

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE EFFECTS OF MOTHER TONGUE ON VIETNAMESE FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS’ WRITING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This research focused on finding the patterns of mother tongue interference in written English of first-year English-majored students at University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi as well as discovering effective methods to mitigate them. It analyzed how much students are affected by Vietnamese, their mother tongue in terms of grammar, vocabulary and sentence conjunctions. The researcher examined 84 students’ questionnaire and interviewed 9 random students. From the data collected, it can be seen that most students’ writings consisted of grammatical inaccuracies related to Vietnamese writing habits. Conversely, the frequency of lexical mistakes was quite low. In terms of sentence conjunctions, most students still forgot to use a comma before certain linking words. Based on the findings, it is advisable for students to ameliorate the Vietnamese influences by familiarizing themselves with native speakers’ thinking system with several tools such as books, TV shows and forums.

Keywords: mother tongue, first language, interference, English-majored students

Abbreviations:

FANBOYS: For, and, nor, but, or, yet, so

FELTE: Faculty of English Language Teacher Education

ULIS: University of Languages and International Studies

PART I: INTRODUCTION

1. Statement of the problem and rationale for the study

Learning foreign languages is a must in this era of globalization. Among acknowledged languages, English is the largest one by the number of speakers with the estimation of over 1.5 billion individuals worldwide (World Economic Forum, 2015). In Vietnam, a developing nation in Southeast Asia, English is the most common foreign language.

In general education, particularly primary schools and secondary schools, though there is a considerable increase in the quantities and the qualities of English-learning students, it is undoubted that writing skills have yet to be put emphasis. The current format of the English exam required to enroll in a university does not include writing paragraphs/essays. Moreover, the limited amount of time for English-teaching at school is believed to prevent teachers from teaching their students how to write in English properly (Ur, 1999). Therefore, writing seems to be the weakest among four macro-skills to most Vietnamese students.

As a consequence, on becoming a freshman, plenty of students are still involved in a great number of errors. To illustrate, the instructors are believed to detect manifold inaccuracies varying from spelling to sentence structure in their writing assignments. Those mistakes seem to emerge from the influence of Vietnamese, their first language.

This project is expected to find out the level of effect Vietnamese writing habits have on first-year students from FELTE. Thus, measures to ameliorate the problems stand more chances of being feasible.

2. Research purposes

The objectives of this study are:

[1] To identify some influences of mother tongue on Writing English skills among English-major first-year students at ULIS.

[2] To propose solutions to tackle the disruptive influences of first language on Writing English skills based on the findings of this study.

3. Significance of the study

With this study, the researcher expected to gain insights into the patterns of Vietnamese influences on first-year students at FELTE, ULIS during academic writing, as perceived by the students themselves. Once completed, the research would serve as a source of reference for those who wish to have a more precise look at the effects of Vietnamese on English language writings of first-year students and to exploit it in more appropriate ways. More importantly, the findings are primary resource for subsequent researchers in designing programs or courses of treatment to improve the situation on a larger and more practical scale.

4. Scope of the study

The participants of our research were 84 first-year students chosen randomly from four classes of Faculty of English Language Teacher Education, University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

These students all completed 1 semesters at FELTE, ULIS with compulsory language-practicing courses. They were expected to be at B1+/B2 level of English Proficiency at the time our research was conducted.

First-year students were chosen because they had more than a semester to reflect on their mother tongue interference errors and achieve self-improvements. In addition, during the 2nd semester, they were assigned to writing academic paragraphs and essays, which demands their skills of using academic language to be as efficient as possible. All things considered, this group of subjects is ideally suited with the research purposes, which are to examine some native language interference, their origins, their levels, and their negative effects as well as finding out some appropriate methods to alleviate the inaccuracies.

Our study was carried out from November 2021 to January 2022. It would have been ideal for stretching the scope of this study to cover more cases in Faculty of English Language Teacher Education at the University of Languages and International Studies. However, for the limitation of available resources and time, this study was only conducted among 84 first-year students randomly selected from Faculty of English Language Teacher Education in the University of Languages and International Studies. This study was also only conducted under the perspective of students.

5. Method of the study

To thoroughly support this study, the researchers decided to use mixed methods.

5.1. Quantitative method

There was a questionnaire (survey) with the participation of 84 random FELTE freshmen. The questions concentrated on the Vietnamese influences in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence conjunctions with diverse answer methods (from short answer to multiple choice). After collecting all survey responses from selected students, the researchers grouped the answers to each question into five tables. The first three tables were based on types of Vietnamese influences: grammar, vocabulary, and sentence conjunctions. It was to take a detailed look at each type of interference to find out which one was dominant among the three. The two last tables, on the other hand, were based on the groups of respondents: with and without an English proficiency certificate. Although at semester 2, FELTE first-year students are all expected to be at B1+/B2 level, according to the researchers' daily observation, it seemed that there were some students had not yet reached it. Therefore, two last tables would provide more direct insights into the relation between levels of English proficiency and Vietnamese interference on English writing. Overall, the quantitative method, accompanied by the support of questionnaire reflects the quantity of the analysed objects. Since the time for conducting this research was quite limited, using questionnaire was an effective method.

