Exploring the Challenges of L1 Negative Transfer among Vietnamese English Language Learners: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The current study aimed to gain insight into the nuanced challenges that Vietnamese learners encountered due to the interference of their native linguistic structures and norms. This qualitative study explored the experiences of Vietnamese learners in acquiring English, focusing on the influence of negative L1 transfer. This study focused on the influence of negative transfer from their first language (L1) by drawing upon in-depth interviews and observational data from a group of Vietnamese university students. The results showed that despite exhibiting high levels of motivation and enthusiasm for learning English, Vietnamese learners struggled with the shadows of L1 interference in areas such as pronunciation, syntax, and idiomatic expressions. The tonal nature of the Vietnamese language led to intonation patterns in English that deviated from native norms. Direct translations also contributed to unidiomatic English, indicating a deep influence of L1 thought patterns. Additionally, cultural contexts embedded within the Vietnamese language presented challenges, as some concepts and expressions lacked direct English equivalents. Although students faced various obstacles, they utilized a variety of adaptive techniques to lessen the impact of negative transfer. These techniques included code-switching, peer correction, and self-reflection. The study emphasized the significance of recognizing and comprehending the significant role of L1 when creating English language educational programs and teaching techniques for Vietnamese students. By illuminating the specific challenges and adaptive strategies of these learners, educators could personalize their approaches, leading to a more comprehensive and efficacious language-learning atmosphere.

INTRODUCTION

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) involves a complex interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural factors, with the learner's first language (L1) significantly influencing the process.

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A key influence is the learner's first language (L1), which can cause both facilitating and inhibiting effects on the new language through a phenomenon known as language transfer or cross-linguistic influence (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). Considerable research has examined this transfer in the context of English language learning, providing insight into theoretical frameworks, international environments, and pedagogical implications.

Traditionally, contrastive analysis and error analysis (EA) have been instrumental in illuminating transfer effects (Richards, 2015). Contrastive analysis compares L1 and L2 structures to predict areas of difficulty, while EA examines learners' mistakes directly to identify negative transfer. These studies have also revealed the multidimensional nature of transfer, covering all of the main linguistic branches such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Selinker & Gass, 2008).

The rise of English as a global language has sparked international investigations into how one's native language (L1) influences the acquisition of English. Kazazoğlu (2020) and Erkaya (2012) found that Turkish speakers struggled with L1 interference in English pronunciation and vocabulary. Chinese and Malaysian learners exhibited L1 influence on English grammar and word order (Eng et al., 2020). The findings from Turkish, Chinese, and Malaysian learners underscore how transfer manifests across diverse linguistic and cultural settings.

This study therefore explores the difficulties faced by Vietnamese learners of English due to their L1 language transfer. We adopted the sociocultural theory of SLA, which emphasized the role of social interaction and cultural artifacts in shaping SLA (Donato & MacCormick, 1994; Thorne & Lantolf, 2006), to investigate how the specific sociocultural context of Vietnamese learners influences their English language learning experiences and the manifestation of L1 transfer. The decision to apply sociocultural theory in this manner is supported by Lantolf and Pavlenko (2006), who argued that second language acquisition is fundamentally a sociocultural process.

Regarding Vietnamese learners specifically, prior research has identified pronunciation, syntax, lexicosemantic, and sociopragmatic challenges stemming from L1 interference (Islam, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2008). However, few qualitative inquiries have examined Vietnamese learners' personal encounters with negative transfer. The purpose of the present study is to contribute to the identification of strategies that might be useful in the enhancement of English teaching methodologies that are sensitive to Vietnamese learners' cultural backgrounds. Noting the difficulties and the process of learning English by these students, teachers can develop techniques that will correspond to the linguistic and cultural aspects that define the process of language acquisition. The present study aims to answer the two research questions:

RQ 1: What are the specific linguistic challenges faced by Vietnamese learners of English due to the L1 negative transfer?

RQ 2: How do the differences in sociocultural norms, such as politeness and directness, between Vietnamese and English impact the language use and perceptions of Vietnamese learners of English?

LITERATURE REVEW

Language transfer has been a significant aspect of research in the field of SLA especially concerning non-native English speakers. The following literature review explores the theoretical framework surrounding language transfer, its implications for Vietnamese learners, and relevant teaching methodologies tailored for non-native English speakers.

