

## Some Vietnamese Students' Problems with English Grammar: A Preliminary Study

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on some common problems encountered by Vietnamese learners of English with tense and aspect, particularly the simple and progressive aspects, the copula *be*, and adverb positions in verb and adjective phrases. Twenty-five first-year English majors and 47 first-year non-English majors at Kiengiang Community College in Vietnam participated in this study. The results show that the students have widespread errors in these areas of English grammar.

### Introduction

Many Vietnamese students beginning to study English have much trouble learning English grammar. One of the problems they usually have is handling English aspect. This may be because verbs are not marked for tense and aspect in Vietnamese. As a result, students usually transfer non-conjugated verbs and implied tense and aspect into English. Another problem is that they often transfer Vietnamese sentential structures into English, particularly the use of the copula and phrasal structures. They tend to string together English words using Vietnamese word order.

In this paper, I will first provide a contrastive analysis of some features of English and Vietnamese grammar, focusing on tense and aspect, the use of the copula *be*, and phrasal structures. This comparison is based on the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, which assumes that errors are "the result of transfer from learners' first language" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 79) to the second. The majority of my results confirm the prediction of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis; however, there is also some evidence against it, supporting Zobl (1980) and Kellerman (1986), who have found that not all errors can be predicted by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (as cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p. 79). Based on my results, I will discuss some implications for language teaching and learning.

### Tense and Aspect in English and Vietnamese

#### *Tense and Aspect in English*

In English, a finite verb carries both tense and aspect. The tense indicates the time in which an action occurs, present, past, or future. For example, the present tense of the verb *to bring* is *bring*, the past tense is *brought*, and the future tense is *will bring*. On the other hand, the aspect shows whether an action happens habitually, continuously, or repeatedly (Longman Group, 1995). "English has four aspects: simple (or zero aspect), progressive, perfect, and their combination, perfect progressive" (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 110). These four aspects are illustrated in the following examples:

(1)

He speaks English with his girlfriend every day. (simple)

He is speaking English with his girlfriend at the moment. (progressive)

He has spoken English with his girlfriend very often recently. (perfect)

He has been speaking English with his girlfriend for nearly three hours. (perfect progressive)

Although there is a difference between tense and aspect, according to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), it is easier to combine tense and aspect when learning English than to learn them separately.

### *Tense and Aspect in Vietnamese*

Like English, Vietnamese also has tense and aspect, but they are expressed differently. Doan (n.d.) pointed out that “In Vietnamese, verbs are not conjugated, and tense and aspect are generally understood in the context” (p. 6). Similarly, Le (1972) and Dam (2001) also stated that tense and aspect are usually implied and understood in context, even though Vietnamese has particles to mark them when needed. For example, the Vietnamese sentence *Anh ấy ngủ* [brother-there-sleep] can be translated into English as *He is sleeping, He slept, He sleeps, or He has slept*, depending on the context. When adverbial elements such as *trước đây* [ago, before] or *bây giờ* [now, at the moment] are used in the sentence, tense- and/or aspect-marking particles are generally omitted.

In fact, the distinction between tense and aspect in Vietnamese is rather complicated, and in fact controversial, compared to the case in English. Some linguists argue that Vietnamese has two tenses, past and future (marked by *đã* [past] and *sẽ* [future]), and two aspects, perfect and progressive (marked by *đã* [perfect] and *đang* [progressive]) (Panfilov, 2002). Thus, in this framework, the same particle *đã* is used for both tense and aspect while the other two particles mark either tense (*sẽ*) or aspect (*đang*).

In another description of tense and aspect in Vietnamese, Cao Xuan Hao, an influential Vietnamese linguist, argued that Vietnamese does not have tense; it only has aspect. According to Cao (1998), Vietnamese uses *đã* to mark the perfect aspect, *đang* to mark the progressive aspect, and *sẽ* to mark an uncertain state expressed by verbs expressing hopes, wishes, guesses, and conditions. Tense marking in Vietnamese, following Cao, only occurs idiomatically when these aspect markers are combined in expressions, such as *đã và đang* [in the past and present], and *đã và sẽ* [in the past and future]. These expressions are found in modern and formal Vietnamese, but not in traditional or casual Vietnamese (p. 536). In fact, to demonstrate that Vietnamese does not fit into the mold of Western languages, Cao cited a project from the 1960s on Vietnamese lin-

guistics by Bui The Khanh, who compared the correlation between the tense and aspect of Vietnamese and Russian. After one year of researching, Bui could not find any correlation of *đã* [past] or *đang* [present] between the two languages. He found, however, over 30% correlation of *sẽ* [future] in these two languages (Cao, 1998, p. 544). Cao argued that although *sẽ* correlates with the future tense, the future tense itself, after all, is only one of the uncertain states covered by *sẽ* as an aspect marker. Cao then concluded that Vietnamese does not have tense.

The confusion between tense and aspect in Vietnamese can be seen even among linguists, as can be seen in the following statement, in which the author claimed that “aspect marking particles” express “time”: “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], and *sẽ* [for future]” (Dam, 2001, emphasis added). This unclear understanding about tense and aspect by linguists resulted in misleading information about tense and aspect presented in textbooks on Vietnamese language taught in schools in Vietnam (Cao, 2004). In this paper, I adopt the framework of Cao Xuan Hao. His framework is based on a sound understanding of authentic Vietnamese rather than trying to fit Vietnamese grammar into a Western model.

According to Cao (1998), the markers *đã* and *đang* do not properly indicate *past* and *present* tenses. He illustrated this with the following examples:

- (2) *Bây giờ*      *tôi*      *đã*  
Now            I            marker  
*có*            *đủ*            *tiền*.  
have            enough            money  
'I have enough money now' (p. 548).