5.2. Qualitative method

The researcher believed that the quantity cannot fully reflect the reality of the results. Some participants might be reluctant to respond carefully and honestly. Therefore, it would be ideal for the qualitative method to be the partner of the quantitative one. To comprehensively analyse the overview of the topic, the researchers approved the use of interview. It could be ensured that their answers are objective and trustworthy to themselves because of unexpected questions. All nine interviewees were selected entirely randomly. There were four major questions used by the interviewers:

[1] Do you often make the mistakes included in your response in writing exercises that you do at home, with enough time to prepare and review or in writing tests under time pressure?

[2] Could you recognize your inaccuracies yourself?

[3] Do your teachers and classmates point out those influences for you during peer-checking and marking activities?

[4] Do you follow any methods to alleviate the Vietnamese influences in English language writings?

Researcher intended to figure out whether time limitation was a factor affecting students' writing skills through the first question. Two following ones were to identify students' abilities to detect the Vietnamese influences with peers and teachers' assistance. The final question was to suggest effective ways to ameliorate mother tongue interference to perfect FELTE first-years' English writing skills.

PART II: LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Key constructs

Because of the vagueness of “mother tongue” term, some researchers believe that meanings of this term vary according to the intended usage of the word (Pokorn, 2005).

According to Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1989), *mother tongue* has the following meanings:

1. The language learned from the mother.
2. The first language (L1) learned, irrespective of "from whom."
3. The stronger language at any time of life.
4. The mother tongue of the area or country (e.g., Byelorussian in Byelorussia).
5. The language most used by a person.
6. The language to which a person has the more positive attitude and affection.

Bloomfield (1994) defined a *first language*, *native language* or *mother/father/parent tongue* (also known as *arterial language* or *L1*) as a language that one has been exposed to from birth.

Davies (2003) stated that *native language/mother tongue* refers to the language of one's ethnic group rather than one's first language in some countries.

In our research, *mother tongue/first language/native language* is understood as the language a person uses in their daily life, therefore, is most familiar with. That is the combination of Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson's #5 definition and Bloomfield's claim. Instead of using previous definitions, the researchers made a decision to combine some of them. Because Vietnamese is officially the national language, as guaranteed in the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam despite the co-existence of 54 ethnic

groups nationwide. Therefore, no matter which ethnic group one belongs to, he/she must use Vietnamese on a regular basis and be familiar with it.

2. Literature gaps

There are already detailed studies on interferences of mother tongue in the English writings of Vietnamese students, such as “Some influences of Vietnamese writing habits on English academic writing by students at Vietnam National University” (Phan, 2014). The students’ inaccuracies she scrutinized include the habit of putting the subordinate clause before the dependent one and the adverbial phrase at the beginning of the sentence as well as using inappropriate vocabulary due to translating word by word. Those are the typical mistakes that we also intend to examine. However, some of her subjects were from University of Natural Sciences and University of Social Sciences and Humanities, which means their majors were not English Language.

Moreover, Do from College of Foreign Languages, Hue University also carried out extensive research in 2011. She presented her work in an article named “Some influences of Vietnamese writing habits on English academic writing by Vietnamese students at universities.” She illustrated some errors in the students’ styles, as a result of their dream to have their assignments or products appreciated by the instructors, or published on articles. The typical one is the high tendency of arranging the adverbial clauses prior to the main one, or at the beginning of the sentences. Despite being acceptable in informal writing, it is considered not highly academic on that excessive writing style. However, this research only put an emphasis on the seniors of College of Foreign Languages, Hue, and the writing section in an end-term examination. In an exam, there is insufficient time to preview the work, and the research was conducted 9 years ago, which is out of date currently.

In conclusion, both those two researchers focused mostly on grammar-related issues, and their studies are somehow out of date. Moreover, to the extent of our knowledge, none of the local researchers have carried out a study on a similar topic on English-majored first-year students at University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. My research is expected to fill this gap of time and subjects as well as examining some more influences regarding sentence link that were not included in their studies.

=> Research questions:

[1] How does Vietnamese affect subjects’ English writing skills ?

[2] Is there any possible way for FELTE freshmen to mitigate mother tongue interference in their English language writing?

