AN INVESTIGATION INTO GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN ESSAYS WRITTEN BY VIETNAMESE EFL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: It has been widely accepted that grammatical knowledge plays an indispensable role in language use. In hopes of describing the grammatical errors committed by Vietnamese EFL high school students, this research was conducted rigorously using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data in this study were collected from forty-five English essays, written by grade-ten students at a high school in Phu Yen, Viet Nam. Results from students’ essays revealed that the most common grammatical errors included: word choice, plurality, verb tense and form, prepositions, articles, subject-verb agreement, to be verb, word order, and relative clauses. Furthermore, interviews with twenty students were conducted to dig deeper into the causes of students’ errors. The result showed that most of these errors were due to language transfer, lack of knowledge of the grammar points and meanings, students’ carelessness, overgeneralization of target language rules and lack of practice. Data from the interview with five high school teachers showed that the teachers often involved their students in self-assessment and peer-assessment activities to let them have a reflection upon their errors. In addition, frequent language testing and intermediate feedback were given to prevent students from internalizing such errors. The study ended with implications for developing the English language proficiency among Vietnamese EFL high school students.

Keywords: Error analysis, grammatical errors in essays.

INTRODUCTION
Learning English as a foreign language in Viet Nam has been witnessing a spectacular increase in demands due to a wealth of opportunities it provides to the learners in many fields. However, the challenging and often complicated process of studying English needs to be kept in mind especially by Vietnamese speakers. To some extent, Vietnamese grammar rules are fairly different from English ones. This on its own leads to a large potential of errors when Vietnamese students produce written or spoken English. Therefore, there has been a growing body of research investigating errors committed by Vietnamese EFL high school students. According to Brown (2004), “a mistake refers to a performance error in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly, while an error is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner”. What is more, Harmer (2003) said that grammar is the description of the ways in which words can change their forms and can be combined into sentences in that language. Grammar is one of the most crucial aspects in translation. In order to make a well structured translation, one should be mastered in grammar.
As suggested by Brown (2004, p.298) “before the learner becomes familiar with the system of the second language, the native language is the only linguistic system upon which the learner can draw. Therefore, not having enough knowledge in this sense will lead learners to use their own system of syntax in the target language and this interference makes them Erroneous.” Hence, it seems impossible to learn a language without learning its grammar.

Likewise, Richards & Schmidt (2002) stated that in the speech or writing of a second or foreign language, error is the use of a linguistic item (e.g. a word, grammatical item, speech act, etc.) in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete. Because the difference between the two languages makes the learner face a great difficulty in learning and applying foreign language rules. Mother tongue interference (also known as language transfer) refers to speakers or writers applying knowledge from their native language to a second or foreign language. When it comes to learners’ errors, Brown (2004) said that error analysis (EA) enthusiasts make a distinction between mistakes and errors, which are “technically two very different phenomena”. He also reckoned that a mistake can be self-corrected, but an error cannot. Therefore, native speakers can identify and correct them instantly because they have a deep awareness of their mother tongue structures and rules. Non-native speakers or L2 learners not only make mistakes, but also they commit errors in their writings; since their knowledge of L2 structures and rules is not sufficient. Thus, studying a second language never becomes a simple task to accomplish. It is commonly believed that L1 has an effect on the L2 or foreign language especially regarding speaking which is concerned to be the most difficult skill to conquer. Having learners to produce a smooth, fluent and error-free sentence when making a conversation has always been the life long dream and the ambition of all EFL teachers because they are the ones who suffer from such a problem.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the grammatical errors in essays written by Vietnamese EFL high school students. In Viet Nam, students start learning English at Grade three of primary education. Albeit getting exposed to English at an early stage, most of Vietnamese EFL students do not receive enough opportunities for their writing and speaking skill development. Therefore, they have been struggling with English language use for many years, even when they study at high school. They usually make errors in writing, especially grammatical errors which is not preferable for a senior or junior student, and these problems should be figured out. These tremendous problems of students are regarded as a motivation for the research to be conducted. First, it is necessary to find out the types of errors that Vietnamese EFL students usually make in their writing. Next, other studies on this problem should be reviewed so that the experiment strategies that they used on their researches could be considered and be applied in this research. After the appropriate data collection method was employed, data would be collected strictly. It was immensely significant to use the most reliable and proper method for collecting data. The study was conducted with three research questions specified as follows:

1. What are the common grammatical errors in essays written by Vietnamese EFL high school students?
2. What are the causes of the errors?
3. What are feasible measures to alleviate students’ grammatical errors?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative competence and Grammatical competence

Canale & Swain (1980) stated that the communicative competence model consists of four competence components: Grammatical or linguistic competence; Sociolinguistic competence;
Discourse competence; Strategic competence. From the ideas about the communicative competence, the grammatical competence has a stronger practical significance. Khamesian (2016) confirmed grammatical competence is an indispensable component which lays the groundwork for efficient communication and makes written or spoken content more readable and in turn more gripping.