1. Theoretical framework of language transfer

Language transfer is the influence that the L1 knowledge exerts on SLA (Terence, 1989; Yu & Odlin, 2016). Language transfer normally manifests in various aspects of language such as phonology, syntax, lexicon, and semantics. Gass and Selinker (2008) differentiated between positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs when L1 knowledge facilitates L2 learning due to similarities or compatible differences. In contrast, negative transfer (or interference) arises when differences between L1 and L2 result in L2 errors. Several factors can influence the extent and type of transfer, including linguistic distance between L1 and L2, learners' proficiency, age, and cognitive abilities (Yu & Odlin, 2016).

2. Sociocultural theory in language learning

As a fundamental theory of learning, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) asserted that learning is the 'part of' the social activity. In SLA, Sociocultural Theory argues that learners acquire language by interacting with other people and through context (Donato & MacCormick, 1994; Thorne & Lantolf, 2006). It is crucial to delineate the concepts that have emerged out of Vygotskian theory: mediation as the use of signs, which include language, for the regulation of internal and outer mental processes and actions; internalization as the process whereby external societal actions become internal psychological functions; and ZPD as the area of development in partnerships with other individuals who are more capable in the given task (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Donato and MacCormick (1994) attempted to understand the ways mediation aids the construction of learners' strategic competence, while Ohta (2005) explained the significance of the collaborative interaction in the ZPD. Although the above-cited studies have delivered useful findings to the social and cultural characteristics of L2 acquisition, the current study employs the concept of sociocultural theory in a broader sense. Unlike other studies that may look at possible learning processes or certain learning strategies, this research aims to look at how the general cultural endowment of the learners and their experiences in their social contexts may affect their English language acquisition and use especially in the area of transfer of cognitive information from the L1. This approach takes into account the fact that SLA is grounded within the learners' social webs of experience and their emerging cultural selves which influences their language use and learning (Thorne & Lantolf, 2006).

3. Language transfer among Vietnamese learners

In terms of linguistic differences leading to transfer, Vietnamese, with its tonal phonology and isolating grammar, differs vastly from English in several linguistic aspects. Nguyen et al. (2008) highlighted that these structural disparities can result in negative transfer, especially in

pronunciation and syntax. Studies have also examined specific error patterns influenced by L1 transfer, including misuse of prepositions (Bui, 2022), subject-verb agreement errors (Chi, 2020; Do, 2022), and direct translation of idioms and phrases (Luong, 2016).

Regarding sociocultural influence, beyond mere linguistic structures, Nguyen et al. (2016) elucidated that cultural contexts embedded within the Vietnamese language play a crucial role. Expressions, idioms, or phrases native to Vietnamese, when translated directly, might not convey the intended meaning in English (Nguyen, 2021).

As for contrastive analysis, a prevalent method used in predicting areas of difficulty due to transfer is contrastive analysis, where L1 and L2 structures are compared to anticipate potential problems (Nguyen et al, 2008). However, while this method can forecast possible areas of negative transfer, it does not always correlate with actual learner errors.

Regarding EA, following contrastive analysis, EA emerged as a method to study learner errors directly rather than predicting them. By examining these mistakes, educators can determine if they stem from negative transfer or other sources (Lin, 2021; Nghi & Phuc, 2022; Wang, 2009). Studies utilizing EA have examined common syntactic, semantic, and lexical errors made by Vietnamese EFL learners (Linh & Vien, 2020; Nhut, 2020).

SLA is a multifaceted process influenced by the learner's first language (L1). This phenomenon of L1 impact on L2 learning is conceptualized as language transfer. The following section provides theoretical frameworks for conceptualizing and examining L1 transfer, laying the foundation for the current study.

4. Conceptualizing L1 transfer

L1 (mother tongue) transfer refers to the influence of a learner's prior linguistic knowledge on the process of acquiring a new language (Odlin, 1989). L1 transfer manifests in various dimensions, including phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Transfer can be positive, with L1 facilitating L2 learning, or negative, with L1 interfering and causing errors. Key theoretical frameworks elucidate the mechanisms and patterns of transfer. Contrastive analysis compares L1 and L2 structures to predict areas of difficulty (James, 1980). EA examines learner output to identify actual instances of negative transfer (Corder, 1967). Sociocultural, psychological, and linguistic factors mediate transfer effects, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding L1 influence on L2 acquisition (Yu & Odlin, 2016).

