

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON NEGATIVE TRANSFER IN VIETNAMESE TERTIARY EFL LEARNERS' ENGLISH WRITING

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Abstract. *The question of whether the first language (L1) has any effects on foreign/second language (L2) acquisition has attracted the curiosity of numerous linguists as well as language educators and led to a significant number of studies being conducted on the issue. This empirical research was aimed at exploring the possible interference of Vietnamese language (L1) with the acquisition of English (L2), or the negative transfer, reflected through pieces of English writing by Vietnamese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Error analysis of written English academic essays by 15 Vietnamese EFL tertiary students on a given topic with time and word restrictions was conducted and then the errors in their writing were examined in comparison with L1 characteristics to identify the possible negative effects of L1 on L2. The analysed results showed evidence of negative transfer in word forms, articles, prepositions, pronouns and the possessive case in the students' L2 writing which resulted in underproduction, overproduction and production errors.*

Key words: *negative transfer, English writing, EFL learners, second language acquisition*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language transfer has attracted the attention of a number of language instructors and linguists for quite a long time now. A number of studies in second language acquisition (SLA) have been implemented to find evidence of language transfer in second language (L2) learners' performance. However, only very few studies have investigated this issue in the context of Vietnamese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). As an EFL teacher in Vietnam, I was particularly curious about whether the phenomenon occurs in this context and what impacts it could possibly have on Vietnamese EFL learners, which was the major motive for this study to be conducted.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of transfer

Language transfer refers to the phenomenon that what a person knows about one previous language influences how they acquire and use another language (Ellis, 2008; Gass, Behney and Plonsky, 2013; Gass and Selinker, 1992; Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2007; Odlin, 1989, 2003). Researchers have different phrases to refer to this phenomenon, such as 'interference', 'native language influence', 'language transfer', or 'cross-linguistic influence' (Odlin, 2003), among which the last two are possibly the most commonly used. In this study, the popular term 'transfer' is employed throughout.

There have been arguments about whether L1 has an influence on L2. Some attributed learners' recourse to L1 to their lack of knowledge of a particular L2 feature (Newmark, 1966; Krashen, 1983; Taylor, 1975) or considered it as not important, useful or influential in L2 acquisition (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982; George, 1972; Larsen-Freeman, 1978; Whitman and Jackson, 1972). Others, however, acknowledged the existence of transfer with research evidence (Chan, 2004; Faerch and Kasper, 1987; Irujo, 1986; Jarvis and Odlin, 2000; Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2008; Kellerman, 1979; Lepetit, 1989; Ringbom, 1987; Verhoeven, 1994). I, based on my own experience of learning EFL, agreed with the proponents of this phenomenon and therefore merely focused on investigating how it worked in the context of Vietnamese as L1 and English L2.

2.2. Identification of transfer

Sources of data for investigation into transfer are not unanimous among researchers. While some chose to examine transfer in learners' L2 reception (listening and reading), others preferred to inspect it through L2 production (speaking and writing) of learners (Ellis, 2008). This study examined instances of transfer in L2 production, particularly writing, due to the fact that I often saw my students struggle with their English writing skill and thus desired to discover whether L1 was the cause of their difficulty.

Another matter of debate centres around how transfer can be identified in collected data. Jarvis (2000) mentioned three types of evidence to identify transfer, namely intra-group homogeneity, inter-group heterogeneity, and cross-linguistic performance congruity. Intra-group homogeneity can be found when a group of language users who have a 'comparable knowledge' of both the L1 and L2 'behave similarly' in the L2. This evidence can be obtained by examining the errors produced in L2 and inspecting them to see if they correlate to L2 characteristics. Meanwhile, inter-group heterogeneity can be derived from the comparisons of the performances of groups of language users whose knowledge of the L1 or L2 is different. The third type of evidence, cross-linguistic performance congruity, involves explicit demonstration of the factors in language users' knowledge about their L1 contributing to the features found in their performance in the L2.

Jarvis (2000) claimed that problems were found within each kind of evidence and proposed that all those types of evidence should be examined for a verification of transfer. However, a number of transfer studies have obtained 'credibility' without generating all three types of evidence, which led Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008) to conclude that it is the strength and reliability of the evidence that matters rather than whether all three types are investigated in one empirical study. Taking this into consideration, I chose to inspect the evidence of intra-group homogeneity.

