

**TEMPORAL EXPRESSION ERRORS IN ENGLISH AMONG VIETNAMESE LEARNERS DUE TO FIRST LANGUAGE INTERFERENCE****Nguyen, Thi Minh Chau, PhD**

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***Abstract***

*This study investigates the errors Vietnamese speakers commonly make when expressing temporal meaning in English, particularly through the use of tense and aspect. The research is grounded in the hypothesis that such errors stem from typological differences between Vietnamese and English, as well as issues of interlingual interference. The study population consisted of Vietnamese office professionals working in business-related companies and academic institutions, where English is regularly used for instruction and communication. The analysis revealed that temporal expression errors were largely attributable to negative language transfer from Vietnamese. Additionally, the findings suggest that discrepancies in how temporal concepts are cognitively processed in Vietnamese and English contribute significantly to these errors. The study underscores the need for targeted instructional strategies to help Vietnamese learners overcome challenges in mastering English temporal structures.*

**Keywords:** Temporal Expression Errors, English, Vietnamese Learners, First Language, Interference

**INTRODUCTION**

Many Vietnamese speakers of English as a foreign language (EFL) have had much trouble with learning English grammar. One of the problems challenging them is how to correctly express the meaning of time which is seen in a particularly different light by Western and Eastern cultures. Once learners start producing their utterances, they will use verbs and therefore also tenses and aspects. The dissimilar features of temporal expression through the use of tenses and aspects in English may lead to errors in use or hereunder called *temporal errors*. In other words, temporal errors are thought of as errors made by speakers/writers when expressing the time through the misuse of grammatical devices (e.g., tenses) and lexical devices required by a particular language.

It is said that when there is a lack or no analogy in expressing the time between in English and in Vietnamese, Vietnamese speakers often express their ideas in the Vietnamese way of thinking and make sentences in the Vietnamese writing style. Additionally, the way the Vietnamese and English people think about the time could be cognitively different due to characteristics of their respective languages. These factors could lead to grammatical errors which can actually change the intended meaning of a sentence. Therefore, the study of temporal errors is critically important as it benefits in many different ways. Correct use of temporality is first thought to avoid confusion and unnecessary misunderstanding that readers may not understand when events happened. Also, employing the correct tenses and aspects will help contribute to upgrading the users' English proficiency level. It is said that the arbitrary tense

shift between past and present and vice versa due to the inconsistent use of verb tenses can be particularly irritating to readers who may conclude that the writers/speakers have failed to use

- The corresponding author

English correctly and to respect the readers. From a pedagogical perspective, linguistic errors in general and temporal errors in particular can give valuable information regarding the difficulties students have encountered when learning English so that teachers and researchers can find possible ways to help prevent errors from happening, contributing in return to getting the meaning across.

In this paper, I will first provide a contrastive analysis of features of temporality through tenses and aspects between English and Vietnamese, examine differences in language types and in cognition as causal factors of interference errors, and finally discuss some pedagogical implications for language teaching and learning toward expressing the time.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical framework

#### *Tenses and Aspects in English*

In English, a finite verb carries both a tense and an aspect. The tense indicates the time in which an action occurs at present, in the past, or in the future. According to Hackmack (2012:2), the English tenses are ‘a result of the serial application or concatenation of one or more of the parameters, including tense (either [+past] or [– past], modality (the use of such modals as *will* or *shall* in combination with [– past] used to locate the event in the future, perfect (a formation of *have* and the past participle of the main verb), and progressive (a formation of the auxiliary *be* and the present participle of the main verb)’.

On the other hand, the aspect shows whether an action happens habitually, continuously, or repeatedly. As Comrie (1985) notes, the difference between *John sang* and *John sings* in English is one of tense, whereas that between *John sings* and *John is singing* is not, but rather of aspect (p. 9). According to Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999), English has “four aspects: simple (or zero aspect), progressive, perfect, and their combination, perfect progressive” (p. 110), as illustrated in the table (1) below. With regards to classification of tenses, Huddleston and Pullum (2002:116) claims that English has a binary tense system: past [+past] marked in *-ed* and non-past [– past] marked by modal verbs. According to Pension (2005:15), there are three main tenses, including present, past and future. English has 8 tenses for Radden and Dirven (2007:207), or 12 tenses for Folse, Solomon and Smith-Palinkas (2008:41-42), Simon (2013:18) and Mai and Ha (2015:190), or 16 tenses when anterior future tenses or future in the past tenses are counted, and

Aspects Tenses	Simple	Progressive	Perfect	Perfect-progressive
Present (1)Present	(2)Present (3)Present progressive	(4) Present	Perfect Simple	progressive Perfect
Past		(5) Past simple (8) Past	(6)Past Perfect progressive	(7) Past perfect progressive

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Future (9)Future (10)Future (11)Future (12) Future Perfect simple progressive perfect progressive

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Table 1. *Tenses and Aspects in English*

for other grammarians, there are 17 tenses in the event of taking a near future tense into account. Of all, a classification of 12 tenses has always been known to Vietnamese speakers of English. This can be explained by a 12-tense system used to address the issue of expressing the time by Vietnamese EFL learners in this paper.