5. Theoretical frameworks for the current study

This study adopted a qualitative approach situated within the thematic analysis to explore L1 transfer from the perspective of Vietnamese learners learning English. Theoretically, contrastive analysis of Vietnamese and English grammatical and phonological systems informs predictions of potential transfer effects. Concurrently, EA provides a lens for examining actual learner challenges based on production data. Socioculturally, the study draws on conceptualizations of the cultural dimensions of language transfer (Donato & MacCormick, 1994). Pragmatically,

it utilizes frameworks on communication style differences (Eng et al., 2020). In summary, this multidimensional theoretical grounding facilitates a nuanced investigation of the learner experience, illuminating the complex role of L1 transfer in SLA.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research design

This qualitative research design aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of language transfer among Vietnamese learners of English. The primary focus of this study was to provide rich, detailed insights into the learners' experiences and perspectives concerning L1 transfer into L2 language usages. In this study, thematic analysis was deemed the most suitable approach because, through thematic analysis, patterns within the data can be identified, analyzed, and reported (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was consistent with the objectives of the study and the method of research, which was explanatory and involved identifying constraints to transfer of first language in Vietnamese learners of English.

2. Participants

We used purposive sampling to select 20 Vietnamese university students (aged 18-22) with over a decade of English learning experience. Participants' extended exposure to English, spanning over a decade, ensured they had substantial experience with the phenomenon of interest. By focusing on learners with a long-term, consistent engagement with English, the study aimed to capture insights from individuals who had navigated the challenges of language transfer across various stages of their language learning journey. The selected participants represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and were pursuing degrees across different disciplines, providing a broad range of perspectives on the topic.

3. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews

Primary data collection used semi-structured interviews conducted in Vietnamese to ensure participants could fully express their experiences and thoughts without language barriers. The researchers discussed with the participants the mistakes that happened during class observations and journals. The use of Vietnamese allowed participants in the semi-structured interview to help them express their ideas more comfortably and precisely, enabling the researchers to capture the nuances and depth of their experiences. After obtaining oral and written informed consent, each participant was asked to complete a face-to-face semi-structured interview lasting around 15-20 minutes in a private and noise-reduced area of the researchers' campuses. The interviews also aimed at discussing the expectations of the participants toward language transfer, obstacles they met, and possible ways to eliminate these obstacles, such as "*Can you tell me the time when you realized your Vietnamese language background affected your English talking?*" or "*Why didn't you use these words [the correct ones] instead of the others [the wrong ones]?*" (*see* Appendix A.1).

Observational data

To triangulate the data, three observations (class meetings) were conducted in English language classrooms and during communicative activities such as group discussions and presentations. The researchers took detailed field notes, focusing on instances of language transfer in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and sociocultural aspects. These observations provided firsthand insights into how language transfer manifested in real-time communication.

Reflective journals

Besides, participants were also asked to maintain a reflective journal for a month, noting down instances they perceived as influenced by their L1. This served as an introspective tool for learners to critically analyze their language use and provided rich data for the study (*see* Appendix A.2 for the whole set of questions).

4. Data analysis

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed, based on which a thematic analysis was conducted that follows the steps highlighted by Charmaz (2006). It was followed by open coding that aimed at generating early categories and patterns of the analysis. The next step taken was axial coding which helped in constructing relationships between these categories. Finally, selective coding was used to come up with the themes that account for language transfer which is the purpose of the study. The main themes that were identified were named as follows: (i) *Pronunciation difficulties*, (ii) *Syntax errors*, (iii) *Idiomatic expression challenges*, (iv) *Cultural contexts in language use*; and their *sub-themes*. When used in its theme, member checking helped in, the validity of the data that was collected to provide more reliable information as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The data collected was then discussed with the participants, specifically aiming to validate the manner in which the researchers interpreted the results, ensuring that the researchers had not misconstrued or misunderstood the results in any way. It also assisted in fortifying the factual assertions made at the end of the study so that they were credible and trustworthy.

5. Ethical concerns

The present research was done under the principles of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) formulated by the Foreign Languages Faculty Academic Council of Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade. In the research process, the researchers ensured that the proposal received a stamp of approval from the institutional review board (IRB) before data collection commenced as a way of adhering to the accordant ethical practices regarding the participants. Study objectives and procedures were explained and a clear reference made to the role of the participants in the research. To assemble this consent, subjects and participants were read and signed formal consent forms which explained to them that their participation was not mandatory and they could drop out at any time without any penalty. Since the study aimed to uphold the participants' anonymity and ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assuaged throughout the results.