According to Zhang (2009), aim of achieving communicative proficiency is the goal of second language acquisition, and language learners need to acquire grammar knowledge as well as other skills. Grammar is a crucial tool that speakers need for successful interaction with other language users. Individuals with poor grammar may fail to get certain social positions. In addition, grammar is absolutely vital since it supports accuracy, which means grammatical structures can help learners develop the logical thoughts and use the language much more accurately.

**Grammatical error**

According to Hsu (2013), grammatical errors are considered as the appearance of inaccurate form and use, and the misunderstanding of meanings. If foreign language learners would like to use a non-native language accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately, they need to master the three dimensions. Grammatical errors can belong to local errors which affect single elements in a sentence, while global errors means communicative errors which affect overall sentence organization, showing second language learners misinterpret conversational messages.

Norrish (1983) stated in his theory that there are three causes of errors:

1. Carelessness: This cause is reckoned to have a close relationship with the lack of motivation.
2. L1 interference: Learning a second language was a matter of habit information. The learners’ speech acts were thought to be gradually shaped towards those of the language he was learning.
3. Translation: This can be attributed to the reason that a student translates his first language sentence of idiomatic expression in to the target language word by word.

**Error analysis**

According to Sawalmeh (2013), EA is concerned with the analysis of the errors committed by second language learners by comparing the learners’ norms with the target language norms and explaining the identified errors. For Iamsiu (2014), error analysis in language teaching and learning is the study of the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language. To be more specific, error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make.

According to Ellis (1994), error analysis is carried out in four consecutive stages including:

1. Collection of a sample of learner language
2. Identification of errors
3. Description of errors
4. Explanation of errors

**Errors made by Vietnamese learners of English**

In Vietnamese, the equivalent of the English verb “to be” is “là”, but Dam (2001) said “là” is rarely used to link a subject with its predicative adjective in Vietnamese. With adjectives, “là” is
usually omitted. For example: “Tôi đói” = I hungry (“I am hungry”). In the same case, Nhut (2020) stated in his thesis that “to be” is often omitted by learners using English when it comes to occurring with predicate adjectives in non-emphatic contexts.

According to Cao (1998), Vietnamese uses “đã” for past, “đang” for present, and “sẽ” for future. Hence, Vietnamese learners find tenses other than simple present, past and future very difficult to use properly. For this reason, they often encounter tense-related errors when writing or speaking in English.

**Previous studies**

Abbasi & Karimnia (2011) investigated a number of grammatical errors that were committed by Iranian students in their translation and compared the errors of junior and senior students. In the research of Sucipto (2018), common grammatical errors in writing narrative essay of English Study Program students at Jambi University were revealed. The results showed that there were 12 errors namely verb-tense, punctuation, capital letters, word choice, spelling, preposition, pronoun, pluralism, redundancy, word order, article, and possessive case. The study concluded that students produce errors due to the lack of grammatical knowledge and the influence of their native language. Similarly, the results from the study of Ridha (2012) showed that most of the learners rely on their mother tongue in expressing their ideas. The tense errors form the most troublesome area, next comes articles errors, pronouns errors, singular/plural nouns errors and preposition errors.

According to Al-Shujairi (2017) the most common errors made by Iraqi Arab EFL learners were in the categories of articles, tenses, prepositions, and singular/plural nouns. Both interlingual and intralingual interference were seen as the triggers of the grammatical errors found in the paper. Next, the research of Watcharapunyawong & Usaha (2012) revealed that the first language interference errors fell into 16 categories including: verb tense, word choice, sentence structure, article, preposition, modal/auxiliary, singular/plural form, fragment, verb form, pronoun, run-on sentence, infinitive/gerund, transition, subject-verb agreement, parallel structure, and comparison structure, respectively, and the number of frequent errors made in each type of written tasks was apparently different.

Akbary (2017) undertook a study on the grammatical errors committed by junior and senior students. The results revealed that the most predominant error was word choice with 79 (24%) places and the participants were not aware of applying the correct tense to the verb in the sentence. Likewise, Alahmadi & Kesseiri (2013) conducted a research which drew the attention to the use of the past tense, for instance incorrect verb usage.