#### *Tenses and Aspects in Vietnamese*

Vietnamese is an isolating language with no inflectional morphology. Grammatical categories are indicated by word order (e.g., inversion of a verb and a subject or uses of interrogation) or by bringing in additional words (e.g., '*nhieu*', meaning '*many*' instead of an inflection '*-s*' in English) or by context. Vietnamese linguists in majority have argued that tenses and aspects in Vietnamese are not grammaticalized but reflected by the three mentioned ways, and there are formally more implicit signs of aspects than tenses. As Nguyen (2006) notes, Vietnamese speakers are more familiar with the notion of tense than aspect, and the time category in Vietnamese has been studied extensively, and it boils down to determining whether there is the category of tense in Vietnamese. Three mainstreams have been detected. Researchers including Bui (1952), Truong and Nguyen (1963), Nguyen and Nguyen (1998), and Panfilov (2002) claimed that Vietnamese has a category of tenses which are a universal category in language and are marked by functional words like *đã* [past marker], *đang*\* [present marker], *sẽ* [future marker] in Vietnamese. The second group of Vietnamese linguists, namely Nguyen (1977), Dinh (2001), and Diep (1992) concluded that Vietnamese has a category so called the combined tense-aspect. These linguists said that '*đã*', '*đang*', and '*sẽ*' have values of tense and aspect in a sentence. The last mainstream with the leading figure of Cao (1998) argued that Vietnamese has no tenses but aspects, and he called it '*hữu thể vô thì*' (having aspects but having no tenses). After conducting rigorous empirical research, Cao (1998) proved that '*đã*', '*đang*', and '*sẽ*' in Vietnamese do not signify a tense. This view of tenselessness was supported by other linguists like Nguyen (1996) and Nguyen (2006).

The issue of tense category in Vietnamese has still been under an ongoing debate among linguists of Vietnamese at home and overseas. Logically speaking, as Dao (2008) notes, that the framework of Cao is based on 'a sound understanding of authentic Vietnamese rather than try to fit Vietnamese grammar into a Western model' (p. 38). I also hold this view and take it as a reference for analyzing the temporal errors in this paper. It can be easily deduced that if Vietnamese does not have a category of tenses because of the lack of the grammatical devices (e.g., tenses or inflectional changes of a verb), then other means (e.g., lexical expressions of temporality) will be used to offset the lack of temporal expressions.

This research study aims to examine if the temporal expression through the use of tenses and aspects in English is the same or different from that in Vietnamese, and whether differences in temporal cognition between the Vietnamese and English people will cause negative transfer and temporal transfer errors when the Vietnamese speakers use English. This study therefore examined the following research questions:

1. What are underlying differences in temporal expressions in English and Vietnamese?
2. What interference errors challenge Vietnamese speakers when denoting the time in English due to the temporal expression differences?

### Theoretical assumptions

#### *Differences in denoting temporality in English and Vietnamese*

In order to express event time in a sentence, English uses a system of tenses, and each finite clause has a particular tense which is the determinant of denoting the time in the sentence. In contrast, Vietnamese uses contexts, time adverbs, word order, and functional words like '**đã**', '**đang**', and '**sẽ**'. Consider the following sentences:

\* **đang**: can be either a verb or a functional word as the present marker. 1)

- Anh đi **khi nào**? (When did you go?)
- 2) **Khi nào** anh đi? (When will you go?)
- 3) Ngày mai tôi **sẽ** đi Hà Nội (Tomorrow I will go to Hanoi).
- 4) Tôi **đang** xem phim. (I am watching a movie).
- 5) Tôi **đã** làm xong bài tập ngày hôm qua. (I finished the exercise yesterday).

In Vietnamese, contexts and word order help determine the tenses as used in (1) and (2). If '**khi nào**' (when) is put at the end of the sentence as in (1), the Vietnamese easily understand that the event already happened, so the past tense is used when that sentence is translated in English. In case '**khi nào**' is put at the beginning of the sentence as in (2), it is understood that the event is not yet to happen, and then the present tense is used instead. Sentence (3) which has a time adverb '**Ngày mai**' (Tomorrow) and a functional word '**sẽ**' [future marker] uses the future tense. Sentence (4) uses the present tense thanks to the functional word '**đang**' [present marker]. The use of '**hôm qua**' (yesterday) and '**đã**' [past marker] in Sentence 5 determines the past tense. Therefore, it is possible to say that '**đã**', '**đang**', and '**sẽ**' in Vietnamese to some extent have the same correspondence in expressing the time in English.

However, differences in signifying the time in English and Vietnamese abound. Firstly, the Vietnamese language does not have to follow the rules as consistently as English. For example, sentence (6a) has a time adverb '**Hôm qua**' (Yesterday) made explicitly, it will be completely unnecessary, if not unnatural, for the marker **đã** [past] to be used.

- 6a) \* **Hôm qua**, lúc tôi **đã** gặp anh, hắn **đã** đi ngang qua và **đã** vẫy tay chào.

Yesterday, when I **met** you, he **walked** past and **waved** to us.

In other words, in Vietnamese, a tense marker is usually left out if there is a time expression in the sentence or if the tense is clear from the context the marker. Therefore, '**đã**' needs omitting and implicitly understanding, and the above sentence sounds natural and is expressed as in (6b):

- 6b) **Hôm qua**, lúc tôi gặp anh, hắn đi ngang qua và vẫy tay chào.

It seems like leaving the markers out to achieve the naturalness of a sentence. This omission, however, leads to a different challenge for Vietnamese EFL learners. They are not aware of a specific tense being used, when the tense markers are not explicitly stated and available. Look at the following example:

- 7a) Hắn đi nghỉ cuối tuần.