FINDINGS

1. Pronunciation challenges

Pronunciation challenges were found as a significant theme during the interviews, with 85 percent of the participants due to the tonal nature of Vietnamese ending sounds, named *"sắc" [acute accent]*, *"huyền"[grave accent]*, *'hỏi" [question mark]*, *"ngã" [tilde]* and *"nặng" [dot below]* with the different tone stresses. Participant 7 shared their experience, saying, "*Well,…. When I first started learning English, [myself] I struggled a lot with pronunciation. The way [by] I pronounced words was heavily influenced by my Northern accent, and it was hard for native speakers to understand me. For example, I would often mix up the 'l' and 'n' sounds, like saying 'light' instead of 'night.*'"

Participant 12 highlighted another common pronunciation challenge: "*I remember having a hard time with the 'th' [/ð/ or /θ/ by the authors] sound in English because it doesn't exist in Vietnamese. I would either pronounce it as 't' or 's', which made words like 'think' and 'this' sound strange. It took a lot of practice and listening to native speakers to improve my pronunciation.*" Specifically, learners found it hard to differentiate between certain English sounds that do not exist in Vietnamese.

Table 1

Vietnamese sounds and their common mispronunciation in English

Vietnamese Sounds	Mispronounced English Sounds
ng	ŋ (as in 'song')
âu	ɔ: (as in 'saw')
êu	ju: (as in 'you')

Table 1 is illustrated with a detailed breakdown of the common pronunciation errors identified by participants during our interviews. These errors stem from the tonal nature of the Vietnamese language's ending sounds, which pose unique challenges for Vietnamese learners when trying to articulate certain English sounds accurately.

2. Grammatical challenges

Observations from classroom settings and reflective journals revealed grammatical errors influenced by Vietnamese sentence structures. The use of prepositions and verb tenses seemed particularly challenging (*see* Table 2).

Table 2

Grammatical errors influenced by Vietnamese structures

Error Types	Vietnamese Influence	Frequency of Occurrences (out of 20 students)
Prepositions	Omission or misuse due to lack of equivalent in Vietnamese	17
Verb Tenses	Use of present simple instead of continuous, influenced by Vietnamese tenses	15

Table 2 showed that one striking grammatical challenge faced by Vietnamese EFL learners was related to prepositions. Among the 20 students observed, 17 exhibited instances of prepositional errors, highlighting the pervasive nature of this issue in the classroom. Another significant grammatical challenge was the use of verb tenses. These errors were then discussed with participants in the semi-structured interviews to understand the reasons behind these challenges. Below are five insights from their thoughts:

Participant 3 said, "*[In] Vietnamese we don't use subject-verb agreement like English does So it was a problem when I started learning English I [would] often drop the 's' sound at the end of third-person singular and I [would] say for example 'He go." instead of 'He goes.'*."

Participant 18 mentioned another grammatical error: "*One grammatical difficulty/ challenge I faced was using articles correctly. In Vietnamese, we don't have articles "một" or "cái" like 'a,' 'an,' and 'the,' so I [would] often omit them or use them incorrectly in English. It was hard to know when [necessary] to use them and which one to choose [from]*."

Participant 9 highlighted the difficulty with verb tenses: *"Vietnamese verb(s) don't/ doesn't change form(s) to indicate any tense like in English. We use adverbs or context to show when an action happens/ happened. This was a factor that often provoked me to forget to use the correct verb conjugations in English, especially for irregular verbs*."

Participant 5 shared their struggle with prepositions: "*Prepositions were a big challenge for me. [In] Vietnamese we often use postpositions or no prepositions at all, depending on the context. This led me to omit prepositions or use them incorrectly in English sentences. I would say things like 'I go school' (translated from the sentence: "tôi đi đến trường") instead of 'I go to school.'"*

Thus, the pervasiveness of grammatical errors stemming from interference with Vietnamese sentence patterns has significant implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Vietnam. It is crucial for educators to recognize this linguistic disparity and implement appropriate teaching strategies to address these challenges. This may involve incorporating targeted exercises, grammar drills, and other practical activities that can help learners overcome these obstacles and improve their English language proficiency.

These issues are attributed to the differences between the Vietnamese and English languages and structures. Vietnamese is considered an analytic language that determines the grammatical structures in the context of word orders and particles, whereas English is a synthetic language that employs inflections and auxiliaries to express grammatical categories like tense, aspect, and subject-verb agreement.

In addition, The technique of error analysis can also be useful, as it allows the teacher to identify patterns of grammatical mistakes made by Vietnamese learners and attempt to correct them through feedback. In this way, it is possible for teachers to systematically describe all these grammar difficulties and offer Vietnamese learners sufficiently many practical applications so that the influence of the first language on their second language English grammatical skills would be minimized.

3. Lexical interference

Lexical interference pertains to the influence of the L1 language on the L2 language at the level of vocabulary. For Vietnamese learners of English, this level often manifests in the form of direct translations, incorrect word choice, and the misuse of idiomatic expressions. Lexical interference can significantly hinder effective communication and create misunderstandings.

