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Use of the Inflectional Morpheme –*s* Marking Plurality and the Third-person Singular Present Tense in Vietnamese EFL Opinion Essays: Accuracy Analysis and Learner Perspectives

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Abstract

The present research explored how Vietnamese EFL third-year students used the inflectional morpheme –*s* marking plural nouns (PN–*s*) and the third-person singular in the present tense (3SG–*s*) in opinion essays. 32 students each wrote an opinion essay about the topic of Facebook within 45 minutes as a progress test. The collected essays were analyzed for the use of PN–*s* and 3SG–*s*. 10 of the students who had completed their writing task were subsequently interviewed in an in-depth semi-structured format. The results revealed that students used PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* correctly in most of the obligatory contexts. Yet they used PN–*s* more accurately than 3SG–*s*. Omission was the most common error students made, and they omitted 3SG–*s* at a higher rate than PN–*s*. In view of the plural morpheme, omission of the orthographical plural variant –*s* was significantly higher than that of –*es* and of –*ies*. Incorrect use rarely occurred. But when it did, it was only found with PN–*s*, which also had a higher rate of oversuppliance than 3SG–*s*. In the interviews, the students reported having explicit knowledge about the target morphemes, but different factors related to the meaning-making process involved in essay writing contributed to omission or misuse. The study offers important pedagogical implications for writing instruction and teacher feedback that enhance the use of the target morphemes in written language production.

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1   Introduction

The inflectional morpheme *–s* marking the third-person singular in the present tense (3SG–*s*) (e.g. he/she *writes*) is one of the persistent challenges facing L1 and L2 English learners (e.g., Choi & Ionin, 2021; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Freeman, 1975; Hsieh, 2009; Jensen et al., 2020; Li & Yang, 2022; Murakami & Ellis, 2022; Nguyen & Newton, 2020; Qi, 2022). Plurality is denoted as the concept of "more than one" and is marked by the morpheme *–s* in English (henceforth PN–*s*). Early research on English morpheme acquisition by English L2 learners has shown that 3SG–*s* is acquired later than PN–*s* and other morphemes (Akbaş & Ölçü-Dinçer, 2021; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Freeman, 1975; Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001; Krashen, 1982; Murakami & Ellis, 2022).

As plurality and the third-person singular are marked grammatically in some languages more than others (e.g., Corbett, 2000; Mithun 1999; Murakami & Ellis, 2022), it is essential to understand whether the target inflectional morphemes are grammaticalized in the learners' native languages (Choi & Ionin, 2021; Jia & Fuse, 2007;). Unlike English, Vietnamese is an "isolating language" (Ngo & Tran, 2001) where inflectional morphemes are not used to mark agreement and number. For example, in Vietnamese, the same verb form *'hát'* (sing) is used for all the subjects, whereas in English the inflectional form *–s* is required to denote the third-person singular:

Tôi *hát*. (I *sing*.)
Cô/Anh ấy *hát.* (She *sings*.)
Họ *hát.* (They *sing*.)
Chúng tôi *hát*. (We *sing*.)
Bạn *hát*. (You *sing*.)

Similarly, the same noun is used for both singular and plural in Vietnamese. Plurality is indicated through non-inflectional means such as "*nhiều*" (many), "*một vài*" (some) or a numeric quantifier while the noun that follows is kept unchanged:

Tôi có *một cây bút*. (I have *a pen*.)
Tôi có *ba cây bút*. (I have *three pens*.)
Cô ấy có *một cuốn sách*. (She has *a book*.)
Cô ấy có *100 cuốn sách*. (She has *100 books*.)
Họ có *một ngôi nhà*. (They have *a house*.)
Họ có *vài/nhiều ngôi nhà.* (They have *several/many houses.)*

In contrast, in English, the inflectional form *–s* is added to count nouns for plural marking when they are preceded by such quantifiers or cardinal numbers. According to Jia (2003), plurality in English is obligatory with both explicit linguistic and implicit contextual clues. Plural nouns are also implied in the interpretation of the contextual or discourse signs as in the case of generic meaning with zero articles (*Apples* are good for our health. / Reading *books* is beneficial.) or with discourse indicators (My mother has four children, one son and three daughters including me. My *sisters* are very beautiful.). In other words, English requires plural marking on plural count nouns as well as subject-verb accord in the 3SG–*s*, whereas Vietnamese does not.

While PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* have been studied extensively with young L1 and L2 learners and mostly in oral tasks (Blom et al., 2012; Hsieh, 2009; Ionin & Wexler, 2002; Kelly, 2017), research on the use of these morphemes in writing performance has been limited. The present study therefore examined the accurate use of these two inflectional morphemes by Vietnamese EFL students in their essay writing. Additionally, it aimed to understand whether students followed a similar acquisition order of PN–*s* prior to 3SG–*s* as found in previous research. As discussed earlier, Vietnamese is a non-inflectional language which does not indicate subject-verb and number agreement (Ngo & Tran,

2001). This characteristic led to the hypothesis that these two target forms could be challenging for Vietnamese EFL learners.

This study employed a combination of students' written essays and interviews with students to obtain insights into how students attended to the two target inflectional morphemes in the process of EFL writing. Most studies of this type have tended to draw exclusively on the performance data (e.g., Akbaş & Ölçü-Dinçer, 2021; Altarawneh & Hajjo, 2018; Blom et al., 2012; Hsieh, 2009; Ionin & Wexler, 2002; Lardiere, 2017; Prévost & White, 2000; Qi, 2022). In the present study, learners' voices helped unpack their process of making meaning and attending to language forms in written language production.