2.3. Classification of transfer

Odlin (1989) classified the results of transfer into three categories: positive transfer, negative transfer and varying lengths of acquisition. Positive transfer indicates that similarities between the L1 and L2 can enhance the acquisition of the latter, which can be determined through comparing the success of groups with dissimilar first languages. Negative transfer, on the other hand, shows differences from L2 standards and can bring about such outcomes as underproduction, overproduction, production errors and misinterpretation. While underproduction signifies production of not many or even no instances of an L2 pattern, overproduction means learners' overuse of a certain L2 form as a result of avoiding other ones. Production errors include substitutions, i.e. using L1 forms in the L2; calques, i.e. errors showing a similar L1 pattern; and alterations, i.e. changing L2 structures as a result of a specific impact from the L1. Misinterpretation means learners interpret a certain L2 item differently because of the influence of their L1. The last outcome of the transfer, diverging acquisition lengths, means learners with different L1s need varying lengths of time to acquire the L2. This can be determined by an inspection of the length of time required to achieve high proficiency in the L2. Due to the limited scope of this study, the researcher only investigated one L1, so it was not possible to measure positive transfer and lengths of acquisition. Accordingly, only negative transfer was examined.

2.3. Research gap and research questions

Mitchell and Myles (2004) and Ellis (2008) in their books claimed that L1 does not have strong effects on morpheme acquisition. However, Luk and Shirai (2009) who reviewed a number of studies on the influence of L1 on learners' acquisition of grammatical morphemes in English concluded that strong L1 transfer happened and called for a reconsideration of the importance of L1 in the acquisition of grammatical morphemes. Jarvis and Odlin (2000) investigating morphological transfer in the spatial expressions of Finish-speaking and Swedish-speaking learners also found that L1 played a significant role. Supportive evidence of L1 interference was also found in Paquot's (2013) study on lexical bundles, Watcharapunyawong and Usaha's (2013) and Bennui's (2016) study on Thai EFL students's writing, Sabbah's (2015) research on Arabic language interference to learning English, Shi's (2015) work on Chinese negative transfer on learning English. However, very few studies have been done on Vietnamese negative transfer in Vietnamese EFL learners' English writing and its effects.

This empirical research was aimed at exploring the interference of Vietnamese language (L1) with the acquisition of English (L2), or the negative transfer, reflected through Vietnamese tertiary EFL learners' English writing. Specifically, this study was conducted to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Which instances of negative transfer could be found in Vietnamese tertiary EFL learners' English writing?
2. What were the effects of negative transfer on their L2 writing?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

Participants in this study were comprised of 15 Vietnamese university students (N = 15, 10 females and 5 males) with intermediate level of English proficiency, aged from 18 to 22 (M = 20.3, SD = 1.68), studying at 3 different universities in Vietnam. They were chosen randomly based on their English language proficiency and willingness to volunteer to participate in this study.

3.2. Data collection

This study was intended to explore negative transfer through evidence of intra-group homogeneity in Vietnamese learners' L2 writing. Specifically, the method of error analysis, "a type of linguistic analysis in which errors that a learner makes are compared with the TL [target language] form" (Gass, Behney and Plonsky, 2013), was conducted in six steps: collecting data, identifying errors in the data, classifying those errors, quantifying them, analysing the source and remediating (Gass, Behney and Plonsky, 2013).

First, an academic English writing task with restrictions on word number (about 250 words) and time length (in 40 minutes) was delivered to the participants. This is a way of gathering samples of learner language called "clinical elicitation" (Ellis, 2008, p.46). The total number of essays was fifteen and the overall number of words was about 5,000.

Next, errors were identified in those collected papers for analysis. It is important to clarify that this research looked into errors, which are "systematic", "likely to occur repeatedly" (Gass, Behney and Plonsky, 2013, p.91) and result from "a lack of knowledge" (Ellis, 2008, p.48), rather than mistakes, which are normally "one-time-only events" (Gass, Behney and Plonsky, 2013, p.91) and show "processing failures that arise as a result of competing plans, memory limitations, and lack of automaticity" (Ellis, 2008, p.48).

3.3. Data analysis

There are two major types of errors in the framework of error analysis (Gass, Behney and Plonsky, 2013). The first one is interlingual errors which can be ascribed to the native language.

The second one is intralingual errors resulting from the target language without dependence on the native language. Since this study is about negative transfer, only the former was discussed.

After the interlingual errors were highlighted in the participants' essays, the researcher attempted to categorise and code them. Two kinds of descriptive taxonomies used in error analysis are linguistic and surface strategy (Ellis, 2008). While the former classifies errors in either distinct levels of language such as lexis, morphology, syntax or particular categories of grammar such as articles, prepositions, the latter divides types of errors into four types: omission, addition, misformations and misorderings (Ellis, 2008; James, 1998). In this particular study, the researcher selected the linguistic category taxonomy, categorising errors into specific grammar categories.