Direct translations

One common type of lexical interference observed among Vietnamese learners is the direct translation of Vietnamese words and phrases into English ones. Because of the substantial differences between the lexical systems of Vietnamese and English, Participants' translations observed in class often resulted in unidiomatic expressions. During a semi-structured interview, Participant 10 explained his experience after being informed why his word choices were inappropriate: "*Sometimes I translate Vietnamese phrases directly into English, and it sounds strange. For example, I once said 'eat photos' [translating from "ăn ảnh"] instead of 'enjoy the view.' My friends didn't understand what I meant.*"

This example illustrates how literal translations can lead to confusion and miscommunication, highlighting the challenge of lexical transfer from Vietnamese to English. Other notable examples of Vietnamese expressions that illustrate lexical interference include: "*Có công mài sắt, có ngày nên kim,*" which directly translates to "*With perseverance in sharpening iron, one day it will become a needle,*" meaning "*Where there's a will, there's a way*"; "*Như ngồi trên đống lửa,*" translated as "*Like sitting on a fire,*" meaning "*Like a cat on a hot tin roof*"; "*Đi một ngày đàng học một sàng khôn,*" meaning "*Go on a day's journey, learn a bag of wisdom,*" which translates to "*Traveling broadens your knowledge*"; "*Cười nắc nẻ,*" directly translated as "*Laughing like hiccups,*" meaning "*Laugh one's head off*"; and "*Chạy đua với thời gian,*" which translates to "*Race with time,*" meaning "*Racing against time.*"

Incorrect word choice

Another issue related to lexical interference is the incorrect choice of words due to the similarity in meaning between words in Vietnamese and English. Learners often select English words that superficially resemble Vietnamese terms but differ in nuance or usage. Participant 13 reflected in their journal, "*I often confuse 'make' and 'do' because in Vietnamese, the same word ["làm"] can mean both. I wrote 'I did a cake' instead of 'I made a cake,' and my teacher corrected me*." Such errors indicate how lexical interference can stem from the overgeneralization of L1 vocabulary rules to L2 contexts, resulting in inaccurate word usage.

Misuse of idiomatic expressions

Vietnamese learners also lack proficiency in English idioms and phrases since there are no directly equivalent idioms and phrases in the Vietnamese language. Such is the case with idioms, where the cultural and contextual differences between the two languages act as a hindrance to understanding and also proper application. During an observation session, a student used

the phrase "kick the bucket" inappropriately, leading to confusion among peers. The reflective journal of this student further elaborated: "*I thought 'kick the bucket' just meant to fail at something, but my classmates explained it actually means to die. I realized how different idioms can be between English and Vietnamese*." This example underscores the difficulty learners face in understanding and correctly applying idiomatic expressions, a form of lexical interference that stems from deep-seated cultural and linguistic differences.

Addressing lexical interference

To mitigate lexical interference, Vietnamese learners employ various adaptive strategies. One effective method is *peer correction*, where students engage in collaborative learning and correct each other's mistakes. This not only helps in identifying errors but also promotes a deeper understanding of correct usage.

Another strategy is *self-reflection*, which involves keeping reflective journals to analyze and learn from their errors. As Participant 13 noted, "*Writing down my mistakes in a journal helps me see patterns in my errors. It makes me more aware of the words I tend to misuse.*" This practice allows learners to become more aware of their common mistakes and work towards improving their language skills.

Code-switching is also a common strategy, where learners use Vietnamese for complex ideas before translating them into simpler English structures. This helps in ensuring that the core meaning of their thoughts is preserved, even if the initial translation is not entirely accurate.

By understanding and addressing lexical interference, language teachers can tailor their teaching methods to better support Vietnamese learners in overcoming these challenges. This involves emphasizing contextual learning, providing ample practice with idiomatic expressions, and fostering an environment where learners can comfortably explore and correct their lexical choices. Such an approach not only addresses the immediate issue of lexical interference but also contributes to the overall language development of the learners.

4. Influence of sociocultural context on communication

Interview data revealed that sociocultural differences between Vietnamese and English-speaking contexts significantly influenced participants' communication styles. One participant mentioned, "*In Vietnamese, it's common to use more indirect and polite language, even in casual conversations. But in English, I've noticed that people tend to be more direct, which can sometimes feel abrupt or even rude to me.*"

Observational data from classroom discussions and presentations further supported this finding. In one instance, a participant began their presentation with a lengthy, formal introduction, reflecting Vietnamese cultural norms of showing respect to the audience. However, this approach seemed out of place in the more straightforward, time-efficient context of an English classroom presentation.