(7a) could be translated in many different ways in English, with sentences of various tenses:

- 7b) He **went** on a weekend vacation.

- 7c) He **goes** on a weekend.  
 7d) He **will go** on a weekend vacation.  
 7e) He **has gone** on a weekend vacation.

Obviously, the lack of the markers in sentence (7a) will definitely cause confusion or even misunderstanding to native English speakers because they do not know whether the event already happened or not. This completely contrasts with the case in which the marker '**đang**', for example, is used as in (7f) *Hắn đang đi nghỉ cuối tuần*. By adding the marker '**đang**', it will be crystal clear about the current status of the holiday goer.

While the absence of the markers '**đã**', '**đang**', and '**sẽ**' causes some confusion, the presence of these markers in Vietnamese also cause substantial problems for the Vietnamese to learn English. This is because these markers themselves do not determine the tense used in a sentence (Cao, 2001). Consider the following examples:

- 8) *Hai- tháng -nữa, tôi- đã-hai mươi- tuổi- rồi.*  
 (Two- months -more, I -[past marker]- twenty- years – already).  
 I will be 20 in two months.  
 9) *Năm- ngoái, khi - lá -cây -đang- còn -xanh- thì- gốc- cây- bắt đầu-ủ -bệnh.*  
 (Year - last –when-leave -tree -[present marker]- still –green- then -root –tree- began-incubate –disease)  
 Last year when the leaves were still green, the root began to incubate a disease.  
 10) *Hôm qua khi tôi đến, anh ta đang ngủ.*  
 (Yesterday- when – I – come, he – [present marker] – sleep)  
 When I came in yesterday, he was sleeping.

Vietnamese is argued not to follow the rules as strictly as English. The presence or absence of the so-called tense markers '**đã**', '**đang**', and '**sẽ**' in Vietnamese alike poses challenges for the Vietnamese to learn English. On one hand, the tense markers sometimes help clarify the meaning, for instance, as in (7f), leading to the need for use. On the other hand, the use of these markers is not useful much because they do not help determine the time expected to be used, as in (8) when '**nữa**' denoting the future, but the past marker '**đã**' is used. Likewise, the time adverbs '**năm ngoái**' in sentence (9) and '**Hôm qua**' in (10) are used to denote the time in the past, but the present marker '**đang**' is seen. These factors can result in confusion and errors in failing to use the correct tense in the sentences.

Additional great difficulty faced by Vietnamese EFL learners comes from a disparity in the number of means of time expressions. While English has 12 tenses to express the time, Vietnamese does not have the same corresponding time pattern. Hence, when it comes to a less frequently used tense in English or a tense used to express a particular meaning, like a feeling of annoyance, or a continuing action at a particular future time as in (11a):

- 11a) *I - will - be seeing - you - soon.*  
 11b) \* *Tôi - sẽ [future]- đang [present] gặp - bạn - sớm [future adverb].*

(11b) is considered weird or unnatural in Vietnamese when '**sẽ**' [future], '**đang**' [present] and '**sớm**' [future adverb] are combinatorically used in the sentence. This problem is seen more in the complex time than in the simple or deictic time.

#### *Differences in temporal cognition between English and Vietnamese*

Differences in language types between English and Vietnamese are likely to lead to differences in temporal cognition. A noticeable difference in time cognition results from making speech



time explicit in English cognitive structure as opposed to being implicit in Vietnamese. English is fully aware of the speech time and a relationship between speech time (S) and event time (E) and makes it explicit so as to determine the appropriate tense in a sentence. In contrast, Vietnamese is not clear about speech time and a speech-event time relationship. Consider the following examples:

(37a)\* *Dad goes up the flight of stairs.*

(Cha **đi** lên cầu thang.)

(37b) *Dad is going up the flight of stairs.*

(Cha **đang đi** lên cầu thang.) (37c)

*Dad went up the flight of stairs.*

(Cha **đã đi** lên cầu thang.)

In English, sentence (37a) has a wrong tense because ‘going upstairs takes longer than speech time’ (Radden & Dirven, 2007:208), and therefore, the present tense cannot be used in this sentence. Yet, it is not the case in Vietnamese. On the other hand, in English, ‘a punctual event such as a glass breaking in my hand is shorter than the time necessary for describing it’ (ibid). Therefore, under normal circumstances in English, it cannot be expressed as in (38a) and (38b).

(38a)\* *The glass breaks in my hand.*

(Cái ly **vỡ** trong tay tôi.)

(38b) \**The glass is breaking in my hand.*

(Cái ly **đang vỡ** trong tay tôi.) (38c)

*The glass broke in my hand.*

(Cái ly **đã vỡ** trong tay tôi.)

However, in Vietnamese, sentences (38a), (38b) and (38c) are acceptable, and even the markers ‘**đang**’ in (38b) and ‘**đã**’ in (38c) respectively can be omitted without causing confusion or misunderstanding.