The final stages of the research include the quantification of the errors to see their frequency in the papers, investigation into the L1 characteristics corresponding to those L2 errors to identify instances of negative transfer, and suggestions for pedagogical interventions.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Intralingual errors

There were a total of 399 presumably interlingual errors found in the 15 papers. They were categorised in an order of frequency as follows (see Table 1).

4.1.1. Word forms

This category includes errors in the forms of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. These errors accounted for the largest proportion of the total errors found (57.6%) and were made by all 15 learners (100%).

In the English language, nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are inflected for person, number, tense, aspect, voice and so forth. For example, regular nouns are added with “-s” or “-es” to become plurals or regular verbs have inflected forms for indicatives of the past (-ed), third person singular present (-s/-es), present participle (-ing) or uninflected forms for other cases. Vietnamese language, however, does not use inflections, which may explain why these examined Vietnamese tertiary EFL learners tend not to inflect English words when needed and often either maintain original word forms or use wrong word forms instead.

Below are examples taken from the investigated papers with errors underlined and corrections put in angle brackets:

“Secondly, more and more children make decision <decisions> for their study base <based> on the parent <parents>.” (Hạnh)

“...is a person who not only give <gives> knowledge for student <students> in school, but also teach <teaches> them how to behave well in society.” (Linh)

4.1.2. Articles

This type of error ranked second in terms of frequency in the examined papers at 26.1% out of all errors and was also committed by all learners studied (100%).

While there are two types of articles in the English language: definite article (*the*) and indefinite articles (*a, an*), typical Vietnamese articles include “*cái*” to refer to singular nouns and “*những*” to talk about plural ones, both of which seem to mean and function the same as the demonstratives “*this/that*” and “*these/those*” in English. These might be the reasons why Vietnamese tertiary EFL learners are more than often confused about the use of English articles.

Table 1 Interlingual errors in Vietnamese tertiary EFL learners' English writing

Participant	WF	A	PREP	PRO	PC	Total of errors made by each participant
An	21	8	4	8	0	41
Bình	12	5	4	0	1	22
Cúc	19	6	1	2	0	28
Dung	7	4	1	0	1	13
Đào	10	10	2	0	0	22
Điệp	12	4	6	0	0	22
Giang	16	4	1	1	0	22
Hạnh	32	11	5	1	1	50
Hương	10	7	0	0	0	17
Hải	7	4	2	1	0	14
Khánh	8	7	2	3	0	20
Linh	40	4	5	0	0	49
Minh	16	9	4	0	0	29
Nhàn	9	4	3	0	1	17
Phương	11	17	4	1	0	33
Total of errors made in each category	230	104	44	17	4	399

(Note: WF = word forms; A = articles; PREP = prepositions; PRO = pronouns; PC = possessive case)

There are three tendencies found in their use of articles: omission of articles, overuse of “the” or wrong use of “a” and “an”.

Examples:

“Moreover, without the <omitted> parents' encouragement and help at home, the child <children/a child> would feel discouraged to learn further.” (Phương)

“On the one hand, it is undeniable that parents are driving force <a driving force> behind children's academic development.” (Khánh)

“Teachers play an <a> significant role...” (An).

4.1.3. Prepositions

There were 14 out of 15 learners (93.3%) making errors in prepositions and they occupied 11.0% of the total errors.

In reality, both English and Vietnamese languages have prepositions, but it seems that Vietnamese people look at things from a different angle and hence sometimes use prepositions differently. An analysis of some examples below will elaborate on that claim.

“Therefore, teacher's influence to <on> children is so large and no one can deny it.” (Bình)

When talking about “influence” as “*ảnh hưởng*” or “*tác động*”, Vietnamese people can use two prepositions “*đối với*”, which is a Vietnamese equivalent of “*to*” in English, or “*lên*” as “*on*” in English. This difference may justify Vietnamese tertiary EFL learners' confusion about these two prepositions here.

“In <from> my perspective, I strongly support for <omitted> the notion that...” (Điệp)

Instead of using the preposition “*from*” to combine with “*my perspective*”, a number of Vietnamese tertiary EFL learners tend to use “*in*”. The reason is that when expressing personal and subjective viewpoints, they tend to say “*trong suy nghĩ của tôi*” with “*trong*” as a Vietnamese equivalent of “*in*” in English. For the word “*support*”, Vietnamese people usually say “*ủng hộ cho*” with “*cho*” meaning similarly as “*for*”.

4.1.4. Pronouns

Errors in pronouns were found in 7 out of 15 papers (46.7%), making up 4.3% of the total errors.