- (3) *Nếu*            *hai*            *tháng*       *nữa*  
If                two            months      more  
*anh*            *mới*            *độn*      *đến*  
you             new            move      arrive  
*thì*            *tôi*            *đã*  
then            I            marker

ở chỗ khác rồi.  
live place different already.  
'If you are moving in two months, I  
will have moved to another place' (p.  
548).

- (4) Hôm ấy, tôi đang  
Back then I marker  
học đệ tứ,  
study the fourth division  
còn anh đang chuẩn bị  
as for you marker prepare  
thi tú tài.  
take (exam) high school exam.  
'At that time I was attending the fourth  
division while you were preparing to  
take the high school exam' (p. 547).

- (5) Sáng mai anh nên  
morning tomorrow you should  
đến thật sớm, khi  
come really early when  
cả nhà tôi đang ngủ.  
all family I marker sleep  
'Tomorrow morning, you should come  
early when my family will be sleeping'  
(p. 549).

*Đã* in sentences (2) and (3) does not indicate actions happening in the past. *Đã* in sentence (3) expresses a state, an action, and a truth in the present while *đã* in sentence (4) expresses an action happening in the future. In addition, *đang* in sentences (4) and (5) does not express actions happening in the present. *Đang* in sentence (4) indicates actions happening in the past, and *đang* in sentence (5) denotes an action in the future. In reality, when Vietnamese speakers want to express when something happened, they use adverbs of time, such as *trước đây* [ago, before], *bây giờ* [now, at the moment], *sau này* [later, in the future] (p. 549). Do *đã* and *đang* markers always indicate past and present tenses in Vietnamese? In Cao's approach, they definitely do not. Instead, he stated that the markers *đã* and *đang* indicate aspects expressing actions with an end-point or actions with no end-point, respectively (p. 551). He emphasized that an action with an end-

point leads to the result of the state or the action. For example:

- (6) Họ đã đi đến trường.  
They marker go arrive school  
'They went to school.'
- (7) Nó đã bán cuốn sách đó.  
It marker sell book that  
'He sold that book.'

These sentences (6 and 7) express actions with an end-point that were completed in the past before the time of speaking, and they did not continue into the present. In other words, actions such as *went* and *sold* were finished already and could not happen one more time. Cao concluded that *đã* in these cases expresses an action that is complete (p. 550).

In contrast, an action with no end-point does not lead to the result of the state or action, but rather states an action that is still happening at the time of speaking. For instance:

- (8) Họ đang đi đến trường.  
They marker go arrive school  
'They are going to school.'
- (9) Nó đang bán cuốn sách đó.  
It marker sell book that  
'He is selling the book' (Cao, 1998, pp.  
551-553).

The marker *đang* in these sentences (8 and 9) expresses actions, such as *go* and *sell* that are still happening at the time of speaking. In Cao's viewpoint, these actions with no end-point are expressed by the progressive aspect (p. 551).

The following examples contrast the use of tense and aspect in English and Vietnamese:

- (10) Hôm qua tôi mua hai cuốn sách.  
Yesterday, I buy two book  
'I bought two books yesterday.'

- (11) *Anh*      *ấy*      *đang*      *ngủ.*  
 Brother    there    marker    sleep  
 'He is sleeping.'

In example 10, *hôm qua* [yesterday] in Vietnamese is the adverb of time, and it implies the past. No tense marker is needed in this sentence because adding the tense marker would result in an unnatural sounding sentence, but the verb *buy* has to be changed into *bought* in English.

In sentence 12 below, *sẽ* is used to indicate uncertainty of an event in the future.

- (12) *Trời*      *sẽ*                      *mưa*  
 Sky            marker                    rain  
 'It will rain.'

According to Cao (1998), since *sẽ* expresses unfulfilled actions or uncertainty, it is suitable to talk about the future. This does not mean that *sẽ* is a tense marker; it is an aspect marker which happens to be suitable to talk about a certain time frame.<sup>1</sup> Thus, *sẽ* can, but not always, indicate a future time frame.

### Copula in English and in Vietnamese

#### *The Copula in English*

According to Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999), the verb *to be* serves as the copula in English. It links the subject of a sentence with a predicate, which can be a noun or an adjective (p. 54). Here are two examples:

- (13) He is a professor.

- (14) Cotton is light.

Unfortunately for language learners, *be* has many forms, including *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *being*, and *been*. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), "Be, which is the most frequent verb in English, has more distinct forms with respect to person, number, and tense than any other verb in English" (p. 54).

#### *The Copula in Vietnamese*

Although Vietnamese has a word *là* that carries some of the same meaning as English *be*, it is not used in quite the same way. First, Vietnamese uses *là* when the predicate is a noun.

- (15) *Anh*      *ấy*      *là*      *bác sĩ.*  
 Brother    there    be      doctor  
 'He is a doctor'.

According to Stassen (1997), "In Vietnamese, nominal predicates strongly prefer the presence of the particle '*là*', which can be characterized as a general 'identificational marker'" (p. 87).

- (16) *Ông*      *ấy*      *là*      *lính.*  
 gentleman there be      soldier  
 'He is / was a soldier' (Stassen, 1997, p. 87).

- (17) *Tên*      *của*      *tôi*      *là*      *Nam*  
 Name of    me be      Nam  
 'My name is Nam' (Cao, 1998, p. 238).

In these cases (sentences 15, 16, and 17), the copula *be* is the main verb in Vietnamese (Diep, 2004, p. 493).