Additionally, in English, when it comes to the complex time, reference time (R) is also required to be explicitly stated, as illustrated as in sentence (12), schematized in Figure (1):

12). *When I got up this morning, my father had already left.*

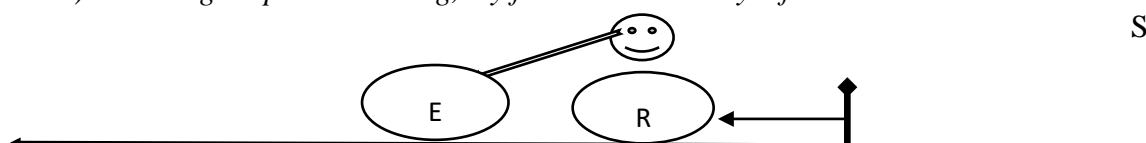


Figure 1: An example of the cognitive structure of the past perfect tense in English.

As can be seen, the viewpoint of the speaker moves to reference time (R) ‘*I got up this morning*’, and from there, backshifts the event happening before (E) ‘*my father had already left*’. At the same time, the explicitness and foreground of speech time (S) determines reference time to be past.

Nevertheless, in the Vietnamese cognitive mechanism, when back shifting the time to the past or fore shifting it to the future, speech time is not necessary to be present, and thus being moved to the background (represented by the broken line at the speech time), and having no deictic value for event time and reference time (having no horizontal arrow). As in the above example, the cognitive structure in Vietnamese is schematized as in Figure (2).

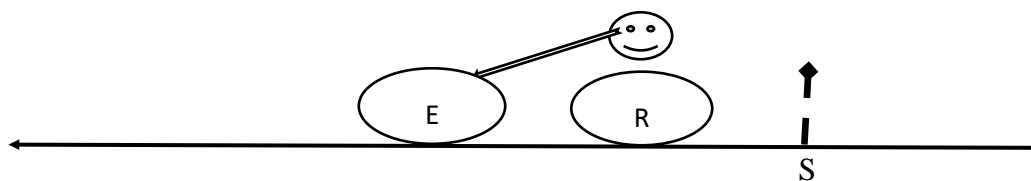


Figure 2: *An example of the cognitive structure of the past perfect tense in Vietnamese.*

Another disparity is the difference between a static-specific pattern of temporal division in English, and a dynamic-generic pattern of temporal division in Vietnamese. It is commonly agreed that the time on the linear axis of the Vietnamese, English or any other nationalities is the same, but individual nationalities divide the linear time into different frames, and they place their focus on certain, discrete points of time. This difference results from individual nationalities' traditions, cultures, and mindsets. Specifically, in the linear time axis, 'the combination of speech time, event time and reference time allows the English people to distinguish is nine patterns and eight tenses' (Radden & Dirven, 2007:207), as illustrated in Figure (3).

The system of time and tenses in English is static and unchanged. Hence, an event that falls within any temporal division of this system must be expressed by the use of tense and aspect as prescribed (except for the tense shift due to the rhetorical purposes).

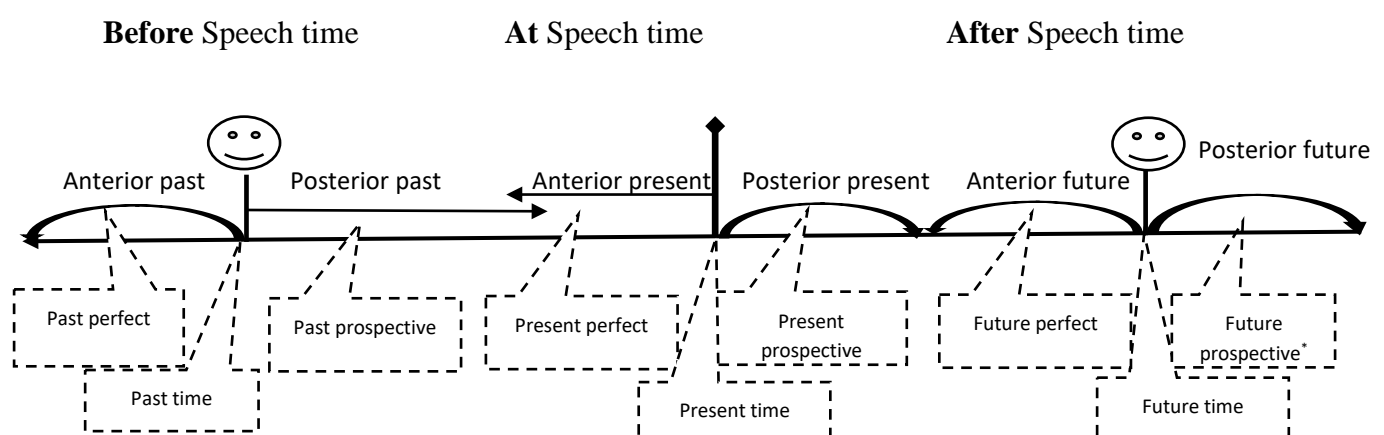


Figure 3. *The system of time and tenses in English. (Modified from Radden & Dirven, 2007)*

It is widely agreed that the Vietnamese people divide the linear time axis into past (before speech time), present (at speech time) and future (after speech time). Apart from the three big temporal divisions, the Vietnamese also have two smaller bounded time subdivisions under the