Hamzah (2012) posed a great concern over the taxonomy of the grammatical errors made by the university students in written production of English. The categories for severe errors were word choice, verb group, article, preposition, plurality and spelling. The other categories were subject-verb agreement, pronoun agreement and dropping, relative clause, possessive, copula omission and mechanic.

Hourani (2008) conducted a research study on the common types of grammatical errors made by Emirati secondary male students in their English essay. The most common grammatical errors found in the students essays included: passivization, verb tense and form, subject-verb agreement, word order, prepositions, articles, plurality and auxiliaries. Their biggest number of errors is due to intralingual reasons.
In a different context, Nhut (2020) examined the errors in English committed by Tra Vinh University Vietnamese students and their potential reasons. The findings showed that not only the category of morphosyntax but also word order accounted for the highest percentages, and grammatical problem owing to the interference of the Vietnamese onto English was still a big challenge to Vietnamese learners. Dao (2008) focused on common problems encountered by Vietnamese learners of English with tense and aspect, particularly the simple and progressive aspects, the copula *be*, and adverb positions in verb and adjective phrases. The results showed that the students have widespread errors in these areas of English grammar.

Cuc (2017) analyzed the translation errors committed by Vietnamese EFL students, and identified the sources of errors. The results revealed that most errors were related to lexical choice, syntax and collocations. The source of the errors could be attributed to inter-lingual, intra-lingual interference.

In general, the previous studies focused on grammatical errors and causes in reference to the learners’ native language. Furthermore, little research in the field has been found in the literature review. This is why the current research study is carried out in the context where Vietnamese learners are exposed to English, hopefully to fill this research gap.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

The population of the study consisted of 45 students who were in grade 10 of a high school in Phu Yen Province, Viet Nam. These students were asked to write an essay about 150 to 200 words regarding their hobbies. Semi structured interview with 20 students writing the essays was undertaken to figure out their views about the reasons that led to their making grammatical errors. Moreover, 5 teachers who are in charge of different grades in high school participated in an interview to shed light more on the measures that they often apply in their classes to alleviate those errors.

**Instrument**

This research employed a mixed methods approach, which aimed to examine grammatical errors and their causes in essays written by Vietnamese EFL high school students. To achieve the aims and objectives of the research, a qualitative approach (interview) was used with the support from quantitative method (survey).

**Data collection**

In this study the quantitative data (writing papers) was conducted before the qualitative data (interview) to foster understanding and interpretation of the results. For the purpose of obtaining data that will identify the most common grammatical errors in students’ essays as well as exploring both teachers' and students’ viewpoints regarding the reasons for making errors and teachers’ measures for dealing with them.

**Data analysis**

The students were required to write an essay about their “Hobbies” in 150 to 200 words. This was to investigate the grammatical errors students in Viet Nam made in their EFL writings. The frequency of errors was calculated and presented in percentage by using bar chart of Microsoft excel and table in tabular form.
Two weeks after collecting and analyzing the data of the writing essays, interviews were conducted to gain students’ perspectives about the reasons for their proclivity for making errors. Additionally, interviews with teachers who are in charge of those classes were made to figure out some resolutions that teachers often use to overcome students’ errors.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1

In this study, 54 places of word choice errors, 46 places of plurality errors, 38 places of verb tense and form errors, 34 places of preposition errors, 19 articles errors, 12 errors recorded in subject-verb agreement, which shared the same figure for *to be* verb (12 errors). Next came word order with just 9 errors. The number of errors founded in relative clause was only 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of errors</th>
<th>Frequency of errors</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word Choice</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>23.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plurality</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb Tense and Form</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>14.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-Verb Agreement</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>To be</em> Verb</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Order</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Clause</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>228</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graph 1. *Total of Grammatical Errors*

Research Question 2

The findings from the interview with students revealed that Vietnamese EFL high school students committed errors for causes namely language transfer (interlingual transfer), lack of knowledge of the grammar points and meanings, students’ carelessness, overgeneralization of target language rules and lack of students’ practice. However, the majority of students confirmed that they encountered such errors mostly due to their lack of knowledge of the grammar points.
Based on the data obtained from the interview with 20 grade ten students, a considerable number of students (17/20) believed that the dearth of grammatical knowledge and vocabulary’s meanings is always responsible for their weakness in using language. The students reported: “Sometimes, I tend to put an adjective after a noun because I do not know the Vietnamese meaning of the adjective or even both”. On the other hand, the data obtained from students’ responses in the interview shows that 9 students out of 20 remarked there is always an evidence of students’ carelessness.