2   Literature review

2.1   Different theoretical views on acquisition of inflectional morphemes in L2 English

Different theoretical views have been advanced to explain the variable use of grammatical inflections including PN–s and 3SG–s among L1 and L2 learners of English. A recent theoretical model takes account of the role of input or "availability" (see Murakami & Ellis, 2022), assuming that the inflected forms of high frequency words are more accurately used than those of lower frequency words. For example, *makes* and *needs* may be acquired earlier than *communicates* or *demands* respectively. Empirical support has been provided for the impact of availability on the processing and acquisition of inflectional forms by L1 learners (Ambridge et al., 2015) and L2 counterparts (e.g., Blom et al., 2012; Ellis, 2002; Ellis et al., 2014; Murakami & Ellis, 2022). In particular, Guo and Ellis (2021) found an effect of input on the suppliance of PN–s and 3SG–s. In other words, the availability of the target words or tokens contributes to the acquisition of their grammatical inflection.

Another theoretical model which is relevant to the focus of the present study is the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH) (Prévost & White, 2000). It is a morphosyntactically-oriented theoretical stance which posits that the target inflectional morpheme is present in the L2 learners' grammar, but that the difficulty or omission of it is due to the problem of mapping the abstract features of the target inflection to their surface forms (Ionin & Wexler, 2002; Lardiere, 2017; Prévost & White, 2000). It is this mapping challenge that hypothetically causes L2 learners to omit the inflectional morpheme where it is required, especially when they are under communicative pressure (Prévost & White, 2000). According to some authors (Goldschneider & DeKeyser; 2001; Jensen et al., 2020), the pressure to communicate and the low communicative value of grammatical morphemes may also contribute to inaccurate use or omission.

One other theoretical model that considers the facilitative or otherwise constraining role of L1 is the Morphological Congruency Hypothesis (Jiang et al., 2011). According to this view, if the given target morpheme has an equivalent in the learners' L1, it is likely to be used more accurately. Conversely, a lack of congruence between L1 and L2 with regard to a specific inflectional morpheme is believed to result in low accuracy of use. As such, L2 learners whose L1s are non-inflectional languages are more likely to have problems with inflectional morphemes than those with inflectional L1s (Blom et al., 2012; Choi & Ionin, 2021; Hsieh, 2009). Blom et al. (2012) contend that "in the case of isolating L1s, verbs would lack associations with features like person and number. As a result, children with isolating L1s might not initially attend to, or perceive, 3SG–s in English" (p. 26). Some studies have provided empirical evidence of the influence of this lack of accord (e.g., Blom et al., 2012; Choi & Ionin, 2021;_Ellis & Sagarra, 2011; Murakami & Alexopoulou, 2016; Paradis, 2011; Son & Håkansson, 2022). In line with this hypothesis is the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH) (e.g., Hawkins, 2005; Hawkins & Chan, 1997), which holds a similar perspective on the correspondence between L1 and L2, or lack thereof, in learners' acquisition of inflectional morphemes.

2.2   Studies on acquisition of PN –s and 3SG–s

The acquisition of PN–s and 3SG–s has been examined through different sources of data. One line of research involves the use of these two target inflectional morphemes in language-focused exercises. For example, Li and Yang (2022) focused on 33 Chinese postgraduate students in the UK. They employed a translation task which required students to translate a text from Chinese into English and found that regular plural nouns were more successfully inflected than 3SG–s for thematic verbs (91.35% and 74.1% respectively). Through eliciting exercises, Al-Jarf (2022) found that omission and overgeneralisation were two common types of errors that her first-year Arab students in a grammar course committed with the English plural morpheme. In another study, Choi and Ionin (2021) examined L1 Korean and L1 Mandarin learners of English identifying plural marking through error identification tasks in a laboratory condition. They found evidence of L1 transfer, but only with obligatory aspects in L1, partially confirming the morphological congruency (Jiang, et al, 2011). The learners in Choi and Ionin's (2021) study were also more successful in detecting a missing –s in count nouns than mass nouns.

Accuracy of use or acquisition of inflectional morphemes has been investigated in free oral and written production in different studies with a wide range of tasks and learner groups. Early research on the acquisitional order of grammatical morphemes in oral language production reveals that 3SG–s was persistently challenging for both L1 and L2 learners of English, as it tended to be acquired later than other morphemes including PN–s (Lardiere, 2017; Zobl & Liceras, 1994). Later studies on oral data samples, though focusing on different groups of learners such as bilingual Catalan and Spanish child learners of English (Helland & Alvarez, 2007), and Chinese or Mandarin EFL young learners (Hsieh, 2009; Jia, 2003) show that learners dropped the inflected forms that mark the 3SG–s in the majority of the obligatory contexts. The plural morpheme was also found to be challenging for many groups of learners, such as Arabic L1 learners of English (*Altarawneh & Hajjo, 2018) or* Thai L1 learners of English (Sridhanyarat & Chaengchenkit, 2013).

Regarding learner use of PN–s and 3SG–s in written language production in the form of essays, research to date has been quite limited. Wee et al. (2010) found frequent omission of 3SG–s marking in academic writing by Malaysian EFL students, which was resonant with Muftah and Rafik-Galea's (2013) study of Arabic EFL undergraduate students using data from grammaticality judgement tasks. Other studies, although not explicitly focusing on the PN–s and 3SG–s morphemes, found that the omission and incorrect use of 3SG–s forms, i.e. –s, –es, –ies, were the most common errors in EFL writing by Turkish students (Ulgu et al., 2013) and Thai learners (Phuket & Othman, 2015). Hamamcı and Hamamcı (2018) reported that Turkish undergraduate students still had difficulty using the third-person singular in their essays, with a significant proportion being omitted. In Qi's (2022) study of Chinese undergraduate learners in a UK context, the 3SG–s omission rate was reported to be 50% of the obligatory contexts. In a recent study, Akbaş and Ölçü-Dinçer (2021) examined the acquisitional order of several grammatical morphemes in a corpus of 136 argumentative essays by first-year Turkish EFL learners. Their results indicated that 3SG–s was more challenging than PN–s for these learners.

