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AUTHOR Dam, Phap
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ABSTRACT

Language educators find two kinds of errors in the interlanguages of language learners: developmental and interference. While developmental errors reflect a normal pattern of development common among all language learners, interference errors are caused by the learners' native languages. This paper deals with a number of die-hard types of interference errors found in English written by Vietnamese speakers. The most persistent errors involve the handling of the linking verb "to be" before adjectives; indefinite and definite articles; complicated verb tenses; subject pronoun and object pronouns; and complex sentences introduced by subordinate conjunctions. It is recommended that these errors be politely called to the speakers' attention and that practice and monitoring are the most effective ways to correct these interference errors. (KFT)

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Old Habits Die Hard: Persistent Errors in English Written by Vietnamese Speakers

***A Paper Presented at the
National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)
Annual Conference, February 20-24, 2001 in Phoenix, Arizona
by Phap Dam, Ph. D.***

***Department of Teacher Education
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY***

1. Language educators distinguish two types of errors found in the interlanguages of language learners: *developmental* and *interference*. While developmental errors reflect a normal pattern of development common among all language learners, interference errors are caused by the learners' native languages. This paper deals with a number of die-hard types of interference errors found in English written by Vietnamese speakers, who were either former students of mine at the University of Saigon (1965-1975) or Vietnamese American writers whose articles I read or edited in the last 15 years or so. It should be noted that these students and writers were all learners of English as a foreign or second language. I will share my analysis of these particular errors and then make a recommendation on how to help Vietnamese speakers overcome these errors. Sentences containing errors are preceded by a pound sign (#), glosses of Vietnamese terms are kept inside square brackets ([]), and examples in both languages are inside quotation marks.

2. It appears that these die-hard errors usually occur when the structures of Vietnamese and English are strikingly different. In the scope of this paper, I will analyze the errors Vietnamese speakers persistently make in the following areas of written English, which involve the handling of :

linking verb "be" before adjectives,
indefinite and definite articles,
complicated verb tenses,
subject pronouns and object pronouns, and
complex sentences introduced by subordinate conjunctions.

2.1 The Vietnamese equivalent of the English linking verb "be" is "là." However, "là" is rarely used to link a subject with its predicative adjective in Vietnamese:

"Nó đỏi."

[He hungry]
“He is hungry.”

“Giáo-sư Smith thông-minh vô cùng.”
[Professor Smith intelligent without end]
“Professor Smith is extremely intelligent.”

We may assume that Vietnamese adjectives have their own “built-in” verbs or that they function like “stative verbs.” Errors reflecting this Vietnamese syntactic feature are found in the following:

“My child very sick today.”
“Our elderly parents not happy to be away from Vietnam.”

2.2 Vietnamese learners of English know that English speakers sometimes use an indefinite article (“She is A funny girl” or “Charles was just AN average student”), sometimes a definite article (“That would be THE perfect solution to our problem”), and sometimes no article at all (“Dogs and cats are favorite pets in America”). Because A, AN, and THE have no exact counterparts in Vietnamese, Vietnamese learners of English are frequently at a loss to know which to use, writing such flawed English sentences as:

“His dream is to become lawyer, not teacher.”
“The exhausted man went to the bed without eating dinner.”
“We truly hope that we will hear a good news soon.”

2.3 When necessary, Vietnamese grammar can express time adequately by means of placing one of several aspect-marking particles in front of the main verb, notably “đã” (for past), “đang” (for present), và “sẽ” (for future):

“Hắn ĐÃ gặp một bạn cũ tuần rồi.”
[He past-marker meet one friend old week just past]
“He met an old friend last week.”

“Ông thầy ĐANG dạy cú-pháp tiếng Việt.”
[Mr. teacher present-marker teach syntax language Viet]
“The teacher is teaching Vietnamese syntax.”

“Khi có thì giờ tôi SẼ thăm bác tôi tại Houston.”
[When have time I future-marker visit father’s older brother my in Houston]
“When I am free, I will visit my uncle in Houston.”