Participants' reflective journals also highlighted instances where cultural differences led to communication challenges. Participant 17 wrote, "*Today, I realized that my tendency to use overly polite language in emails to my English-speaking teacher might come across as insincere or unnecessarily formal. I need to find a balance between showing respect and being more direct in my communication.*"

These findings, drawn from multiple data sources, underscore the profound influence of sociocultural factors on Vietnamese learners' English language use and communication styles. Navigating these cultural differences emerges as a significant challenge in their language learning journey.

By presenting specific examples and direct quotes from the interviews, reflective journals, and observational data, this revised version of the findings section provides stronger evidence to support the interpretations and conclusions drawn by the researchers. The integration of participants' own words and experiences lends credibility to the identified themes and patterns of language transfer among Vietnamese learners of English.

The sociocultural context holds a significant sway over an individual's communication style and preferences. In the case of Vietnamese learners of English, insights gathered from interviews conducted as part of this study brought to light the profound impact of sociocultural factors on their use of the English language. This section examines how the sociocultural backdrop shapes their perception of directness and politeness in English communication, often diverging from their deeply ingrained Vietnamese communication patterns.

Politeness and Directness: A Clash of Styles

Participants in our study consistently highlighted their experiences with the contrasting norms of directness and politeness in English compared to the deeply embedded communication patterns in the Vietnamese sociocultural context. Participant 16 shared an experience in a Vietnamese social setting, it is customary to directly ask, "Have you eaten?" as a greeting, whereas in English, such a question can be perceived as intrusive. The same with Participant 8 recounted the challenge of adapting to the more straightforward and less formal English communication style in contrast to the polite and indirect approach often used in Vietnamese business interactions.

An intriguing observation that emerged was the tendency to directly translate polite Vietnamese expressions into English, sometimes resulting in language use that was excessively formal or overly polite. In Vietnamese, specific expressions are employed to convey politeness and respect. However, when these expressions are translated verbatim into English, they can come across as unnecessarily formal, potentially disrupting the natural flow of conversation. Participant 7 recounted using phrases like "*May I kindly inquire if you might consider...*" when a simpler, more direct request would have sufficed in casual English conversations. In a professional context, another participant described their habit of using long-winded and overly polite language in emails to English-speaking colleagues, causing communication to be less efficient than necessary.

Navigating communication challenges

Vietnamese learners of English often face difficulties due to cultural differences in politeness and directness, which can lead to misunderstandings or perceptions of being distant. For instance, one participant shared that saying "I deeply appreciate your assistance" in a casual conversation, though polite, came off as overly formal. Another noted that their reserved demeanor and polite nods at social events were frequently misinterpreted by English speakers as disinterest or aloofness.

Adapting to the cultural expectations of both Vietnamese and English-speaking environments proved challenging for the participants, who highlighted the necessity of cultural sensitivity for effective cross-cultural communication. They recounted how they adjusted their tone and politeness depending on whether they were speaking to fellow Vietnamese or English speakers. Additionally, understanding the cultural backgrounds of their conversation partners was crucial, whether in business negotiations or casual interactions. These experiences underscore the importance of balancing cultural norms and adaptability in navigating diverse linguistic landscapes.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of language transfer experienced by Vietnamese learners acquiring English. This discussion section will delve deeper into the implications of these findings, aligning them with existing literature and highlighting potential strategies for mitigating negative transfer.

1. Phonology

The pronunciation challenges observed align with Kazazoğlu (2020), who found L1 interference manifested in Turkish learners' English speech patterns. The tonal structure of Vietnamese leads to consistent errors with intonation and articulation of certain English phonemes non-existent in learners' L1 (Nguyen et al., 2008). Participants reported struggling particularly with English sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/, which are absent in Vietnamese. Targeted pronunciation instruction, emphasizing these phonetic differences, could mitigate this negative transfer. Techniques such as phonetic training, minimal pair drills, and auditory discrimination exercises could be particularly beneficial.

2. Syntax and morphology

Grammatical errors noted echo patterns in Islam (2020) and Antonova-Unlu and Wei (2020). These studies revealed L1 influence on the acquisition of English verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, and word order. Specifically, Bui (2022) examined Vietnamese EFL learners' misuse of cohesive devices due to L1 interference. Our findings indicate that learners often default to Vietnamese syntactic structures, resulting in errors such as incorrect word order and tense usage. Sociocultural factors likely compound these grammatical difficulties, as Eng et al. (2020) found in their comparison of Chinese and Malaysian learners. To address

these issues, contrastive analysis of L1 and L2 structures can illuminate areas of potential difficulty, enabling educators to design targeted grammar instruction that addresses these specific challenges.