Research on the use of inflectional morphology by Vietnamese EFL learners has largely focused on oral language production. For example, McDonald (2000) found an effect of L1 on the acquisition of 3SG–s, withVietnamese L1 learner immigrants omitting the target inflectional morpheme more than Spanish L1 learners of English, as Spanish is an inflection-rich language while Vietnamese is non-inflectional. By interviewing 160 bilingual learners of English aged 12-16 in Hamburg, Germany, including Russian-German, Turkish-German, and Vietnamese-German learners, Siemund and Lechner (2015) similarly found that verb-subject agreement was more problematic for Vietnamese immigrants than for Russian and Turkish L1 learners. Again, Vietnamese L1 was identified as a key factor. In a Vietnamese EFL tertiary context, Nguyen and Newton (2020) audio-recorded students' task performances of communicative tasks and analyzed their use of 3SG–s and *be* copula. The study found that students omitted the inflectional morpheme –s marking the third-person singular 78% of the time while performing better on the *be* copula. Though with a different

focus, Son and Håkansson (2022) found that the Vietnamese learners in their study tended to analyze the grammatical rules in their different constituents, leading to errors related to 3SG–*s*.

As mentioned above, no research has specifically explored the use of both PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* in opinion essays written by tertiary students in the Vietnamese EFL context. Few studies to date have also reported learners' voices in the process of writing in relation to the use of PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* marking. The present study therefore aims to fill these gaps and answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. How accurately do Vietnamese English-major students use PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* in their opinion essays?

RQ2. How do students perceive the use of PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* in opinion essays?

Based on the extant scholarship on inflectional morphology as reviewed above and how PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* are expressed in Vietnamese L1 as a non-inflectional language, three hypotheses are formed:

Hypothesis 1: As research has shown that many groups of learners follow the natural acquisition order featuring PN–*s* to be acquired earlier than 3SG–*s*, Vietnamese EFL learners in the present study will use PN–*s* more correctly than 3SG–*s*.

Hypothesis 2: Because Vietnamese is an isolating language which does not mark 3SG–*s* and plurality inflectionally, omission will be most common.

Hypothesis 3: Because there are linguistic cues in Vietnamese that accompany the expression of plurality whereas there are no such cues in the case of 3SG–*s*, omission of PN–*s* will be less frequent than that of 3SG–*s*.

For RQ 2, 10 learners were subsequently interviewed on a voluntary basis after they had written their essays. They were asked about their writing process and use of the target inflectional morphemes. No hypothesis was formulated about the learners' qualitative self-reported data.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants were 32 third-year English-major students who enrolled in a compulsory writing course named "Writing 5" out of a total of six writing courses as part of their four-year undergraduate program at a university in Vietnam. The writing course targeted the upper-intermediate level or B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and was taught by the second author. At the time of the study, the students were in the second half of their four-month writing course. They were aged 20 on average; the majority (28 out of 32) were female; and they had all passed a previous writing course with a B1 learning outcome based on the CEFR. They participated in this research voluntarily and were de-identified via codes such as S1, S2, and S3.

3.2 Writing task

The students each wrote an opinion essay about the impact of Facebook during their normal class time as a progress test (see Appendix for the writing task). They were required to write about 250 words on a prepared sheet of paper within 45 minutes and were not allowed to use any reference materials such as dictionaries or seek assistance from teachers or friends.

All the handwritten essays were reliably legible and were typed for analysis as part of a larger project on EFL writing (Nguyen & Newton, 2020). Essays below 250 words were also included in the data to avoid data waste. The total length of the 32 students' essays was 9,337 words (M=291.78, SD= 60.31), with a maximum of 434 words and a minimum of 151 words. Students were informed that the purpose of the research was to explore their EFL writing performance in multiple aspects, rather than the narrow focus of the present paper, which examined the use of PN–*s* and 3SG–*s,* so that they could write the essays as they normally would.

3.3 Interviews

The interviews aimed to understand students' experience of using PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* in the process of writing their English essays. 10 out of the 32 students who had written the essays were interviewed through the Messenger app and their participation was entirely voluntary. Based on their preference, five students were interviewed via Messenger calls and five via text messaging. The interviews were conducted at the students' convenience, without any time limit, and in their mother tongue (Vietnamese). With the permission of the relevant students, the oral interviews were fully audio-recorded. The total duration of the interviews was 239.5 minutes and each interview lasted an average of 24 minutes (M=23.95 minutes, SD=4.98), with a maximum of 31.2 minutes and a minimum of 15.1 minutes.

3.4 Data analysis

3.4.1 Use of PN–s

Obligatory contexts (OCs) regarding each target morpheme were identified and tallied for frequencies. OCs referred to the contexts in which the target form was required. For instance, plural marking is required if it is preceded by explicit linguistic expressions (see examples a and b) or implicit contextual clues (see examples c and d):

a) "I will show you three *benefits* of Facebook." (S7)
b) "Facebook has many *disadvantages*." (S20)
c) "Facebook brings about *benefits* for *users*." (S22)
d) "We can learn English from Facebook when we add *friends* with *foreigners*." (S32)

For each OC, it was checked whether the target inflectional morpheme was supplied and then noted.
The frequencies of correct use and incorrect use were also counted. Correct use (C) meant that PN–*s* was correctly applied in obligatory contexts (see examples e and f):

e) It has negative effects on *many aspects* of life. (S23)
f) There are *many online stores* so you can have *many* different *options* and go far from your house. (S15)

