verb agreement problems, highlighted in previous studies, were also present, particularly in sentences where the subject was a collective noun or a noun that required singular verb agreement [26]. Finally, run-on sentences and sentence structure errors were repeatedly emphasized in past studies as a major difficulty for Vietnamese learners, which was also a significant challenge in this study [27].

3.4. Recommendations to address grammatical errors in Vietnamese ESL learners

In order to correct these particular mistakes, specific teaching methods are needed. Article usage and sentence structure should be the main focus of grammar instruction through personalized exercises. One way to reinforce correct article usage is through a sentence correction activity in which students choose between "a" and "the" depending on the context. Moreover, rearranging sentences as a task, such as correcting sentences like "Always he is late" to "He is always late," can enhance students' grasp of sentence structure [28].

Contrastive analysis is very useful in dealing with errors involving verb tenses and SVA, as it focuses on the distinctions between English and Vietnamese grammar. As Vietnamese does not have tense markers, students might find it helpful to do exercises that compare English sentences such as "She is eating" with "She eats" in order to grasp the differences between present continuous and simple present tenses. Likewise, exercises that demonstrate differences in subject-verb agreement in English, like "He walks" versus "They walk," can aid students in understanding this idea, which does not exist in Vietnamese [29].

Another crucial tactic is integrating grammar into hands-on communication tasks. Engaging in role-playing situations that require students to utilize proper grammar during conversations can be especially advantageous. For example, students can participate in a conversation where one is required to ask questions using proper article usage, such as "Would you like an apple or the apple?" while the other responds using correct verb tenses, like "I consumed the apple yesterday" [24]. Giving precise correction and individualized feedback is just as important. Following a writing assignment, instructors have the ability to point out particular mistakes, like the incorrect use of articles or verb tense errors, and assist students in fixing them. For instance, if a student writes, "He have two dogs," the teacher can point out the mistake and offer the accurate form, "He has two dogs," assisting the student in learning the correct usage.

Ultimately, incorporating technology, like Grammarly for grammar checks, provides instant feedback and extra opportunities for learning. These tools are able to identify wrong verb tenses or missing articles, encouraging students to fix sentences like "He go to school" to "He goes to school" or "She is teacher" to "She is a teacher," helping them learn better and decrease the frequency of these mistakes in their writing. By incorporating these tactics alongside frequent practice exercises, tests, and ongoing feedback, students will not only fix errors but also gain a more profound grasp and memory of English grammar regulations.

4. Conclusion

This research emphasizes the noteworthy difficulties in grammar that Vietnamese students encounter when writing in English, which stem mainly from the structural distinctions between the two languages. By examining frequent mistakes like incorrect verb tenses, missing articles, preposition problems, pluralization errors, subject-verb disagreements, and sentence structure issues, the study highlights the significant impact of native language influence on learning a second language. The results show that even though students have varying levels of English proficiency, article usage and sentence structure continue to be the most challenging areas.

In order to tackle these challenges, the research suggests using specialized teaching methods that cater to the unique requirements of Vietnamese students. Integrating contrastive analysis, practical communication exercises, and personalized feedback in teaching methods can better help students in overcoming grammatical obstacles. Additionally, utilizing technology for grammar checking presents a contemporary method for enhancing proper usage.

In the end, enhancing grammatical precision in English writing for Vietnamese students necessitates a comprehensive strategy that integrates a thorough grasp of linguistic variances with creative teaching methods. As Vietnam further joins the global community, improving English skills through more effective teaching methods will be vital for personal and national progress. This study provides important information that can help teachers enhance their curricula and teaching methods, resulting in better results for Vietnamese students studying English.

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