With their native tongue lacking the intricate structure of tenses and moods found in English and other Western languages, Vietnamese speakers find English tenses other than present (“He IS at work today”), past (“Mary LOOKED so happy with her parents last week”), and future (“They WILL DO it for us this afternoon”) hard to understand and use. Indeed, the handling of more complicated English tenses (especially those expressed by auxiliaries and past and present participles, like “We WILL HAVE BEEN LIVING in America for twenty years by then” and “If my parents HAD BEEN rich at that time, they WOULD HAVE SENT me to a private school in Switzerland”) could qualify as the problem area in which they make the most errors. The serious mismatch in tense and mood systems between Vietnamese and English and the convenient simplicity of the Vietnamese system are the reason why Vietnamese learners of English keep writing such interference-induced sentences as:

“We live in California since 1975.”

“ I really wish I can speak English like you.”

“ If you are ten years younger, my brother will probably marry you.”

It is worth noting that the above sentences reflect “correct” Vietnamese syntax, and that some Vietnamese learners of English deliberately avoid using complicated tenses in English, simply for fear of making mistakes.

2.4 In English complex sentences, subordinate clauses, like main clauses, must have subjects and verbs. In a similar situation, however, the subordinate clause in Vietnamese usually does not require a subject:

“Cha tôi đã làm việc cho đến khi xỉu.”

[Father my past-marker do work until faint]

“My father worked until he fainted.”

“Nếu không có việc làm, họ sẽ không có đồ ăn.”

[If no have jobs, they future-marker no have thing eat]

“If they do not have jobs, they will not have food.”

Errors reflecting the above-mentioned tendency in Vietnamese syntax manifest themselves in the following:

“ My father worked until fainted.”

“ If not have jobs, they will not have food.”

2.5 In Vietnamese sentences, direct object pronouns are frequently “understood”:

“Người đàn-ông ấy vô-lễ lắm nên không ai ưa.”
[Person man that impolite very so nobody likes]
“That man is very impolite, so nobody likes him.”

“Tặng bạn máy hình này. Tôi mua ở Nhật đấy!”
[Give friend machine picture this. I buy in Japan you know]
“This camera is for you. I bought it in Japan, you know.”

Errors reflecting the above-mentioned tendency in Vietnamese syntax are found in the following:

“That man is very impolite, so nobody likes.”
“This camera is for you. I bought in Japan, you know.”

2.6 English commonly begins a complex sentence with its subordinate clause led by a conjunction like “because”, “although”, “if”, “even if”, and so on. The main clause of the sentence then follows:

“Because he was reckless, he caused a terrible accident.”
“Although my parents are poor, they are quite generous.”
“If you did that thing, I would hate you.”
“Even if she had time, she would not want to see you!”

When expressions of the type mentioned above are used in Vietnamese, it is usual for the main clause to be introduced by one of such “balancing words” as “nên”, “thì”, “nhưng”, and “cũng”. Transferring this deeply ingrained syntactical habit into English causes errors:

“Vì nó cẩu-thả NÊN nó đã gây ra một tai-nạn khủng-khiếp.”
[Because he reckless SO he past-marker cause an accident terrible]
“Because he was reckless, so he caused a terrible accident.”

“Tuy song thân tôi nghèo NHƯNG họ khá hào-phóng.”
[Although parents my poor BUT they quite generous]
“Although my parents are poor, but they are quite generous.”

“Nếu anh làm chuyện đó THÌ tôi sẽ ghét anh.”
[If you do matter that THEN I would hate you]
“If you did that thing, then I would hate you.”

“Ngay cả nếu có thì giờ nàng CŨNG không muốn thấy anh!”

[Even if have time she ALSO no want see you]

“Even if she had time, she also would not want to see you.”

3. Convinced that the above types of interference errors made by Vietnamese-speaking learners of English die very hard, I recommend that we call their attention to these pitfalls and provide them with practice until mastery. Using the jargon of contemporary psycholinguistics, I believe they need to use their “monitor” to consciously “learn” these structural differences between Vietnamese and English so that their English “output” may be more syntactically accurate. That means that this new knowledge “input” must be turned into their “intake” and finally into their “uptake” if we really want them to overcome these persistent errors.



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Signature: Phap Dam
Printed Name/Position/Title: Dr. Phap Dam Associate Professor
Organization/Address: Dept of Teacher Education Texas Woman's University
Telephone: 940-898-2218 FAX: 940-898-2048
E-Mail Address: pdam@twu.edu Date: May 15, 2001

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