There was only one instance of incorrect use (IC) which involved the incorrect inflectional form or misspelling as in example g:

g) "Thanks to social networks, many *communitys* are helped." (S30)

If PN–*s* was not used in obligatory contexts, it was coded as omission (Om) (see examples h and i):

h) "People can see *those face*." (S28)

i) "We can send *picture*, videos and even some sweet greetings for someone we like." (S10)

If the target form was supplied in non-obligatory contexts, it was coded as oversuppliance (Ov) (see examples j and k):

j) "People exchange *informations* about the products." (S28)

k) "Fake profile is another *disadvantages* of Facebook." (S16)

In each category (correct use, incorrect use, and omission), the use of PN–*s* was divided into three subcategories of orthography related to the three forms of the inflectional morpheme –*s*: –*s*, –*es*, and –*ies*. The oversuppliance in PN–*s* was counted separately, considering the three variants: –*s*, –*es*, and –*ies*; and two types of nouns: countable noun (Co) and uncountable noun (Unco).

3.4.2 Use of 3SG–*s*

The focus of the present study was on the inflectional morpheme –*s* marking the 3SG–*s* of the regular verbs only; the verbs *be, do, and have* were not included. Analysis of 3SG–*s* was restricted to declarative sentences, because negative and interrogative sentences were rarely used in the students' essays. Following Ionin and Wexler (2002) and Nguyen and Newton (2020), the use of 3SG–*s* was analyzed for suppliance which included correct use and incorrect use, and non-suppliance or omission. Correct use referred to instances of correct suppliance of the target morpheme (see examples l and m); no instance of incorrect use was found (cases where the target morpheme was used but incorrectly for 3SG–*s*). Omission was coded when the target morpheme was not supplied although it was required (see examples n and o):

l) "Using telephone can be costly especially when it *comes* to long-distance calls." (S16)

m) "Many people say that Facebook is a positive development that *benefits* humankind." (S18)

n) "On the other hand, Facebook *make* you very tired by blue light of phone and not enough energy to study as well as to work." (S32)

o) "On one hand, Facebook *bring* about lots of advantages." (S30)

Again, as with the case of PN–*s*, if the target form was supplied in non-obligatory contexts, it was coded as oversuppliance (Ov) (examples p and q):

p) "Some users *exploits* Facebook to defraud other people." (S11)

q) "Many people *says* that Facebook is a positive development." (S18)

For both PN–*s* and 3SG–*s*, if the same verb or noun was reused in a different combination, the repeated verb or noun was coded again, because research has shown variability in morpheme use by even the same individual learner (e.g., Brown, 1973). Self-correction was counted instead of false starts, and instances of use that were not reliably legible were excluded.

3.4.3 Interview data

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed in their entirety. Textual interviews derived from texting via the Messenger app were composed in the form of word documents for each student and all the students. As recommended by Casanave (2010), the interviews were analyzed in the original source language of Vietnamese to retain the intended message. A qualitative theme-based approach (Cohen et al., 2018) was adopted to analyze the interview data. Each interview text was inductively analyzed in an iterative open manner for themes that emerged. When an interviewee mentioned a theme, that theme was noted on a printed version of each interview transcript. The

process continued with each and all interview transcripts. The surfaced themes were generated, confirmed, and reconfirmed through a process of repeated reading and interpretation (Newman, 2014; Silverman 2021). These themes were typed into a Microsoft Excel sheet for subsequent auto-calculation. A noting column was added next to each theme to supply specific details mentioned by each interviewee.

Due to word limit, only English translations of the selected interview quotes are presented for illustration in the report of the interview findings. Translations were double-checked for accuracy by a fourth-year English major student who was proficient in English with an IELTS band score of 8.0.

3.4.4 Intercoder reliability

The use of PN–s and 3SG–s in eight randomly selected essays out of a total of 32 (25%) was coded by the first author and an English lecturer at the research site. The percentage of agreement between the two coders for all the categories was calculated and the results are summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. Reliability Results

	PN–s	3SG–s
	% of agreement	% of agreement
OC	87.5	87.5
C	87.5	87.5
IC	100	100
Om	100	87.5
Ov	87.5	100

As shown in Table 1, the percentage of agreement ranged from 87.5% to 100%, indicating satisfactory intercoder reliability. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the percentage of agreement between two coders should be at least 80%. Similarly, three of the 10 interview transcripts were coded independently by the same two coders for themes that emerged, and the accord rate was 90%. Differences between the coders were resolved through further discussion and elaboration. In cases where both coders could not agree, an EFL teacher was consulted. If no agreement was reached, the cases were not included in the analysis. The first author coded the remaining data.

4   Findings

4.1   Students' use of PN–s and 3SG–s

Table 2 presents the findings related to the overall use of PN–s and 3SG–s in terms of frequency and percentage of correct use (C), incorrect use (IC), and omission (Om) out of the total number of obligatory contexts (OC):

Table 2. Students' Use of PN–s and 3SG–s

	OC	C	IC	Om
		n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
PN–s	546	442 (80.95)	1 (0.18)	103 (18.87)
3SG–s	155	105 (67.74)	0 (0)	50 (32.26)

As demonstrated in Table 2, students used PN–s and 3SG–s correctly in most obligatory contexts, with a higher proportion of the former than the latter (80.95% and 67.74%, respectively). Regarding omission, students left out 3SG–s (32.26%) more than PN–s (18.87%). A Pearson-Chi-

square test was performed to compare the percentages of omission of PN–s and 3SG–s, and the results showed a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 (2) = 12.693, p <.001$), suggesting that omission was more frequent with 3SG–s than PN–s. Incorrect use was rare for PN–s (only one instance) while there was none for 3SG–s.