Secondly, Diep (2004) pointed out that the Vietnamese *là* is also used with possessions to indicate something that belongs to someone (p. 99). For instance:

- (18) *Quyển sách*      *này*      *là*      *của*      *tôi*  
 Book                    this    be of    I  
 'This book is mine.'

- (19) *Bây giờ,*      *ngôi nhà*      *là*  
 Now            house be  
*của*              *anh.*  
 of                you  
 'Now, the house is yours.'

Thirdly, and unlike English, Dam (2001) said "*là* is rarely used to link a subject with its predicative adjective in Vietnamese." With adjectives, *là* is usually omitted.

- (20) *Tôi đói.*  
 I hungry  
 'I am hungry.'

Diep added that the Vietnamese *là* is used with adjectives only to emphasize, confirm, or assert the meaning of the sentence in context. For example:

- (21) *Theo ý tôi, bức tranh này là đẹp.*  
 Following idea I picture  
 this be beautiful  
 'For me, this picture is beautiful.'

- (22) *Thói quen đó là tốt.*  
 Habit that be good  
 'That habit is good' (Diep, 2004, p. 105).

To summarize, in Vietnamese, *là* is used as a copula (i.e., a main verb) in the sentence to link the subject with predicate nouns, possessive phrases, and, when there is a need for emphasis, with adjectives. It is often omitted when occurring with predicate adjectives in non-emphatic contexts.

### Phrasal Structures in English and in Vietnamese

#### *Phrasal Structures in English*

Phrasal structures refer to many different ways in which languages arrange the constituents of sentences. This paper will focus on verb phrases and adjective phrases. Below are some examples:

- (23) like English very much (verb phrase)

- (24) dance beautifully (verb phrase)

- (25) very beautiful (adjective phrase)

According to English grammar rules, in verb phrases, adverbs can appear in different positions. For instance, adverbs of place, of time, of degree, or of manner come after the verb and its object, if any (Krohn, 1977, p. 21). For example:

- (26) He studies English here.

Similarly, Holschuh (1991) mentioned that adverbs of manner describe the action of the verb and are placed after the verb and the object, if any (p. 43). For example:

- (27) He does his work carefully.

Butler and Mahnke (2004) noted that adverbs of frequency usually precede the main verb. For example:

- (28) She sometimes drinks coffee.

In this paper, I will only discuss the adverb of manner, as in example (27).

In English adjective phrases, an adverb, if present, generally precedes and modifies the adjective as in example (25).

#### *Phrasal Structures in Vietnamese*

Vietnamese verb phrases and adjective phrases are constructed slightly differently from English phrases. In Vietnamese verb or adjective phrases, the adverb of manner, such as *rất* [very], *hơi* [little], may precede or follow the verb or adjective, depending on the lexical type of the adverb.<sup>2</sup> According to Diep (2004), some adverbs, such as *rất* [very], *hơi* [little], *tuyệt* [absolutely], *ực kị* [extremely], which show the degrees of the verbs or adjectives they modify, always precede the verb or adjective. For example:

- (29) *rất thích*  
 very much like  
 'like very much'

- (30) *rất đẹp*  
 very much beautiful  
 'very beautiful'

- (31) *hơi thích*  
 little like  
 'like little'

- (32) *hơi đẹp*  
 little beautiful  
 'little beautiful'

However, some adverbs, *lắm* [very], *quá* [very], which also show degrees of verbs or adjectives, always follow a verb or an adjective to express some Vietnamese people's speaking preferences (pp. 460-461). For instance:

- |      |  |                         |
|------|--|-------------------------|
| (33) | <i>thích</i><br>like<br>'like very much' | <i>lắm</i><br>very much |
| (34) | <i>mệt</i><br>tired<br>'very tired'      | <i>lắm</i><br>very much |
| (35) | <i>thích</i><br>like<br>'like very much' | <i>quá</i><br>very much |
| (36) | <i>đói</i><br>hungry<br>'very hungry'    | <i>quá</i><br>very much |

Thus, a contrast in phrasal structures between English and Vietnamese is that in English, the position of the modifier depends on whether the head of the phrase is a verb or an adjective, as well as on the type of modifier in the case of verb phrases. However, in Vietnamese, the position of the modifier depends only on the type of modifier. In some cases, the position of the modifier in verb phrases and adjective phrases in the two languages matches up well, but in some cases, the modifier is placed in opposite positions, before or after the head word in the two languages.

### Common Problems of Vietnamese Learners of English with Tense and Aspect, the Copula *be*, and Phrasal Structures

#### *Common Problems with Tense and Aspect*

Swan and Smith (2001) listed several mistakes about the simple and progressive aspects of English which many Asian students make. These errors are similar to those made by Vietnamese students. For example, they reported that many Malaysian and Indonesian students produce sentences, such as *They eat dinner tonight* instead of *They are*

*eating dinner tonight* (Swan & Smith, 2001, p. 287). Similarly, some Japanese students write sentences, such as *We are write to each other in English* instead of saying *We write to each other in English* (Swan & Smith, 2001, p. 301). Also, some Chinese learners produce sentences, such as *What do you read?* instead of the correct sentence *What are you reading?* (Swan & Smith, 2001, p. 315).

Further, according to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), students may also use the progressive aspect when the simple aspect is appropriate. For instance, *I am knowing the answer* instead of saying *I know the answer* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 121), *I am wanting to see you* instead of *I want to see you* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 122), or *I am believing you* instead of *I believe you* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 133).

The reason why many students were confused about these two aspects might be that they do not realize that stative verbs, mental perception verbs, and sensory perception verbs are not used with the progressive aspect. These students may think that an action happening at the time of speaking is progressive, which results in their mistakes.