After the interviews with 20 students at Tran Phu high school, it could be seen that these students were sometimes affected by their mother tongue when using English. Some participants expressed their negative attitude towards transfer by saying “I often make errors when I try to translate a sentence from Vietnamese into English”. They explained by saying that Vietnamese structure is different than English, especially when it comes to “to be” verb and word order. Furthermore, students’ lack of language practice such as doing English grammar exercises regularly might result in weakness in language use, which lead to a considerable number of grammatical errors. A proportion of students (4/20) had a strong belief that the lack of writing or speaking activities and homework always took responsibility for their poor English language proficiency.

Strikingly, although this study showed that language transfer (interlingual transfer) was one of the common causes which frequently leads to students’ grammatical errors (for example: word choice errors, word order errors), it was not the top one factor leading to students’ grammatical errors in English writing.

**Research Question 3**

The interviews with 5 teachers working at Tran Phu high school delineated that they did not have sufficient time to give detailed feedback or making corrections during an English lesson. Therefore, the grammatical error correction process was not taken place efficiently. However, the teachers still employed some measures such as self-assessment and peer assessment, intermediate feedback, frequent language testing in order to strive for students’ better performance.

In writing lessons, the teachers asked students to work individually, revising their piece of writing after each writing task to find out their own grammatical errors then corrected them using different colour pens. Peer-assessment then would be applied when time allows, the teachers let students work in pair and change their paper to cross-check to increase the volume of grammatical accuracy. They said: “We do not have enough time to check every single student’s work, so peer-assessment can help us examine the whole class”. However, English speaking practice did not allow students to self-assess, because no records were replayed after their speaking time. In this circumstance, pair work or team work became more efficiently, in which students were asked to listen carefully to their friends’ performance then give feedback.

Five teachers at Tran Phu High school provided firm information that intermediate feedback was constantly used in their English lessons. Findings from the interview showed that they applied this technique frequently and most of them agree that it does wonders for their English language teaching. “I usually raise feedback right after students’ performance as I think by this way they can fix the error immediately and remember it longer”, a teacher explained. After speaking time, students not only join peer-assessment to have a reflection upon their
performance and their peer, but they also receive the teacher’s feedback in term of pronunciation as well as grammatical features. Up to 100% of the teachers involving in the interview subscribed to the view that they frequently raise feedback to students right after their English speaking performance and this practice brings about numerous benefits. Intermediate feedback is also applied in writing lessons when the teachers pick up randomly one or more papers and correct it in front of the class.

In addition, language testing is frequently applied in the form of fifteen-minute test in order to check students’ grammatical knowledge as well as reminding them of such grammatical structures that they failed to use correctly in their speaking or writing. The testing format is designed simply, testing grammatical knowledge that students often make errors in their writing papers or speaking performances.

DISCUSSION

This research focuses on the grammatical errors in students’ essays. The errors were analyzed and the most common errors were identified and classified.

According to the results collected from 45 writing papers, the most common errors recorder in the present study were classified into nine types including word choice, plurality, verb tense and form, prepositions, articles, subject-verb agreement, to be verb, word order, and relative clauses. Strikingly, word order errors are the most severe errors with 54 (23.68%), sharing the same result with Akbary (2017) - “Analysis of grammatical errors in English writing made by senior and junior students in English Department, languages and literature faculty of Balkh university”, which showed that word choice gained the highest position of the voting list with 79 errors (24%). “An analysis of the written grammatical errors produced by freshmen students in English writing” by Hamzah (2012) also indicated that the figure for word choice was 23.2%, becoming the most severe errors regarding the occurrence in students’ English writing.

The findings from the interview with twenty students to discover the causes of the grammatical errors made my Vietnamese EFL High school students delineate that language transfer (interlingual transfer), lack of knowledge of the grammar points and meanings, students’ carelessness, overgeneralization of target language rules and lack of students’ practice are five main factors which trigger the students’ mistakes. According to Watcharapunyawong & Usaha (2012), Bennui (2008), Abbasi and Karimnia (2011), errors caused by L1 interference were seen as an unavoidable obstacle that all EFL and ESL student writers had to encounter, resulting in ineffective L2 writing. L1 interference in L2 writing was also perceived as a serious problem among Thai EFL writers. Therefore, these researchers conducted their studies focusing on the interference of L1 transfer in students’ English language use and discovered numerous grammatical errors caused by this factor. Strikingly, this study also shows that Language transfer (interlingual transfer) was one of the common causes which frequently led to students’ grammatical errors (for example: word choice errors, word order errors). However, the result from this study illustrates that the participants encountered the grammatical errors mostly due to their lack of knowledge of the grammar points and the students’ carelessness. The cause that stemmed from Language transfer just ranked fourth of the list, failing to become the major cause of students’ errors as previous studies.