Figures 1 and 2 show the data broken down for individual students. The omission of the PN–s morpheme was concentrated on the left side of the graph, with a low dropping rate for all except one student who omitted the target morpheme 70-80% of the time and two students who did it 40-50%. In contrast, the individual data for 3SG–s varied more widely, with about half of the students omitting the target morpheme at 0-30% of the time, and the remaining data scattered from the middle to the right side of the graph.
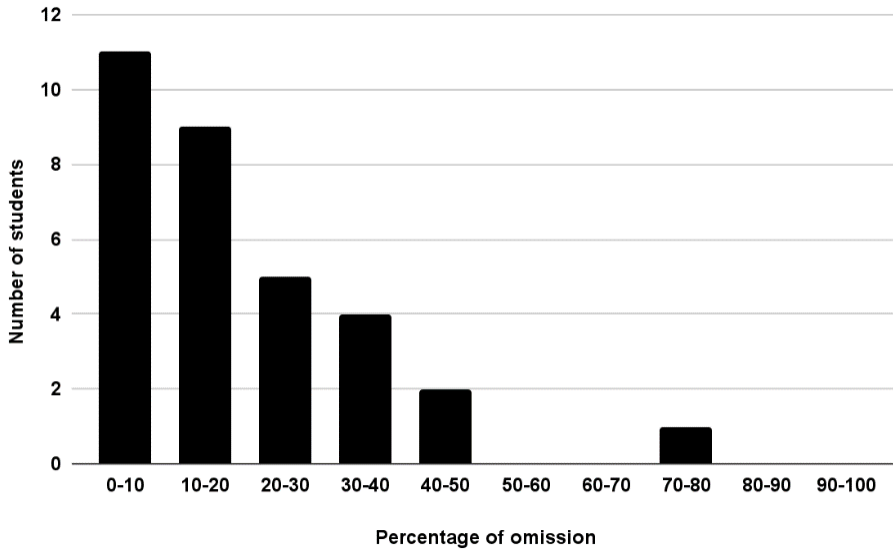

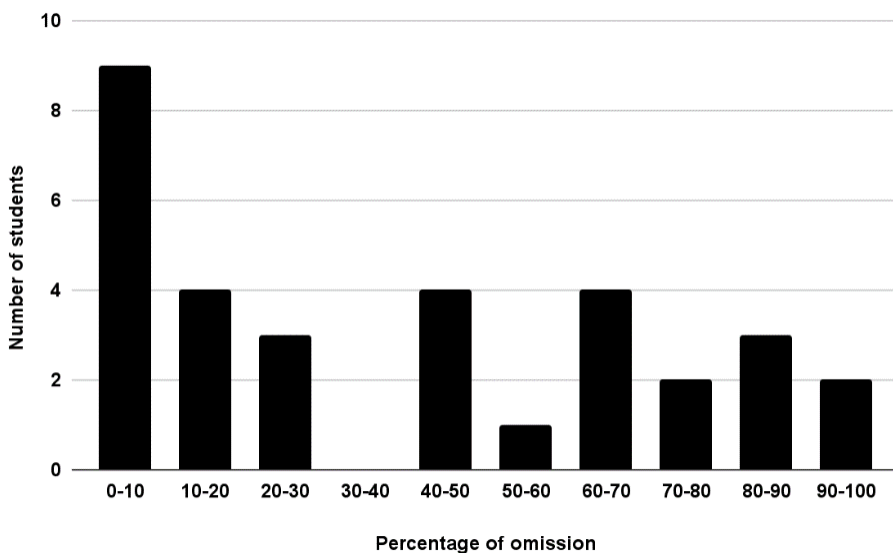**Fig. 1. Percentage Distribution of PN–s Omission**

Fig. 2. Percentage Distribution of 3SG–s Omission

Table 3 further presents the uses of the different forms of PN–*s* such as –*s, –es,* and *–ies*:

Table 3. *Students' Use of PN–s Endings*

	–s n (%)	*–es* n (%)	*–ies* n (%)
OC	495	11	40
C	410 (82.83)	6 (54.55)	26 (65.00)
IC	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (2.50)
Om	85 (17.17)	5 (45.45)	13 (32.50)

As shown in Table 3, students often used PN–s correctly for the three PN–s forms: –s (82.83%), –ies (65%), and –es (54.55%). There was only one instance of incorrect use involving –ies. On the other hand, omission related to –es topped the list (45.45%), followed by that of –ies and –s with 32.5% and 17.17% respectively. The differences between the omission of –s, –es, and –ies were statistically significant (χ^2 (2) = 142.864, p <.001). The omission rate of –es form in PN–s was significantly higher than that of –s (χ^2 (1) =5.887, p =.015) and –ies (χ^2 (1) =141.802, p <.001). However, the data were much smaller in the case of –es and –ies, thus the findings need to be interpreted with caution.