In my thirteen years of teaching English to EFL students at Kiengiang Community College, I have realized that many Vietnamese learners have trouble with learning tense and aspect in English and make the kind of mistakes mentioned by Swan and Smith and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman. Students have problems with both the forms and the context of use for English tenses. They tend to omit the copula *be* in the progressive aspect before they add *(-ing)* to the main verb. For example, they may say *She practice English every afternoon* or *She is practice English every afternoon*, instead of *She practices English every afternoon*. They also say *He is work in the office at the moment* or *He working in the office at the moment*, instead of *He is working in the office at the moment*.

#### *Common Problems with the Copula *be**

As previously mentioned, according to Dam (2001), the copula *là, thì* can be omitted in Vietnamese when connecting a subject with an adjective. However, the copula *be* cannot

be omitted in English. In reality, many Vietnamese learners omit the required form of *be* while making English sentences. Dam illustrated this by giving some examples:

(37) *Nó đói.*  
He hungry  
\* He hungry.  
'He is hungry.'

(38) *Hôm nay con tôi ốm nặng.*  
Today child I sick heavy  
\* My child very sick today.  
'My child is very sick today.'

The following (marked with an asterisk) are my students' actual sentences:

(39) *Chị ấy đẹp.*  
Older sister there beautiful  
\* She beautiful.  
'She is beautiful.'

(40) *Anh ấy nghèo.*  
older brother there poor  
\* He poor.  
'He is poor.'

In examples (39 and 40), neither *là* nor *thì* is used in Vietnamese sentences, but the copula *be* must be present in the English equivalents. The students' English sentences are ungrammatical because they follow the Vietnamese sentential structure.

#### *Common Problems with Phrasal Structures*

Vietnamese learners seem not to have problems with the positions of adverbs in adjective phrases because they are similar in Vietnamese and English. However, the positions of adverbs in verb phrases in English and Vietnamese sentences are slightly different. If students try to apply the adjective phrase rule to some verb phrases, they will make mistakes. The following examples are very common among Vietnamese learners (see Swan and Smith [2001] for similar mistakes among Asian students of English).

(41) *Chị tôi và tôi*  
older sister I and I  
*chúng tôi rất hay đánh nhau.*  
we very often fight each other  
\* My sister and me we very often fight each other.  
'My sister and I fight each other very often' (Swan & Smith, 2001, p. 285).

(42) *Chúng tôi rất thích*  
We very like  
*thời tiết ở Hawaii*  
weather in Hawaii  
\* We very like weather in Hawaii.  
'We like the weather in Hawaii very much.'

(43) *Anh ấy rất*  
older brother there very  
*thích tiếng Anh.*  
like English  
\* He very like English.  
'He likes English very much.'

When phrasal structures are the same in Vietnamese and English, the Vietnamese influence leads learners to produce correct utterances like examples (30 and 32) with adjectives *rất* [very], *hơi* [little], *tuyệt* [absolutely]. If phrasal structures, such as adverb phrases and verb phrases in Vietnamese, differ from those in English, the Vietnamese interference leads students to produce errors as in examples (41-43).

## **The Study**

### *Background*

As mentioned above, my students often misuse the simple and progressive aspects, the copula *be*, and verb and adjective phrasal structures. Students at different levels and in different majors seemed to make English grammar mistakes at different rates. The different language proficiency levels of many Vietnamese students may come from the fact that they use different textbooks, have different types of teachers, follow different curricula, or have different levels of motivation. The biggest contrast is between English majors and non-English majors. Non-English majors study English as a re-

quired course in their academic program (e.g., business or computer science). They have only three 60-period semesters of English. They use integrated skills textbooks for non-English majors. However, their main goals in learning English are to read books and to do research related to their careers, so both teachers and students focus on grammar, reading, and vocabulary rather than on speaking and listening. On the other hand, English majors study all four skills in separate courses using different books for each. For example, when they study listening and speaking skills, they use listening and speaking skills textbooks and just focus on practicing these two skills. They have a total of five 60-period semesters to learn English. Realizing the different proficiency levels among my students, I asked both English majors and non-English majors to participate in this study.

#### *Research Questions*

Based on the literature review and my own teaching experience, the following questions were specifically formulated for this study:

1. How seriously and frequently do Vietnamese students make mistakes with English aspect, the copula *be*, and phrasal structures?
2. Is there a difference in performance between English majors and non-English majors regarding these grammar problems?
3. Is there transfer from Vietnamese to English in the students' use of the simple and progressive aspects, the copula *be*, and phrasal structures?

#### *Methodology*

##### ***Instrument***

A test (see Appendix) was designed by myself and administered by my colleague at Kiengiang Community College in Vietnam. The test consisted of two parts. The first part included ten multiple choice items that tested students on the two grammar items: the simple and progressive aspects. This part of the test used a multiple-choice format with four options per item. The mul-

tiple choice technique allowed me to score objectively and to see the students' recognition knowledge on the two aspects. However, the multiple choice technique also allows students to have a 25% chance of guessing, which means that I could not know exactly if students really understood or not. Furthermore, the multiple choice format does not show how students would use the forms in real life situations. The second part of the test was a translation task, from Vietnamese into English, with twelve sentences that tested students on their use of the copula *be* and phrasal structures. Unlike the multiple-choice section, the translation part required students to show their English language ability in use. However, the presence of the Vietnamese text may induce more transfer from the native language than other formats, such as an oral interview, might have. Since the students' level was pre-intermediate, the level of vocabulary and grammar structures was set to be simple and familiar to students.