In both English and Vietnamese, there are three personal pronouns for first, second and third person with singular and plural forms. However, while Vietnamese pronouns are simple with their forms being independent of their positions or functions, English pronouns are divided into different types with different forms based on their positions and functions in a sentence, for example subjective pronouns *I, we, they, she, or he* function as subjects, and objective pronouns *me, us, them, her, or him* act as objects in a sentence.

Moreover, Vietnamese language has one common and complicated pronoun “*mình*” that can be used to refer to both a person or many people, both men and women, and even a first, second, or third person. For example:

Người ta thường hay ngắm nghĩ lại về cuộc đời mình khi về già. (People tend to look back on their life when they are old.)

Tôi yêu gia đình của mình. (I love my family.)

Anh/Cô ta chỉ quan tâm đến lợi ích riêng mình. (He/She only cares about his/her own benefits.)

As a result, Vietnamese learners might not find it easy to choose an appropriate English pronoun in such circumstances. A learner's sentence below illustrates this:

“...so in his <their> life, people can gain...” (Giang)

4.1.5. The possessive case

Four out of 15 Vietnamese tertiary EFL students (26.7%) made errors in the possessive case ('s), which was 1.0 % of the total errors analysed.

In Vietnamese, people only need to add “*của*” (of) in front of any pronouns or nouns to refer to possession. In English, however, both “*of*” and the possessive case ('s) are used in this case (e.g. *a book of Marry* or *Mary's book*), among which the latter often causes trouble for Vietnamese EFL learners. In addition, when an English plural noun already has an “s” ending, only an apostrophe is added at the end of it (e.g. *my parents' car*).

Examples:

“...parents have more influence on a child <a child's> academic performance” (Dung)

“...as a result of parent's <parents'> opinion...” (Hanh)

Those results that reflected the L1 influence on L2 articles, the possessive case and word forms (plural -s in particular) in this study supported Luk and Shirai (2009) and seemingly contradicted Mitchell and Myles (2004) and Ellis (2008) who claimed that L1 does not have a strong effect in the acquisition of such L2 grammatical morphemes. The findings about the transfer in prepositions and word forms were also in support of a study on morphological transfer by Jarvis and Odlin (2000).

4.2. Effects of negative transfer on Vietnamese EFL learners' English writing

The analysis of the collected data revealed that negative transfer led to underproduction, overproduction and production errors in Vietnamese EFL learners' writing. First of all, the Vietnamese EFL learners seemed less likely to use inflections for English words possibly due to the absence of this feature in their L1. Articles and the possessive case were generally also less frequently seen in their papers, which could have resulted from the differences discussed between their L1 and L2 systems. Subsequently, the underproduction of proper inflections of English words resulted in the overuse of their original forms. The definite article “*the*” was also used significantly more frequently than the other two indefinite articles when learners had to decide which article to use. Finally, as for production errors, calques were found in learners' use of prepositions which might have demonstrated that Vietnamese EFL learners showed a tendency to adopt a similar L1 structure in L2.

5. CONCLUSION

This study revealed that instances of negative transfer were found in Vietnamese tertiary EFL learners' errors in word forms, articles, prepositions, pronouns and the possessive case in their L2 writing, which could have been a result of the absence of or differences in those features in their L1. Accordingly, the negative transfer might have produced three outcomes: underproduction, overproduction and production errors. This study, therefore, called for more attention from both Vietnamese EFL teachers and students to those particular features to minimise the possible effects of negative transfer on students' English writing.

This, however, is a small-scale study on a small sampling with restricted task requirements on the time, length and topic, which might have put constraints on the number of instances of negative transfer found. Also, the errors and outcomes of transfer were not always easy to categorise. For example, errors in pronouns did not actually fit in any category of transfer outcomes proposed by Odlin (1989). In addition, other causes of errors might have been overlooked. There might be misinterpretations of grammar rules of English, intrusion of nonstandard dialects of English, or reflections of developmental stages in second language acquisition that result in errors (Poltzer and Ramirez, 1973). Therefore, longitudinal studies with a larger sampling, more in-depth analyses, and clearer categorising criteria are recommended. It would also be useful if learners' perspectives on their own errors and the existence of negative transfer could be investigated so that the phenomenon could be better explained.

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APPENDIX
WRITING TASK

Write an essay of at least 250 words within 40 minutes on the following topic:

Some people think that parents have the greatest influence on their children's academic development, while others think that a child's teachers have more influence. Discuss both sides and give your opinion.

(Note: No dictionaries or electronic devices are allowed.)