As the frequency of the –s sub-category in the case of PN–s was the highest, the breakdown of the individual data is illustrated in Figure 3. About two-thirds of the students (23/32) omitted the –s ending in one or two obligatory contexts. The data for the remaining students varied from three to nine instances of omission.
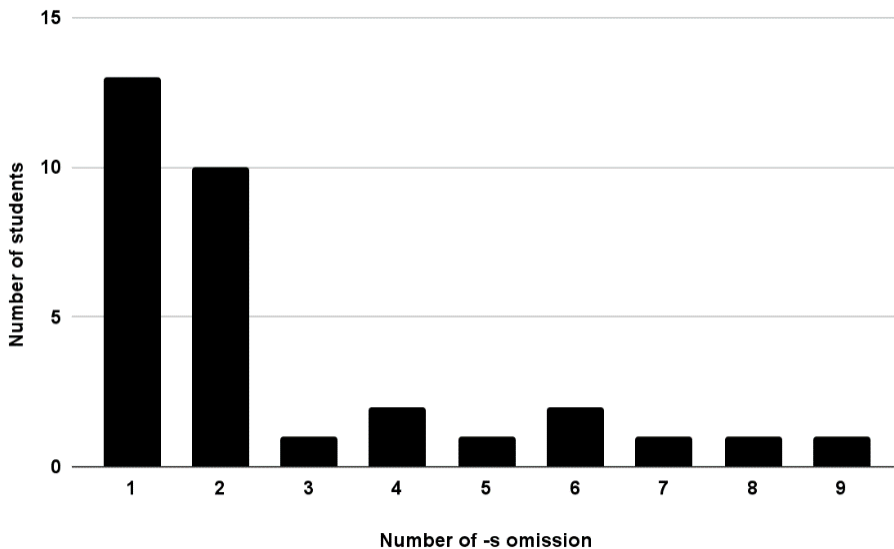

Fig. 3. Omission Distribution of th*e –s* Ending of PN–*s*

Table 4 illustrates the use of the different endings of 3SG–s. Students correctly used the –s ending of 3SG–s 67.32% of the time. There was one obligatory context for each ending –es and –ies; and they were all applied correctly. Omission was only found with the –s ending, with 32.68% of its total obligatory contexts being dropped; there was no instance of incorrect use.

Table 4. Students' Use of 3SG–*s* Endings

	–s n (%)	–es n (%)	–ies n (%)
OC	153	1	1
C	103 (67.32)	1 (100)	1 (100)
IC	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Om	50 (32.68)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Figure 4 presents the breakdown of the individual data for the use of the –s ending of 3SG –s. Most students (30/32) omitted the –s in one or two obligatory contexts and two students dropped it in four instances.
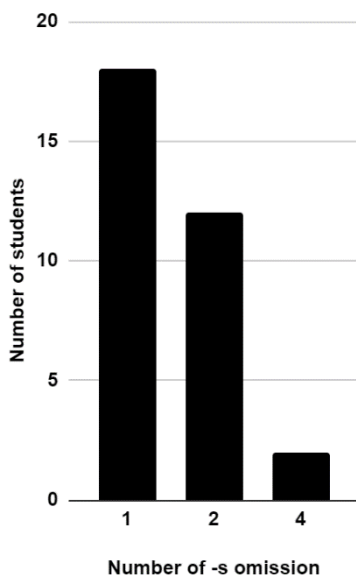

Fig. 4. Omission Distribution of the –s Ending of 3SG–s

Students also overused the target inflectional morphemes, meaning that they provided the form in non-obligatory contexts. The findings relating to oversuppliance are summarized in Table 5:

Table 5. Students' Oversuppliance of PN–s and 3SG–s

	PN–s n (%)	3SG–s n (%)
–s	38 (100)	1 (50)
–es	0 (0)	0 (0)
–ies	0 (0)	1 (50)
Total	38	2

The findings show that there were 40 instances of overuse, of which 38 were predominantly recorded for PN–s, and only two for 3SG–s (with –s and –ies endings). All cases of PN–s oversuppliance involved the –s ending and occurred more frequently with countable nouns (29/38) than uncountable nouns (9/38).
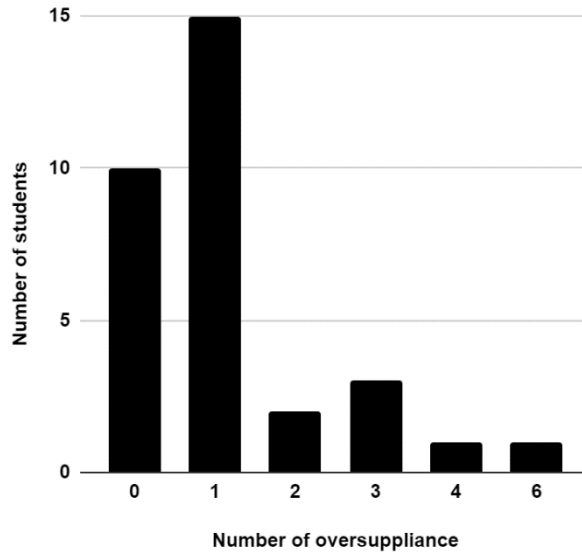
Fig. 5. Frequency Distribution of PN–*s* Oversuppliance

Figure 5 shows the distribution of PN–*s* among students. About one-third of the students (10/32) did not commit this type of error; nearly half of them (15/32) had one instance of overusing PN–*s*. Five students marked plurality on two to three occasions where it was not required, and only one student committed four and one student six oversuppliance errors.

4.1 Students' perspectives

Seven of the 10 interviewed students shared that they considered the target inflectional morphemes as basic grammatical points that they had learnt in the early days of their English acquisition. They reported being aware of the grammatical inflection –*s* that marks PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* in writing:

I am often aware of adding –s to plural nouns and the verb in the third-person singular. (S7)
I am aware and particularly careful about conjugating verbs in line with the subject and use plural/singular nouns. (S2)

From their perspective, the occurrence of omission or erroneous use was mainly due to time pressure, the meaning-driven act of the essay writing process, which had diverted their attention from form, and the potential influence of L1.

Time constraint was often cited as a major factor in the erroneous use of the target morphemes, as one student narrated: "*There is a time limit for a classroom test, so I need to be quick and quite often forget to check, so I make mistakes*" (S9). Another shared a similar view: "*When I write, I still make mistakes due to time pressure and the need to write following my flow of ideas. So I prioritize the content I am working on, and ignore minor issues such as –s*" (S8).