3. Lexical domain

Findings on direct L1 translation aligned with those of Erkaya (2012) and Jensen et al. (2020), who observed lexical interference in L2 vocabulary use. The tendency toward verbatim translation of idioms and phrases reflected broader cognitive patterns in semantic acquisition, which, as Comrie (2002) noted, was vulnerable to L1 influence. Participants frequently translated Vietnamese idioms directly into English, leading to phrases that were nonsensical or culturally inappropriate in English. Cultural familiarity impacts whether lexical acquisition leads to interference or facilitation. Teaching idiomatic expressions and culturally specific phrases within context, using real-life examples and scenarios, can help learners understand and appropriately use these expressions.

4. Adaptive strategies and sociocultural competency

Despite these challenges, learners demonstrated a range of adaptive strategies to mitigate the effects of L1 negative transfer. These included increased exposure to English media, peer interactions in English, and the use of language learning apps. This finding aligns with Dörnyei's (2005) motivational strategies in language learning. Dörnyei emphasized the importance of creating a learning environment that fosters motivation through engagement with authentic language materials and interactive activities. The participants' strategies of using English media and peer interactions mirror Dörnyei's approach by providing real-life contexts that enhance learning motivation. Additionally, the use of language learning apps corresponds with Dörnyei's suggestion of utilizing technological tools to make learning more accessible and engaging. Additionally, fostering sociocultural competency is crucial. Eng et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of understanding cultural contexts in language use, which our participants also highlighted as a key factor in their learning journey. Educators should integrate cultural elements into language instruction, using multimedia resources, cultural exchange programs, and context-based learning activities to enhance learners' sociocultural understanding.

5. Pedagogical issues

The findings support trends in the English Proficiency Index (2022) advocating customized instruction for Vietnamese learners to mitigate L1 interference. As Nhut (2020) suggested, future research could examine the longitudinal efficacy of targeted training in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and sociocultural competency. Implementing a curriculum that addresses the specific needs of Vietnamese learners, such as focused pronunciation drills, grammar exercises contrasting Vietnamese and English structures, and vocabulary lessons that emphasize context and usage, can significantly improve learning outcomes.

It is clear that while posing some difficulties, L1 transfer does not preclude Vietnamese learners from attaining English proficiency. By harnessing insights from recent literature, educators can

implement strategies tailored to leverage positive transfer and reduce negative effects. This facilitates an L2 learning journey grounded in the Vietnamese linguistic and cultural context, ultimately leading to more effective and meaningful language acquisition.

By integrating these strategies and insights into their teaching practices, educators can better support Vietnamese learners in overcoming the challenges posed by L1 negative transfer, thereby enhancing their overall English proficiency and confidence in using the language.

CONCLUSION

The intricacies of language transfer, especially in the context of Vietnamese learners of English, provide both educators and learners with a vast landscape of insights and challenges. This study embarked on a journey to qualitatively examine the specific manifestations of this phenomenon and its effects on the English language acquisition process.

One of the most salient findings was the prominent role that pronunciation played in the challenges faced by Vietnamese learners. The phonetic architecture of Vietnamese, which diverges significantly from English, gave rise to various mispronunciations. While these errors can impede communication to some extent, they can also serve as markers of a learner's unique linguistic identity, embodying their bilingual journey.

Grammatical differences, particularly in the realm of prepositions and verb tenses, were also prevalent. These structural challenges, while foreseeable, underscore the need for pedagogical strategies that directly address the contrastive aspects of both languages. Such an approach, rooted in contrastive analysis theory, can enable learners to anticipate potential areas of difficulty and be better prepared to navigate them (James, 1980)

Lexical interferences, notably the direct translation of idioms, highlighted the nuances and depth of language learning. It is not just about words or grammar; it is about culture, context, and the unspoken meanings that words carry with them. This aligns with the views of Byram (2009), who asserted that language teaching must be intrinsically linked to cultural education, preparing learners to be not just bilingual but also bicultural.

While this research highlighted the challenges borne from negative language transfer, it also shed light on the positive facets. Instances where Vietnamese aided in the understanding of certain English structures underscore the potential benefits of bilingualism. Such findings echo the work of researchers like Cummins (1979), who posited that SLA can be bolstered by strategically leveraging the first language.

Moreover, the proactive strategies employed by learners reflect resilience and adaptability. It suggests that with the right tools, resources, and motivation, language learners can actively mitigate the challenges posed by negative transfer. This emphasizes the importance of learner agency and the need for educators to foster an environment where students are encouraged to be proactive in their learning journey.