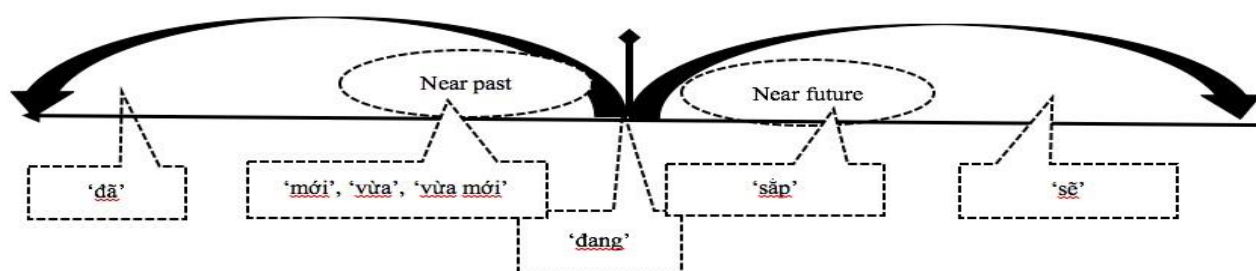


Figure 4: The time patterns in Vietnamese.

big three. Like any other languages, Vietnamese is able to express all the existing tenses of English.

It is generally agreed the presence and use of five functional words, including *đã... (rồi)* (past marker), *mới/vừa/vừa mới* (near past makers), *đang* (present marker), *sắp*<sup>\*\*</sup> (near future marker) and *sẽ*<sup>\*\*\*</sup> (future or distant future marker) are virtually similar to the use of five tenses in English, namely *past (perfect)*, *present perfect*, *present progressive*, *present prospective*, and *future simple*, respectively (Figure 4).

Interestingly enough, the Vietnamese time pattern is not static and analytically specific, but dynamic and generic. Therefore, in case speech time is backshifted to the past or foreshifted to the future, this time pattern will move its coordination to reference time and adopt a version of time in the past (Figure 5) or that of the future time (Figure 6), respectively.

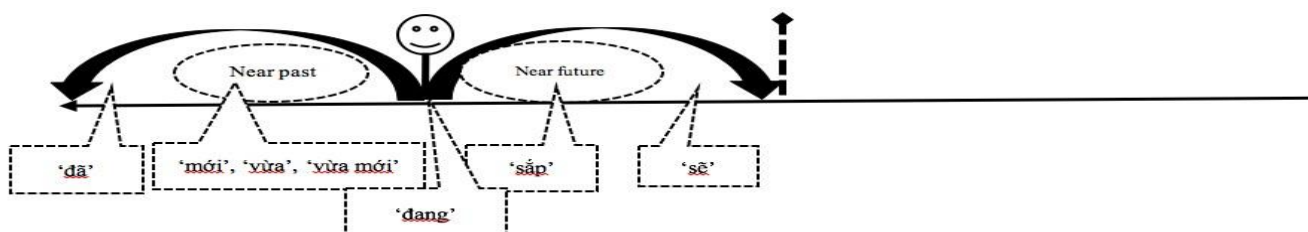


Figure 5: Vietnamese time patterns when back shifting the viewpoint to the past.

<sup>\*\*</sup> *sắp*: used for the near future time, and without having time adverbs explicitly stated. <sup>\*\*\*</sup> *sẽ*: used for the distant future time, and with having time adverbs explicitly stated.

As can be seen from Figures (5) and (6), when the viewpoint is back shifted to the past or foreshifted to the future at reference time, the Vietnamese take that reference time and consider it the

'present time' (speech time), and the time before 'this new speech time' is called the past, and the time after 'this new speech time' is called the future.



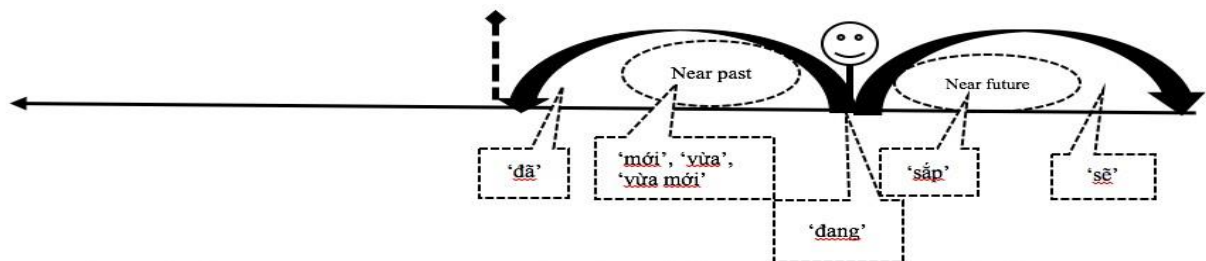


Figure 6: Vietnamese time patterns when fore shifting the viewpoint to the future.

This time shifting model also helps explain why a mix of the future and the past, or the past and the present is commonly found in Vietnamese, as illustrated in the following sentences:

(51a) *Sang năm, lúc bạn trở lại đây, tôi đang làm nhà mới.* (*đang* [present marker])

(*Next year, when you come back here, I will build a new house.*)

(51b) *Sang năm, lúc bạn trở lại đây, tôi sẽ làm nhà mới.* (*sẽ* [future marker])

(*Next year, when you come back here, I will build a new house.*)

(51c) *Sang năm, lúc bạn trở lại đây, tôi sắp làm nhà mới.* (*sắp* [near future marker])

(*Next year, when you come back here, I'm going to build a new house.*)

(51d) *Sang năm, lúc bạn trở lại đây, tôi đã làm nhà mới.* (*đã* [past marker])

(*Next year, when you come back here, I will have built a new house.*)

(51e) *Sang năm, lúc bạn trở lại đây, tôi vừa mới làm nhà mới.* (*vừa mới* [near past])

(*Next year, when you come back here, I will just have built a new house.*)

When correlating individual pairs of sentences in Vietnamese and English from (51a) to (51e), it can be seen that the sequence of time between in English and Vietnamese is different. While English requires a strict sequence of time and follows a chronological order, the Vietnamese time sequence is more dynamic, as in (51d) where '*sang năm*' (Next year) can be used with the past marker '*đã*'. Thus, the difference in time-shifting poses additional challenges for Vietnamese EFL learners who are prone to make temporal errors through the use of tenses and aspects.