The overriding concern to complete the timed essay had diverted their attention away from marking PN–*s* or 3SG–*s* inflectionally. Another student commented:

Trying to complete my essay distracted me from language forms such as –s. It could be that I used the –s correctly in a previous sentence, but perhaps in a sentence that followed, I omitted it. (S10)

It was interesting that the students mentioned time constraint and meaning conveyance together. This shows their great awareness of the timed writing performance and the prioritization of the meaning in the writing process to express their viewpoint on the impact of Facebook. The flow, logic and content of the essay were paramount, which they felt led to mistakes:

Usually I tend to focus on writing my ideas first; after that if I still have time, I'll check my essay again after finishing my writing, or I squeeze in time to check when I am stuck with ideas to write or I cannot continue writing. (S3)

Clearly, a trade-off between content or fluency and form was evident in these learners' narratives. In such a stressful act as writing, strategic moves were adopted to prioritize meaning or fluency over the accuracy of what they considered to be 'minor' forms. The multiple tasks that the students were engaged in, coupled with the overriding concern to express meaning in the opinion essay writing, drove them to opt for conveying the message, rather than paying attention to the inflectional morphemes. One student commented: "*The main reason is that I have to always multitask in writing, I have to move on with idea flow and generation, and it is easy to ignore these minor target forms.*" (S3)

Given their limited capacity under time constraint, students were also very strategic in channeling their attention to other aspects deemed worthier such as lexical variation. One student reported: "*I had to focus on using varied structures and vocabulary, so I was too much into this dimension that I forgot the –*s *for the third-person singular and plural nouns.*" (S8).

The students were under pressure to complete the essay, realize all its rhetorical functions, and manage the logistic components. All these tasks were already demanding, so many did not have time to check their essays after completion. One student reported: "*Due to time pressure, I think I can get higher marks for good ideas and good use of other grammar structures rather than adding an –*s *to a noun or a verb*." (S8). Another student elaborated:

When doing a writing task in class, I just need to come out with something to write without paying much attention to grammatical issues. I feel relieved when I complete a writing task ahead of schedule because I believe that, between an unfinished essay and some minor grammatical errors in verb conjugation or in PN–s, teachers will deduct your grade more when your essay lacks some parts, particularly the conclusion. (S2)

Without a doubt, under time pressure, these students were aware of what weighed more for their essays so they chose to concentrate on the global completion of the essay rather than to attend to 'minor' details such as inflection. It is worth noting that they articulated well about the low communicative value of the target inflectional forms. In this regard, they made reference to their friends ('them') instead of themselves to explain the habit of omission that they had formed, because these forms would be comprehensible to the reader even when they are unmarked. One illustrative comment is that "*Because the reader can still understand if I don't add an –*s*, so it could be a habit to write intuitively without paying attention to correctness when pressed for time.*" (S8)

Thus, students knew what caused them to commit inflectional errors as they were driven to express meaning in the process of writing their essays. Carelessness was acknowledged by four students after the teacher had given feedback on their essays. One of them explained:

Sometimes, I finish the writing tasks and do not truly care about the errors in PN–s and 3SG–s. After receiving my essays back from the teachers, I realize how very careless I was when committing such basic errors. (S1)

L1 interference was also another key theme that surfaced in students' interviews. Nine students stated that they were more likely to make mistakes with use of 3G–*s* than with PN–*s* and cited

Vietnamese L1 as one major influence. Specifically, they articulated the differences between Vietnamese L1 and English in plurality and third-person –*s* marking. In terms of PN–*s*, students reported that since Vietnamese has non-inflectional expressions to indicate plurality, it is easier for them to be more cautious about using PN–*s*:

> *I think that adding PN–s is easier, as I usually form a Vietnamese sentence in my head. For example, when I think of 'many or some books' in Vietnamese, the word 'nhiều' (many) or 'những' (some) in Vietnamese makes me more cautious about adding –s to plural nouns. In contrast, there is no indication for 3SG–s in the verb in Vietnamese (Tôi mua [I buy]/ Anh ấy mua.[He buy]). The same form 'mua' (buy) is used for all the subjects, plural or singular. So adding –s to a verb in the third-person singular is more challenging.* (S2)

It was evident that students were well-aware of the non-inflectional expressions that indicate the need for plural marking while the use of 3SG–*s* was more problematic. Their greater ease with PN–*s* stemmed from the greater accommodation of this form in their L1.

5   Discussion

The present study aimed to examine how Vietnamese EFL students used PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* in their opinion essays. The results showed that they used PN–*s* and 3SG –*s* correctly in the majority of the obligatory contexts. However, the rate of the correct use of PN–*s* was higher than that of 3SG–*s*, which lends support to Hypothesis 1 that PN–*s* is to be acquired earlier than 3SG–*s*. The finding that plural marking was more accurately used corroborates the findings of prior research which documented the earlier acquisition of PN–*s* than 3SG–*s* (e.g., Akbaş & Ölçü-Dinçer, 2021; Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001; Ionin & Wexler, 2002; Joelsson, 2018). It is interesting that students reported being more alert to plurality markers by referring to accompanying non-inflectional linguistic cues in Vietnamese. These cues act namely as a reminder for them to conduct form-meaning mapping in the case of plurality, thus facilitating the provision of the target morpheme. This confirms Hypothesis 3 and points to the possibility of the "differential influence" of L1 on morpheme accuracy (Murakami & Alexopoulou, 2016).