##### ***Subjects***

Seventy-two students took the test. Among these students, 25 were first year English majors and 47 were non-English majors, majoring in computer science and business administration. There were 43 females and 29 males, ranging from twenty to thirty years of age. The students were selected because they attended classes taught by the same teacher who participated in this study. The teacher had thirteen years of English teaching experience. The test was scored by the same teacher.

##### ***Procedure***

The teacher gave the test to her classes during normal class hours. The selected students were not informed about the test in advance. Students were asked to finish the test in 30 minutes without discussion or reference materials. After the students finished the test, the teacher collected and graded the answers.

After getting the results from the teacher, I counted the number of students who chose each option for the multiple

choice items and recorded what the students wrote in the translation section.

*Findings*

***Students' Errors with the Simple and Progressive Aspects***

The sentences below are selected from the first part of the test for the analysis. An asterisk (\*) indicates the correct answer.<sup>3</sup>

Question 1. I \_\_\_\_\_ her every day and she never says hello to me.

- (a) see (\*)
- (b) am seeing
- (c) will see
- (d) am see

Question 2. What is the name of that picture which you \_\_\_\_\_ on the wall?

- (a) are look at
- (b) is looking at
- (c) are looking at (\*)
- (d) look at

Question 4. \_\_\_\_\_ every single thing which that man says?

- (a) Do you believe (\*)
- (b) Is you believing

- (c) Are you believing
- (d) Are you believe

Question 5. Sometimes I \_\_\_\_\_ what the teacher says to me.

- (a) don't understand (\*)
- (b) am not understanding
- (c) understand not
- (d) not understanding

Question 8. \_\_\_\_\_ by air because the cost of flying is very high.

- (a) I don't often travel (\*)
- (b) I'm not often traveling
- (c) I'll not often traveling
- (d) I am not often travel

Question 10. 'I \_\_\_\_\_ to remember your name but I'm afraid I can't remember it'.

- (a) try
- (b) am trying (\*)
- (c) will trying
- (d) am try

Table 1 below presents the number and percentage of students who chose each option for the first part of the test.

Table 1  
*English Majors' and Non-English Majors' Responses to the Multiple Choice Items*  
(English majors: n=25; Non-English majors: n=47)

Item number	Options							
	A		B		C		D	
	Maj.	Non-m.	Maj.	Non-m.	Maj.	Non-m.	Maj.	Non-m.
1	19*	25*	1	14	2	2	3	6
	76%	53.2%	4%	29.7%	8%	4.2%	12%	12.7%
2	7	20	0	0	13*	23*	5	4
	28%	42.5%	0%	0%	52%	48.9%	20%	8.5%
4	18*	19*	0	1	2	20	5	7
	72%	40.4%	0%	2.1%	8%	42.5%	20%	14.8%
5	20*	29*	3	14	0	1	2	3
	80%	61.7%	12%	29.7%	0%	2.1%	8%	6.3%
8	22*	17*	2	23	0	2	1	5
	88%	36.1%	8%	48.9%	0%	4.2%	4%	10.6%
10	5	8	12*	12*	0	3	8	24
	20%	17%	48%	25.5%	0%	6.3%	32%	51%

Notes. Maj.: English majors; Non-m.: Non-English majors; \*: Answer key

One observation is that the students did better on sentences containing clues, such as adverbs of frequency or adverbs of

time, which helped them realize which aspect to use. Therefore, I grouped the sentences into two types: sentences with ad-

verbs and sentences without adverbs, for analysis and discussion.

*Sentences with Adverbs of Frequency or Adverbs of Time.* Students did well on sentences 1 and 5. With question 1, 76% of English majors and 53.2% of non-English majors chose the correct answer, (A), which contains the simple form of the verb. This suggests that many students understood the difference between the simple and progressive aspects, perhaps thanks to the adverb of frequency *every day*. However, some students still chose option C, and this meant that they did not realize that the adverb *every day* is used to indicate the simple aspect. Of note, quite a few non-English majors chose option B, which contains the progressive aspect. Only one English major student chose this option, which shows that the majority of first year English majors have learned the distinction between the simple and progressive aspects.

Similarly with sentence 5, 80% of English majors and 61.7% of non-English majors chose the correct answer (A), which contains the simple aspect. This suggests that most students understood the difference between the simple and progressive aspects, maybe because of the adverb of frequency *sometimes*. However, some students, 12% of English majors and 29.7% of non-English majors, still chose option B which contains the progressive aspect. Some students chose option D, which means that they still did not have a clear idea about the form of these aspects.

*Sentences without Adverbs of Frequency or Adverbs of Time.* The results show that both English majors and non-English majors had more problems with the simple and progressive aspects when there was no adverb of frequency or time. For example, on question 2, the percentage of both English majors and non-English majors choosing the correct answer (C), the progressive aspect, was low: 52% for English majors and 48.9% for non-English majors. Twenty percent of English majors and 8.5% of non-English majors chose option D, the simple aspect, and 28% of English majors and 42.5% of non-English majors chose option A, the in-

accurate forms of the simple and progressive aspects.

English majors did well on question 4. The percentage of students choosing the correct answer (A), the simple aspect, was 72%. However, non-English majors did not understand the uses and the forms of the simple and progressive aspects well. The percentage of non-English majors choosing the correct answer (A) was low, 40.4% compared to 42.5% who chose option C, which contains the progressive aspect. Also, some students, 20% of English majors and 14.8% of non-English majors, were still confused about using the forms of the simple and progressive aspects and chose options B and D.