#### Errors, Temporal errors and Error Analysis

It is important to distinguish *errors* from *mistakes* when conducting research in error analysis. Mistakes occur because of memory lapses, physical tiredness or psychological conditions like anxiety or nervousness, and are therefore unsystematic. According to Corder (1981), mistakes are akin to slips of the tongue, and users are able to recognize and correct them. However, errors are systematic deviations because learners do not know the correct rules of the target language, reflecting the competence of the learners.

Errors caused by the impact of the native language are called 'interlingual' errors, defined as 'those caused by the influence of the learners' mother tongue on the production of the target language in presumably those areas where languages clearly differ' (Schachter & CelceMurcia, 1977:443). The interference of the learners' native language has been proven in many studies to be a significant course of ESL learners' errors. Still, there are other errors caused by the effect of the target language itself, called intralingual errors.

In this paper, the errors under examination are temporal errors due to using wrong tenses and aspects of the main verbs in English under the interference of Vietnamese, and from differences in temporal cognition between the Vietnamese and English. This study does not cover errors due to the omission of the 's' for the third person singular subject, orthographic errors, misformation of tenses or incomplete application of tenses.

This study is based on Corder's (1981) error analysis model that consists of five steps: error collection, identification, description, explanation, and evaluation. Error evaluation step, however, is thought to require the researcher to apply a particular research methodology, and so it is not for this study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Participants*

Participants in this study include Vietnamese EFL speakers working for domestic and international companies in Vietnam, freelancers, university teachers and students of subjects other than English. These participants were concluded to graduate from the universities that required their graduate students to demonstrate an international standardized test score of no lower than a band 6.0 out of 9.0 in the IELTS test or an equivalent to be certified as EFL speakers of Upper-Intermediate level. The survey results showed that these participants use English in their work on a daily basis.

### *Procedures of data collection and analysis*

A variety of tense exercises was used in order to achieve the participants' consistency in test behaviors. First, a set of 100-question exercises of multiple-choice and gap-filling were designed in form of a link, using Google Forms application and sent online to 50 target participants who were expected to complete the exercises within 120 minutes. Also, a 60minute writing task was emailed to the participants who had to write letter of their interest in which all 12 tenses had been expected to be used. The result was a collection of 30 participants' responses from the multiple-choice and gap-filling, with a total of 3000 answers, and 20 full letters from the participants.

Specifically, the result of the multiple-choice exercises named SMC01 and DMC03 was received directly and available displayed on Google Forms. Concerning the gap-fill exercises labeled SFL02 and DFL04, the result was also shown on Google Forms. Actually, these gapfill exercises involved a little writing, potentially leading to some spelling or orthographic errors or inconsistent letter-written errors, but such errors were processed and not regarded as errors in this study, as aforementioned.

Regarding the letter writing, 20 full letters were received from the study participants. The tenses used from the letters were highlighted and then all the letters were sent to two separate native English professors who proofread and checked if there was any misuse of the tenses and aspects. It was concluded that the feedback from the two professors was virtually the same.

**RESULTS***Findings from the multiple choice and gap fill exercises*

Vietnamese EFL speakers made errors with less frequently used tenses and aspects, like progressive and perfect, and a combination of progressive and perfect. The highest number of errors made by Vietnamese EFL speakers was errors about the use of past or future tense combined with progressive-perfect aspects, accounting for 83,33% each.

The finding also revealed that errors for gap-fill exercises were higher than those of multiple choice, with 441 errors out of 1500 answers (or 29, 40%) and 734 errors out of 1500 answers (or 48,93%), respectively. This can be explained that the gap-fill exercises require the speakers to cognitively determine the time for individual events. This also reflects the speakers' competence and thinking about expressing the time in English, and this is also negatively influenced by the Vietnamese language's interference when the Vietnamese speakers have applied the same strategies for learning the English language.

*Findings from the writing letter exercise*

The results from writing letters showed that Vietnamese EFL learners tended to make errors in expressing the time through the use of less frequently used tenses and aspects like progressive perfect future (65%) and progressive perfect past (45,45%). Interestingly enough, every single letter missed one tense and aspect or another, but the three common tenses, including simple present, simple past and simple future were used in all letters. This issue can be because these three simple tenses are expressed in a more or less similar way in Vietnamese. As Nguyen (2009) notes, the Vietnamese people can distinguish events in the past, present and future, respectively.

The preliminary results also showed that all the letters were made with errors, with an average of 2 errors per letter. The most common error was the past simple tense (making up 21,6%), which the present perfect tense should have been used instead.

**DISCUSSION**

This study focused on examining factors leading to temporal errors through the use of English tenses and aspects made by Vietnamese EFL speakers. Holmes (2009) states, although some errors result from conceptual transfer, most errors occur as a result of learners' applying the semantics and syntax of their mother tongue within the scope of the target language. Considering the time, differences in language types between English and Vietnamese and in return differences in thinking prompt negative interferences and errors of temporality.