Another key finding was that omission was the most common error students committed in view of both 3SG–*s* and PN–*s*, thus confirming Hypothesis 2 while other types of errors were less frequent. It is remarkable to note the different reasons students reported for their morpheme omission. Omission of 3SG–*s* and PN–*s* could be partly explained by Vietnamese L1 as an isolating language which does not mark inflection (Ngo & Tran, 2001) and aligns well with the Morphological Congruency Hypothesis (Jiang et al., 2011), lending support to previous research (e.g., McDonald, 2000; Paradis, 2011; Siemund & Lechner, 2015). Affixation is absent in the Vietnamese language, which poses a challenge for students to map such abstract features as 3SG–*s* and PN–*s* to surface forms (Prévost & White, 2000, p. 127). This finds support in recent studies on these two target features although they employed language-focused tasks (Choi & Ionin, 2021; Li & Yang, 2022).

Particularly, the omission rate of 3SG–*s* in students' writing performance (32.26%) was much lower than that in oral speech by Vietnamese English-major university students (about 78.4%) as reported in Nguyen and Newton's (2020) study and by Chinese EFL students (78% of the time) (Hsieh, 2009; Jia & Fuse, 2007; Lardiere, 2017). This might suggest that the written mode may facilitate more accurate language use (at least regarding the target inflectional forms in the present study). Even though it is difficult to compare omission rates across studies, given the multiple factors at play such as differences in tasks, topics, and student-related variables, the omission rate in this study (32.26%) was much lower than that in other studies on 3SG–*s* in written language production (e.g., Hamamcı & Hamamcı, 2018; Qi, 2022). The lower omission rate could be attributed to the more advanced level of the students in the present study (English majors in their third year at university). That said, the findings that one-third of the 3SG–*s* and one-fourth of the PN–*s* cases were omitted were substantial. Although these students were enrolled in the same writing

course, individual variation in the use of 3SG–*s* and PN–*s* use could perhaps be due to the mixed proficiency levels typical of the writing classes at the research site.

It is interesting that the students referred to the complex multifaceted meaning-making act of EFL writing. In their view, it reduced the prominence of the inflectional –*s* and drove them to pay more attention to other dimensions of the writing performance that they considered more important, such as lexical diversity and content. It is understandable that the multitasking of idea generation, meaning encoding and accuracy was cognitively taxing for them. Yet, it is even more interesting to note that students made executive decisions and anticipated a trade-off between fluency and accuracy, which provided empirical support for the limited attention capacity model (Skehan, 2015). This shows they were strategic learners, as their B1 plus proficiency level and experience of EFL writing at a tertiary level enabled them to do so. In the present study, the Vietnamese learners were aware of the target constructions, but had difficulty mapping them to the surface forms as their attention was dominated by the need to address more global aspects of the writing under time pressure, thus reinforcing the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (Haznedar & Schwartz, 1997; Ionin &Wexler, 2002; Prévost & White, 2000). The findings also allude to the low communicative value of PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001; Jensen et al., 2020) *as an additional factor, coupled with the pressure of a timed performance.*

6   Implications and conclusion

The present research set out to explore how Vietnamese EFL students used PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* in their opinion essays and the results point to a number of important implications for teachers and students. Firstly, the findings have shown that writing is a multidimensional meaning-making process that could involve trade-offs between fluency and accuracy, suggesting that teachers should consider a post-task treatment of errors (Willis & Willis, 2007) to help students to attend to the target language forms. This could be done in various forms of explicit instruction to prevent errors that result from L1-L2 differences. Asking students to analyze their writing performance (Skehan, 2014) for the use of the target forms could be another pedagogical option. Teachers should also provide feedback on erroneous use such as omission in order to provide additional "declarative crutches" (DeKeyser, 1998, p. 49) that enable students to proceduralize the use of the target morphemes. As the individual data related to the use of the target morphemes varied considerably, differentiated feedback and instruction by the teacher need to be in place to benefit different students. Equally important, the students' accounts in the present study offer refreshing insights into the hidden process of the meaning-driven act of writing. A relevant implication could be that writing instruction needs to go beyond feedback centered on students' writing performance to include dialogues with students so that their writing experiences can be understood. This could provide a useful basis for teachers to help students to not only correct errors, but also to monitor their progress towards a more automatic and controlled use of grammatical morphemes.

The implications for students could be centered around practice. It is important that students make use of in-class and outside-class opportunities to practice using the target language in both writing and speaking. From the Skills Acquisition view (DeKeyser, 2014), practice can be particularly useful for students, especially when there is a lack of congruence between L1 and L2 in the grammaticalization of target forms such as 3SG–*s* and PN–*s*. Producing extended oral and written discourse is even more crucial in light of the form-meaning mapping issue reported by the students in the present study as the meaning-making process caused them to prioritize the expression of ideas. With practice, students can put their declarative knowledge into automatic use, thus enhancing both their fluency and accuracy.

This study has some shortcomings that need to be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small with only 32 essays and 10 interviewees, suggesting that future research on a larger scale with a higher number of scripts and participants would provide more robust empirical evidence. Second, only PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* were examined in the present study so it is not clear how students use other

language features in their written language production. Accordingly, the use of other types of inflectional morphemes may be a useful research direction to further understand students' accuracy in using inflectional morphemes. Third, the present study did not track the accurate use of the target morphemes according to the availability or frequency of the verbs or nouns that appeared in the essays, which might, however, be a useful avenue for future studies. Finally, the interview data in the present study provided refreshing insights into the use of PN–*s* and 3SG–*s* by the Vietnamese EFL learners, suggesting that this type of data is useful. But future research could consider using stimulated recall interviews or online tracking tools to better capture students' allocation of attentional resources in the writing process.

Acknowledgements

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APPENDIX

Writing task

Some people say that Facebook is a positive development that benefits humankind while some others say that it has negative effects on many aspects of life.

What is your opinion? Provide reasons and examples to support your position. You have 45 minutes to plan and write your essay. You should write about 250 words.