English majors did well on question 8, and 88% of them chose the correct answer (A), containing the simple aspect. However, non-English majors still seemed to be confused about the simple and progressive aspects because the percentage of students choosing the correct answer (A) was very low, just 36.1% compared to 48.9% who chose option B, the progressive aspect. A few students did not understand how the simple and progressive aspects are formed, so they still chose options C and D.

Finally, with question 10, both English majors and non-English majors mistook the simple aspect in option A for the correct progressive aspect in option B. The percentage of students choosing option B was very low, only 48% for English majors and 25.5% for non-English majors. Many students, 20% of English majors and 17% of non-English majors, chose option A. In addition, the number of students who chose option D, the incorrect formulations of the two aspects, was still very high, 32% for English majors and 51% for non-English majors.

In general, many students were still confused between the simple and progressive aspects when there are no clues to help them to distinguish between the two aspects. Students made fewer errors on the two aspects with the presence of these adverbs as in sentences 1 and 5. That the presence of adverbs of time and frequency influences the students' errors more or less may be

another transfer from Vietnamese, where tense and aspect are largely indicated by adverbs. Overall, that non-English majors made more mistakes than English majors was consistent with what I expected.

### **Students' Errors with the Copula Be**

The second part of the test (see Appendix) was collected and analyzed to see how use of the Vietnamese copula influenced production of *be* in English. Since my goal is to see if there is transfer from Vietnamese, I divided the sentences into two types: the first type contains Vietnamese sentences without the copula *là* or *thì*; the second type contains Vietnamese sentences with *là*, but in contexts where it cannot be translated as *be* in English.

First, many students omitted required form of *be* when translating the Vietnamese sentences into English. Below are some results of the test.

Sentence 1.

*Anh ấy rất thông minh.*

Brother there very intelligent

\* He very intelligent.

'He is very intelligent.'

Three out of 25 (12%) English majors and 11 out of 47 (23.4%) non-English majors wrote the sentence marked with (\*).

Sentence 3.

*Mặc dù cha mẹ tôi nghèo*

Although parents I poor,

*nhưng họ rất rộng lượng.*

but they very generous

\* Although my parents poor, but they very generous.

'Although my parents are poor, they are very generous.'

Seven out of 25 (28%) English majors and 18 out of 47 (38.2%) non-English majors produced the sentence marked with (\*).

Sentence 4.

*Tôi đói lắm.*

I hungry very much

\* I very hungry.

'I am very hungry.'

Four out of 25 (16%) English majors and 9 out of 47 (19.1%) non-English majors wrote the sentence marked with (\*).

Sentence 7.

*Hôm nay cô ấy mệt lắm.*

Today miss there tired very much

\*Today she very tired.

'She is very tired today.'

Three out of 25 (12%) English majors and 5 out of 47 (11.1%) non-English majors wrote the sentence marked with (\*).

In contrast, in the other type of sentence, when there was *là* in a sentence, students tended to translate *là* into the English *be* incorrectly. Seven out of 25 (28%) English majors and 18 out of 47 (38.2%) non-English majors wrote the sentence without the copula *be*.<sup>4</sup>

Sentence 12.<sup>5</sup>

*Công việc đầu tiên của tôi là*

Job first of I be

*một kỹ sư đã làm cho*

one engineer marker make give

*tôi mệt.*

I tired

\* My first job is an engineer make me boring.

'My first job as an engineer made me tired.'

Table 2 below summarizes how the Vietnamese learners omitted *be* forms when translating these sentences.

As shown in Table 2, the percentage of errors was the highest in sentence 3. The reason could be that sentence 3 is a complex sentence, consisting of 2 clauses. Thus, it is possible that L1 influence was interacting with L2 complexity in this case. The prediction from the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis may be too simplistic to account for cases like this.

Table 2  
Omission of the Copula *be*

Test sentences	Number and percentage of learners omitting the copula <i>be</i>	
	English majors (n= 25)	Non-English majors (n=47)
Sentence 1 <i>rất thông minh</i> [very intelligent]	3 12%	11 23.4%
Sentence 3 <i>rất rộng lượng</i> [very generous]	7 28%	18 38.2%
Sentence 4 <i>đói lắm</i> [very hungry]	4 16%	9 19.1%
Sentence 7 <i>mệt lắm</i> [very tired]	3 12%	5 11.1%

### Students' Errors with Phrasal Structures

For ease of reference, I divided the sentences into the adjective phrase group and the verb phrase group. The first group includes sentences 1, 3, and 4 in part 2 of the test (see Appendix). The second group includes sentences 2, 6, and 8.

For sentences with adjective phrases (English word order: modifier + adjective, Vietnamese word order: modifier + adjective or adjective + modifier, depending on the modifier's lexical features), most students placed the adverbs and adjectives correctly when the word order in the two languages matches (sentences 1, 3) as well as when the word order between the two languages does *not* match (sentence 4). Thus, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis was only partially supported by the data. Sentence 4 might exemplify an overgeneralization (Zobl, 1980, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 79) by the Vietnamese learners to place an intensifier adverb before an adjective (or verb) in their English.

Sentence 1.

*Anh      ấy      rất      thông minh.*  
Brother   there   very   intelligent

\* He very intelligent.

'He is very intelligent.'

Sentence 3.

*Mặc dù      cha mẹ      tôi      nghèo*  
Although   parents   I      poor,  
*nhưng      họ      rất      rộng lượng.*  
but      they      very      generous

\* Although my parents poor, but they very generous.

'Although my parents are poor, they are very generous.'

Sentence 4.

*Tôi      đói      lắm.*  
I      hungry      very much

\* I very hungry.