As we reflect on these findings, several key implications emerge for educators and curriculum developers: targeted pronunciation training is crucial, utilizing tools like phonetic charts, listening labs, and pronunciation apps to address pronunciation challenges; contrastive grammar lessons that directly address structural differences between Vietnamese and English can better prepare students to navigate the grammatical complexities of English; and encouraging cultural immersion through engagement with English media, literature, and cultural artifacts can help mitigate direct translation errors and enhance overall language proficiency.

Regarding the task of teaching languages, understanding the instances of positive language transfer is vital for language educators. It allows them to capitalize on learners' existing linguistic knowledge to facilitate the acquisition of English. Instructors can design language lessons that explicitly highlight these areas of overlap between Vietnamese and English, providing learners with a bridge to understanding and using new structures.

While the differences between Vietnamese and English present challenges for learners, positive language transfer can serve as a valuable tool for language acquisition. Recognizing the areas where Vietnamese proficiency aids in understanding and using English structures, such as classifiers and question formation, allows educators to optimize their teaching strategies. By leveraging the strengths of learners' native language, instructors can create more effective and efficient language learning experiences, ultimately enhancing the proficiency of Vietnamese learners of English.

In summary, language transfer, while complex, is a vital facet of the language-learning journey. It brings with it challenges, but also opportunities – opportunities for educators to innovate, for curriculum developers to tailor resources, and for learners to evolve and adapt. As Vietnamese learners continue their pursuit of English proficiency, insights from this study can light the way, ensuring that the path is not just about overcoming obstacles, but also about celebrating the unique bilingual tapestry they weave along the way.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are several methodological limitations in the current study that should be noted. First, the limited number of subjects, 20 Vietnamese university students, does not allow talking about the general results for all Vietnamese EFL learners. It is also significant to note that the results of the study might not be generalizable to learners of other ages or those from other regions. Second, it should be noted that, as in virtually any qualitative study, there is a possibility for the effects of researcher bias in the data gathering and analysis process. This is because the researchers' attributes might have implicitly influenced the results, despite their best intentions to remain unbiased. Last of all, the study targeted a certain age bracket of students (18-22 years) and was carried out in a certain region thus reducing the overall external validity of the study.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This qualitative study offers a foundation for future research in Vietnamese EFL. Large-scale quantitative studies could confirm its findings, and objective measurements could enhance clarity and validity. Expanding the sample to include students of various ages, genders, academic levels, learning contexts, and EFL backgrounds would provide more generalizable outcomes regarding negative L1 transfer. Future research could also explore specific challenges faced by middle and high school students, as well as targeted programs. Investigating teaching methods, instructional resources, and classroom practices aimed at mitigating L1 transfer effects on phonology, morphology, lexis, and sociocultural competencies could improve teaching and learning processes for Vietnamese learners.

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Appendix A

Research instruments

A.1 Semi-structured interview guide

Background Information:

1. Name (optional):
2. Age:
3. Years of learning English:
4. Primary reason for learning English (e.g., academic, professional, personal interest):

Main Questions:

1. Can you describe some instances where you felt your Vietnamese background influenced your English pronunciation?
2. Have you noticed patterns or recurring mistakes in your English that you believe stem from Vietnamese structures?
3. Can you recall any English expressions or sentences that you translated directly from Vietnamese and later realized were incorrect in the context?
4. How do you feel cultural differences between Vietnam and English-speaking countries influence your communication style in English?
5. Are there any aspects of English that you found easier to understand or learn because of your knowledge of Vietnamese?

A.2 Classroom observation checklist

Pronunciation:

- Mispronunciation of specific English sounds
- Use of Vietnamese tonal patterns in English sentences
- Difficulty with stress and intonation patterns in English

Grammar:

- Incorrect use of prepositions
- Misuse of English verb tenses
- Sentence structures influenced by Vietnamese patterns

Vocabulary and Idioms:

- Direct translation of Vietnamese idioms
- Misuse of English words with no direct Vietnamese equivalent

Other:

• Signs of hesitation or uncertainty in speaking
• Instances of code-switching between Vietnamese and English

A.3 Reflective journal template

Date: _____

1. Lessons Learned Today:

2. Challenges Faced:

3. Instances Where Vietnamese Influenced My English:

4. Strategies I Used to Overcome Challenges:

5. Questions or Areas of Uncertainty:

6. Feedback Received (if any):

7. Goals for the Next Session:

Appendix B

Sample reflective journal entries

Below is an example of actual entries from participants for Lexical transfer, which provide a snapshot of their daily experiences, challenges, and strategies in learning English.