The result showed that Vietnamese EFL learners made many errors in expressing the time through the use of tenses and aspects. Of the tenses, the present perfect tense challenged them the most. This is demonstrated in the sentences extracted from the survey:

(1) A: *Why can't you wash your dirty plates sometimes? You leave them in the sink most of the time.*

B: *OK, sorry. The last few weeks I \_\_\_\_\_ (have) so little time. I \_\_\_\_\_ (rush) around all the time. (Question 14, DFL04).*

(B: *OK, sorry. The last few weeks I have had so little time. I have been rushing around all the time).*

(2). He \_\_\_\_ (**read**) three books by the same author in the last month (Question 1, SMC01)

(He **has read** three books by the same author in the last month).

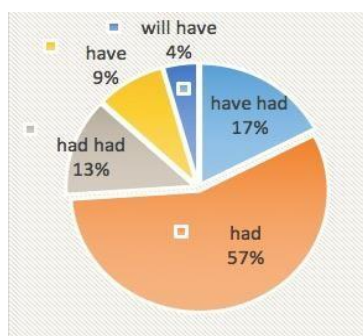


Figure 7a for (1)

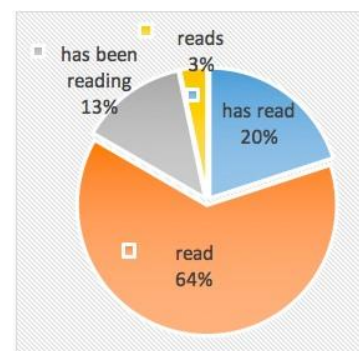


Figure 7b for (2)

Figures 7a for (1) and 7b for (2) show Vietnamese EFL learners have had difficulty in using the present perfect tense correctly. Specifically, for Sentence (1), only 17% of the participants used the present perfect tense correctly, and 20% of them used the correct tense in Sentence (2). That more than half of the participants used the simple past tense reflects that the participants misused or failed to distinguish between the past simple and the present perfect. This can be because of the Vietnamese's interference when Vietnamese EFL learners saw the word '*last*', which signifies completion of the action, and hence a past tense should be used. As can be seen from 7a for (1) and 7b for (2), it is worth noting here that other tenses were also used in sentences (1) and (2). They include present simple, future simple, present perfect progressive and even past perfect. This happens because in some cases, a sentence in Vietnamese can be expressed by different sentences with the use of different tenses and aspects in English. It is flexibility, arbitrariness, and implicitness in expressing and understanding of the Vietnamese language that causes Vietnamese EFL learners to make errors in using the right tense and aspect to express the time in English.

The findings also showed that Vietnamese EFL learners made temporal errors through the wrong use of aspects of perfect and progressive. Consider the sentences extracted from the exercises and illustrated in Figure 8:

(3) She has been wearing a special brace on her back for the last five days. Needless to say, she \_\_(**not, be**) able to play volleyball since her injury. (Question 16, DMC03). (She has been wearing a special brace on her back for the last five days. Needless to say, she **hasn't been** able to play volleyball since her injury).

(4) I'm very tired. I \_\_\_\_ over four hundred miles today. (Question 5, SMC01)  
A. drive B. am driving C. have driven **D. have been driving** (5) A: What did Angela say to you?

B: She asked me how to use a computer. She \_\_\_\_ (**never, use**) it before, so she \_\_\_\_ (not, know) what to do. (Question 11, DFL04)

(B: She asked me how to use a computer. She **had never used** it before, so she didn't know what to do).

(6) *Emma went into the sitting room. It was empty, but the television was still on. Someone \_\_\_\_ (**watch**) it.* (Question 18, SFL02)

*(Emma went into the sitting room. It was empty, but the television was still on. Someone **had been watching** it).*

(7) *By the time he comes, we \_\_\_\_ (**already, leave**). (Question 7, SFL02) (By the time he comes, we **will have already left**).*

(8) *When our parents get married, I \_\_\_\_ (sing) professionally for over a year. (Questions 9, SFL02)*

*(When our parents get married, I **will have been singing** professionally for over a year).*

This aforementioned kind of error can be explained that when there is no equivalent of expressing the time in between English and Vietnamese, or the use of less frequent tenses in English such as past perfect progressive, future perfect or future perfect progressive tenses (Figure 8), the rate of errors, according to the survey result, is higher, accounting for 80%, 80%, and 87%, respectively.