With regard to the results revealed from the interviews with 5 teachers, there were three common solutions the teachers often used to alleviate their students’ grammatical errors, including self-assessment and peer assessment, giving intermediate feedback, and frequent
language testing. Similarly, Akbari (2017) stated in the study “Analysis of grammatical errors in English writing made by senior and junior students in English Department, languages and literature faculty of Balkh university” that providing feedback on students’ writing in target language is the most significant way of improving their writing accuracy.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study aimed at identifying, describing, categorizing and diagnosing the type of grammatical errors made by Vietnamese EFL high school students. The sample in this study was forty-five students who are in grade ten at a high school in Phu Yen Province. These students were required to write a short essay approximately 150-200 words about their hobbies. As a result, a number of different grammatical errors were found in their English. These were limited to nine major errors: word choice (23.68%), plurality (20.18%), verb tense and form (16.67%), prepositions (14.91%), articles (8.33%), subject-verb agreement (5.26%), to be verb (5.26%), word order (3.95%), and relative clauses (1.75%). The students make grammatical errors due to five main reasons: language transfer (interlingual transfer), the lack of knowledge of the grammar points and meanings, students’ carelessness, overgeneralization of target language rules and the lack of practice. Most of the incorrect grammatical sentences found in students essays were ascribed to the lack of knowledge and the students’ carelessness.

Since the errors in grammar require more attention than the others. Teachers should then be more aware of these types of errors and provide the necessary follow up work to check the problem areas as discussed earlier. For instance, the teachers involving in the interview subscribed to the view that they often let students do the tests regarding the knowledge of the grammar rules that they frequently make errors. This way, the teachers can remind students of the grammatical structures and help them to avoid the mistakes. Likewise, providing intermediate feedback to students when they produce errors is the key to effective teaching for EFL teachers. However, in dealing with errors, it is vital for teachers to establish what the error is, to establish the possible sources of errors, to explain why they happen because a full knowledge of the causes of an error allows the teacher to work out a more effective teaching strategy to deal with them and to decide how serious the mistake is to have a remedial work.

The findings in this study have suggested some implications and recommendations which are of significance to EFL teachers as follow:

- Teacher should provide students with the comparison of grammatical structure differences between Vietnamese language and English language, especially the ones that students struggle with. A telling example in this study is adjective position and the appearance of to be verb in English sentences, which are incorrectly used by many students as it has a totally different structure in Vietnamese language. In this case, teachers are suggested to emphasize the divergence of those grammar points between the first language and the target language.

- To reduce students’ errors in word choice, plurality, verb tense and form, teachers should provide students with a quantity of assignments regarding those grammar structures so that students would practice grammar with collocation exercises, hence they would become familiar with English words/ phrases, reducing their proneness to producing errors. Furthermore, teachers can suggest tenses exercises and tests that would help the students become more accurate in applying appropriate tenses in various situations or contexts.
- It is advisable that teachers should give intermediate feedback to students’ written or spoken assignments on regular basis. In English writing learners expect, value, and want teachers’ feedback, and to provide intermediate feedback on students’ performance is the most essential way of improving their language proficiency.

- What is more, teachers should involve students in self-assessment and peer assessment activities for the sake of which the students could have a thorough reflection upon their errors and the others’, stimulating their awareness of the grammatical errors, from which they will try to avoid making mistakes.

- Similarly, if teachers implement team work in class and get the students to work in groups on their projects, students will have the opportunity to practice English with their friends to develop the writing skill as well as their speaking skill. This way, they would, hopefully, correct each other’s errors.

- Furthermore, frequent language testing is highly recommended to teachers with the aim of helping students revise grammatical structures that they often make errors with, therefore they can consolidate their grammatical knowledge, reducing their proneness of making mistakes.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study is limited in these aspects. Because of the lack of time at school, students were asked to write the essay at home and hand in the following week, therefore, the writing process was not under scrutiny and the time to write an essay was not equal amongst students. The next limitation is that the study had also to revise the number of errors in each essay for accuracy then the frequencies of errors were counted and tabulated so it took a lot of time to do the task. In addition, it is the limited population of the study that might not boost the generalizability of the results. This study tackled a limited number of participants and grammatical aspects involved in English language use due to the limitations of space and time.

Moreover, since this study was conducted with grade-10 students at a high school whose writing competencies might be different from those with higher level of English or those in gifted schools, it should be noticed that the findings might not be applicable in gifted schools’ context. The study just collected data of grammatical errors in written essays without focusing on speaking, thus the results might be more or less different in speaking context.

Future research should focus on other aspects of the English language use such as speaking skill. Furthermore, research is also needed to proliferate the number of participants to enhance the level of accuracy of the findings.

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