'I am very hungry.'

For sentences with verb phrases (the second group), the students made errors with verbal phrases in sentences 2, 6, and 8, all of which contain the verb *thích* [like],<sup>6</sup> perhaps because in these sentences, the adverbs precede the verbs in the original Vietnamese, unlike in English. In this case, the influence of Vietnamese on English may have led students to make errors (Table 3).

Table 3  
*Errors with the Placement of Adverbs in Verb Phrases*

Test phrases	Number and percentage of learners misplacing adverbs in verb phrases	
	English majors (n= 25)	Non-English majors (n=47)
Sentence 2 <i>rất thích chơi đàn</i> [like to play the guitar very much]	7 28%	19 40.4%
Sentence 6 <i>rất thích anh</i> [like you very much]	0 0%	10 21.2%
Sentence 8 <i>rất thích thời tiết</i> [like the weather very much]	5 25%	15 31.9%

As shown in Table 3, the percentages of errors ranged from 0% to 28% for English majors and from 21.2% to 40.4% for non-English majors. However, the high correct rate for sentence 6 among English majors might be related to the fact that the expression *rất thích anh* [like you very much] itself is more common than other two expressions. High frequency of the input has been shown to help students learn a form (e.g., N. Ellis, 2002, as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2008, pp. 219-220). The results mean that when word order in verb phrases between the two languages did not match, it might lead students to make errors. The results thus supported the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis to some extent and point to other sources of errors such as low frequency of input.

#### *Discussion*

This study focused on examining tense and aspect, especially the simple and progressive aspects, the copula *be*, and phrasal structures in Vietnamese and English. The results answer the three research questions in the following ways:

RQ1: How seriously and frequently do Vietnamese students make mistakes with English aspect, the copula *be*, and phrasal structures?

For the simple and progressive aspects, the overall finding showed that students had serious and frequent problems. However, students did better on sentences with adverbs of frequency or adverbs of time than on sentences that do not contain these ad-

verbs. Second, translating the Vietnamese copula *là, thì* was one of the major problems for the English language learners in this study. When students translated from Vietnamese into English, they usually omitted the required *be* form or inserted it when the Vietnamese original used *là*. Third, many Vietnamese students of English were confused about the positions of adverbs in verb phrases when translating Vietnamese sentences into English. They translated the sentences as if they were writing Vietnamese sentences.

The reason these students had such serious problems with these grammar points might be the lack of cues, such as adverbs of frequency or adverbs of time in some sentences, the lack of *là, thì* [copula] in the original Vietnamese sentences, and the lack of knowledge about the differences between their native language and the target language.

RQ 2: Is there a difference in performance between English majors and non-English majors regarding these grammar problems?

According to the test results, there was a difference in performance between English majors and non-English majors regarding these grammar problems. Generally, English majors did better than non-English majors, specifically on the simple and progressive aspects. The percentages of correct answers ranged from 48% to 88% for English majors and from 25.5 % to 61.7% for non-English majors (see Table 1). In addition, the percentage of English majors who made errors with the copula *be* was lower

than that of non-English majors. The percentages ranged from 12% to 28% for English majors and 11.1% to 38.2% for non-English majors. Similarly, with phrasal structures, English majors did better than non-English majors, and the percentages ranged from 0% to 28% for English majors and 21.2% to 40.4% for non-English majors. The reasons for the difference in performance might be that English majors had more class hours for English than non-English majors. In addition, the English majors' courses were substantially different from those of non-English majors and that could have contributed to the difference. Further, the language attitudes of English majors were probably different from those of non-English majors. All these speculations need further research to be confirmed.

RQ3: Is there transfer from Vietnamese to English in the simple and progressive aspects, the copula *be*, and phrasal structures?

First of all, there seemed to be transfer from Vietnamese to English in the simple and progressive aspects. Not only was transfer seen in the high rate of errors with tense and aspect, but also in the fact that, given the use of adverbs of time and frequency to indicate tense and aspect in Vietnamese, students performed better when there was an adverb of time or frequency in the sentence.

Secondly, the influence of the Vietnamese copula was definitely one of the problems among Vietnamese while they were learning English grammar. According to the test results, the percentages of the students influenced by the use of Vietnamese *là, thì* meant that the students had problems with using the correct form of the copula *be* in English. L1 influence was also seen in the students' insertion of the copula *be* in English sentences when *là* appears in Vietnamese sentences.

The last L1 influence is seen in the students' use of phrasal structures. Students did not make mistakes with adjective phrases because the positions of adverbs and adjectives in English and Vietnamese are somewhat the same. However, they had problems with verb phrases because the po-

sitions of adverbs and ordinary verbs are different in Vietnamese and English.

The findings support the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis to some extent. However, the findings also point to the limitations of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis in predicting learners' errors. In addition to L1 influence, errors may also be due to learners' overgeneralization, L2 complexity, low frequency of input, and "learners' developing knowledge of the structures of the target language" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 79).

### **Teaching Implications for Vietnamese Students at Kiengiang Community College**

Although this is a preliminary study, the results provided some insights about the frequency and nature of Vietnamese learners' errors with English tense and aspect, the copula *be*, and phrasal structures. Based on these insights, I propose some suggestions for teaching.

My first suggestion is on the simple and progressive aspects. Teachers should help students practice the two aspects in more varied contexts, such as picture descriptions, information gap activities, authentic listening activities, storytelling, and games. For example, the teacher may give students pictures of somebody's daily routine. The teacher asks them to make sentences about that person's daily activities using the simple aspect. The teacher can also ask some of them to show some pictures of their family members' daily routines to the class, and other students make sentences by using the simple aspect. Another example is to ask students to listen to some sounds on a tape and make sentences about what is happening with the sounds on the tape using the progressive aspect. The teacher can also ask some volunteers to mime some actions in front of the class, and other students make sentences about the actions using the progressive aspect. By practicing sentences in contexts such as these, students may become more aware of how to use the two aspects.