Another factor causing temporal errors made by Vietnamese EFL learners is due to differences in temporal cognition in Vietnamese and English. In an English sentence, even time is perceived in relation to speech time, and it must involve in three components: speech time (S),

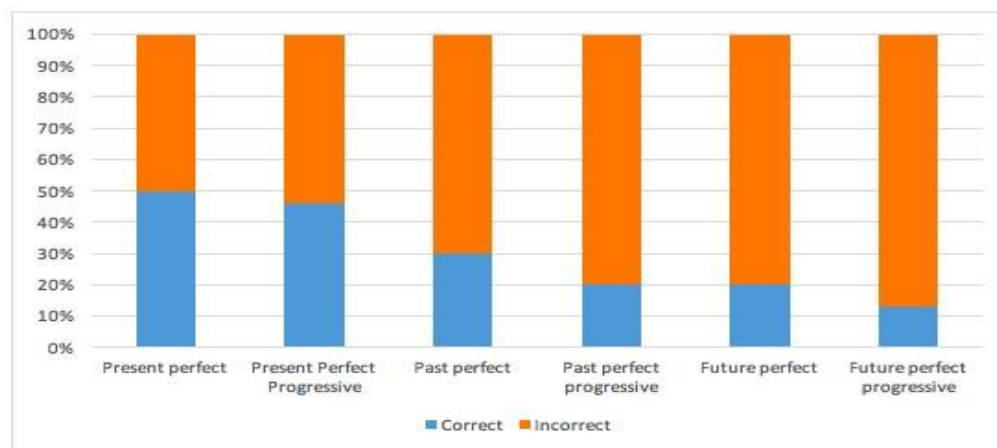


Figure 8. Errors through the use of perfect, progressive, and perfect progressive aspects.

event time (E), and reference time (R). However, in Vietnamese, when backshifting to the past or foreshifting to the future, speech time is not explicitly stated and not compulsory, and it hence has no effect on reference time. In other words, there is no full interaction between S-ER, causing Vietnamese EFL learners to make errors in expressing the time in English. Following are some sentences extracted from the letter writing exercise. (V.E. means Vietnamese English, and B.E. stands for British English)

(1) V.E. *I **stop** writing here. I wish you all the best, my sister.* (Letter 09HOR) B.E. *I **will stop** writing here. I wish you all the best, my sister.*

(David Sinkinson [Ed.], 31/3/2020)

(2) V.E. *Although we **never met** before, you made me feel close with you.* (Letter 18DuH)



B.E. *Although we **had never met** before, you made me feel close with you.* (David Sinkinson [Ed.], 31/3/2020)

(3). V.E. *What's even worse is that I **already bought** my ticket to Da Nang next month.* (Letter 10HOR)

B.E. *What's even worse is that I **have already bought** my ticket to Da Nang next month.* (David Sinkinson [Ed.], 31/3/2020)

(4). V. E. *Do you have any idea about what is the best way to go there? I **heard** the bus may be a little dangerous. What do you think of the traffic here?* (Letter 11HOR) B.E. *Do you have any idea about what is the best way to go there? I **have heard** the bus may be a little dangerous. What do you think of the traffic here?* (David Sinkinson [Ed.], 31/3/2020)

In (1), the speaker looks at the upcoming event of 'stopping writing' from speech time (the present tense), and reference time in this case is the future time, so '***will stop***' should be used. However, Vietnamese EFL learners move the whole time pattern (as in Figure 6 above) to the future, and tend to merge reference time (future time in this case) into speech time when shifting the time, and thus '***stop***' is used, and this leads to making temporal errors. In sentence (2), reference time is the anterior past as the speaker backshifted to the past to talk about an action happening prior to another action in the past, so the past perfect tense (***had met***) should be used. In contrast, when backshifting the time to the past, the Vietnamese EFL learners move the whole time pattern (as in Figure 5 above) and keep the same past simple tense (***met***), and this causes them to make temporal errors. In sentences (3) and (4), to express an action happening in the past, but its effect remains in the present or the action is likely to happen in the future, it is the anterior present (or the present perfect tense) that is used. This is, however, not the same way as the Vietnamese people think. The way of expressing the past (e.g., using the markers '***đã***' or '***đã rồi***', or using no markers when the time is explicitly stated) is chosen to be used in Vietnamese to talk about the past time, consequently, '***bought***' as in (3) and '***heard***' as in (4) are used. The conviction is stronger when sentence (3) has a lexical factor '***already***', meaning '***(đã) ... rồi***' in Vietnamese, making the Vietnamese EFL learners think the action already happened and completed.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study of temporal errors by Vietnamese EFL speakers has a limited population. This is due in part to the intentional selection of target participants who actually use English in their daily work to best meet the purpose of the study. This study used a variety of exercises under the guidance and support from the native speakers, allowing the researcher to collect the most reliable and authentic data and in return measuring the participants' consistency in their testing behavior. Also, this study could hardly investigate the Vietnamese ESL speakers' minds and thinking process of choosing to use this tense and aspect, instead of other tenses and aspects), but rather make hypothesis, deduction, and tentative conclusions, based on differences in English and Vietnamese that causes Vietnamese EFL learners to make errors.

Although this is a preliminary study, the results provided useful insights on reasons why Vietnamese EFL learners make errors about the temporal cognition and expression through the use of tenses and aspects in English. The study helped shed light on and conclude that the way Vietnamese people express the time and have a temporal cognition is different from that in

English. This can be explained by differences in language types and interference of the Vietnamese language in acquiring English. Therefore, it is tremendously helpful for foreign language learners to be explained the way to express the time in the target systematically, cognitively motivated as well as raise awareness of speech time in order to avoid merging it into event time. Instead of teaching students ‘*đã*’, ‘*đang*’, ‘*sẽ*’ as the markers indicating the time, the students need to be explained, compared similarities and contrast differences in the time pattern of being dynamic in Vietnamese and that of being static and strictly rule-governed in English. Also, the proximity versus distance meanings of the tenses are to be found in the use of temporal relations, a cognitive approach which focuses on the meaningfulness of grammar should be incorporated into construing the temporal meaning through the use of tenses and aspects.

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