My next suggestion is to minimize the influence of the Vietnamese copula *là, thì*

and word order on English learning. Again, situated practice may help. For example, the teacher could ask students to bring photos of their families to class. Students will make sentences about members in their family photos in which they will need to use forms of *be* as well as adverbs such as *very*, *little*, and *rather* in adjective and verb phrases. For example, the teacher can ask students to look at Nam's family photo that is hung on the board and make sentences with *rather* or *little*. Students can produce sentences like *His mother is rather thin* or *His mother is a bit thin*. The teacher can ask students to translate sentences with *rất* [very], *hơi* [rather], or *thích* [like], and students can make sentences like *His father likes jogging* or *His father likes jogging very much*. Based on the sentences, the class can practice and do the same activities with other pictures in pairs or groups of three. To make students feel freer in communication, the teacher can also design a questionnaire or a table with sentences for students. Students can talk with their friends about their family members in order to practice *thì* [copula *be*] *rất* [very], *hơi* [rather] or *thích* [like], *rất thích* [like very much] in real contexts.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>According to Le (1972, p. 77), *ẽ* in this sentence indicates future *tense*.

<sup>2</sup> According to Cao (1998), most Vietnamese verbs and adjectives share similar grammatical features. However, not all verbs in Vietnamese can take a modifier of manner such as *rất* [very], *hơi* [little], *lắm* [very] as in *\*rất mua* [very buy], *\*rất đi* [very walk], or *\*rất ôm ấp* [very cuddle] while Vietnamese adjectives usually can (e.g., *rất đẹp* [very beautiful], *hơi mệt* [little tired], p. 256).

<sup>3</sup> The correct answers only reflect common language usage. For example, Option B in Question 1 is possible as an answer if it is said by a doctor about a patient who is anti-social or is not following American greeting rituals. It could also be said by the patient about the doctor.

<sup>4</sup> With English majors, two students omitted the copula *be* in the adverb clause, one student omitted the copula *be* in the main clause, and four students omitted the copula *be* in both clauses. With non-English majors, six students omitted the copula *be* in the adverb clause, three students omitted the copula *be* in the main clause, and nine students omitted the copula *be* in both clauses.

<sup>5</sup> This sentence is rather bookish, or heavily influenced by English structure. It does not appear in colloquial Vietnamese.

<sup>6</sup> This is a limitation of this study. In future research, a variety of verbs and adjectives should be used.

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## Appendix

Kiengiang Community College

English Quiz

Time allotted: 30 minutes

(Answer keys are marked with an asterisk)

Student's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of test: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

### Part I:

Choose the best answer to each of the sentences below.

1. I ..... her every day and she never says hello to me.

- (a)\* see
- (b) am seeing
- (c) will see
- (d) am see

2. What is the name of that picture which you ..... on the wall.

- (a) are look at
- (b) is looking at
- (c)\* are looking at
- (d) look at

3. .... to see that film that is on at the cinema next week?

- (a) Do you go
- (b) Is you going
- (c) Are you go
- (d)\* Are you going

4. .... every single thing which that man says?

- (a)\* Do you believe
- (b) Is you believing
- (c) Are you believing
- (d) Are you believe

5. Sometimes I ..... what the teacher says to me.

- (a)\* don't understand
- (b) am not understanding
- (c) understand not
- (d) not understanding

6. Later tonight I ..... my uncle, who is ill in hospital.

- (a) visit
- (b) am visit
- (c) are visiting
- (d)\* am visiting

7. Why ..... late every time we arrange to meet?

- (a)\* is he
- (b) he is
- (c) is he being
- (d) does he

8. .... by air because the cost of flying is very high.

- (a)\* I don't often travel
- (b) I'm not often travelling
- (c) I'll not often traveling
- (d) I am not often travel

9. Next time you ..... to my house, you must bring that book.

- (a)\* come
- (b) are come
- (c) are coming
- (d) is coming

10. I ..... to remember your name but I'm afraid I can't remember it.

- (a) try
- (b)\* am trying
- (c) will trying
- (d) am try

(Adapted from <http://www.english-test.net/esl/learn/english/grammar/ei010/esl-test.php>)

## Part II:

Translate into English

(answer keys are provided)

1. Anh ấy rất thông minh.

He is very intelligent.

2. Cô ấy rất thích chơi đàn ghi-ta.

She likes to play the guitar very much.

3. Mặc dù cha mẹ tôi nghèo nhưng họ rất rộng lượng.

Although my parents are poor, they are very generous.

4. Tôi đói lắm.

I am very hungry.

5. Anh ấy chẳng hiểu gì cả.  
He doesn't understand at all.
6. Mẹ tôi rất thích anh đấy.  
My mother likes you very much.
7. Hôm nay cô ấy mệt lắm.  
She is very tired today.
8. Tôi rất thích thời tiết ở Mỹ.  
I like the weather in the U.S. very much.
9. Anh ấy nhìn bức tranh chăm chú.  
He is looking at the picture very carefully.
10. Tôi đã gặp cô ấy rồi.  
I have met her before.
11. Anh ấy ngủ.  
He is sleeping/ he slept.
12. Công việc đầu tiên của tôi là một kỹ sư đã làm cho tôi mệt.  
My first job as an engineer made me bored.

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