PART III: FINDINGS

1. Questionnaire analysis

1.1. Based on types of influences

Table 1: The percentage of respondents who were influenced by Vietnamese in terms of GRAMMAR

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Not sure
Question 1	5.95	45.24	40.48	7.14	1.19	0.00
Question 2	1.19	40.48	44.05	7.14	2.38	4.76
Question 3	7.14	51.20	35.71	5.95	0.00	0.00
Question 4	1.19	2.38	14.29	34.52	46.43	1.19

As can be seen from Table 1, second-year students are strongly affected by Vietnamese writing routines in terms of grammar. The rate of students whose responses were “Always” and “Often” when asked about how frequently they put the subordinate clause before the main one was more than 51%. Those of putting the adverbial clauses of time and condition before the main ones were 41.67% and 58.34%, respectively. Finally, only 3.57% of the survey respondents used the Vietnamese past form instead of the actual English phrases (Eg: “I did go” instead of “I went”). A large number of students occasionally put the subordinate, time, and conditional clauses prior to the main ones. However, 80.95% reported as rarely or never translated the Vietnamese past form of expression into English. A small number of students were not able to recognize their routines, which resulted in their “Not sure” answers.

Table 2: The percentage of respondents who were influenced by Vietnamese in terms of VOCABULARY

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Not sure
Question 1	1.19	5.95	51.20	36.90	2.38	2.38
Question 2	0.00	1.19	13.10	26.19	57.14	2.38

As can be seen from Table 2, very few first-year students got confused by the meaning of Vietnamese synonyms when expressing their ideas in English. For instance, only 7.14% struggled to find the difference between “nice play” and “fair play”. However, 51.2% occasionally had difficulty in detecting the dissimilarity. When it came to mistake in terms of word order (Eg: “the red hat” and “the hat red”), the rate of “Always” and “Often” answers was only 1.19% in total. 83.33% of the respondents were able to avoid this mistake. Nevertheless, a small number of freshmen filling in the questionnaire did not pay much attention to their writings, as they selected the “Not sure” option.

Table 3: The percentage of respondents who were influenced by Vietnamese in terms of SENTENCE CONJUNCTIONS

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Not sure
Question 1	7.14	14.29	30.95	29.76	14.29	3.57
Question 2	1.19	4.76	4.76	25.00	64.29	0.00

As can be seen from Table 3, only a minority of first-year students from FELTE (21.43%) regularly forgot to use a comma before the conjunctions of the FANBOYS group. Regarding making a complex sentence with “However...but” or “Because...so”, the rate of “Always” and “Often” responses was even only 5.95% in total. Specifically, 64.29% never made this mistake.

1.2. Based on groups of respondents

Table 4: The percentage of respondents with English proficiency certificates who were influenced by Vietnamese

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Not sure
Question 1	3.33	36.67	53.34	3.33	3.33	0.00
Question 2	0.00	33.33	53.34	10.00	0.00	3.33
Question 3	6.67	53.33	40.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Question 4	0.00	6.67	10.00	43.33	40.00	0.00
Question 5	0.00	0.00	33.33	50.00	13.34	3.33
Question 6	0.00	3.33	0.00	30.00	63.34	3.33
Question 7	3.33	10.00	36.67	33.33	13.34	3.33
Question 8	3.33	6.67	3.33	23.33	63.33	0.00

From table 4, it is obvious that in general, first-year students who obtained a B2-level English proficiency certificate were less affected by Vietnamese writing habits. The strongest influences consisted of putting the subordinate, time, and conditional clauses before the main ones. Very few students found themselves always making these mistakes. On the other hand, a majority never or rarely were affected by three Vietnamese writing routines which are using the Vietnamese past form instead of the actual English phrase (Eg: “I did go” instead of “I went”), getting confused by Vietnamese synonyms in English (“nice play” and “fair play”) and using both “Because...so” and “However...but” in one sentence.

Table 5: The percentage of respondents without English proficiency certificates who were influenced by Vietnamese

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Not sure
Question 1	7.40	50.00	33.33	9.27	0.00	0.00

Question 2	1.85	46.30	38.88	5.56	1.85	5.56
Question 3	7.41	50.00	33.33	9.26	0.00	0.00
Question 4	1.86	0.00	16.66	29.62	50.00	1.86
Question 5	1.86	9.26	38.88	29.62	18.52	1.86
Question 6	0.00	0.00	20.37	24.07	53.70	1.86
Question 7	9.26	16.67	27.78	27.78	14.81	3.70
Question 8	0.00	3.70	5.56	25.93	64.81	0.00

From table 5, it can be seen that students who had not obtained an English Proficiency Certificate had a high tendency to put the adverbial clauses of time and condition prior to the main ones. However, a majority of them rarely or even never applied the Vietnamese past form into English sentences, made mistakes in terms of word order (Eg: “the hat red” instead of “the red hat”), and used both “However...but” or “Because...so” in one sentence. In comparison, second-year students who had obtained an English Proficiency certificate were less affected by Vietnamese writing habits in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and sentence conjunctions. The analysis based on groups of respondents indicates that in students at B1+/B2 level of English proficiency, the influence of Vietnamese was less frequent.

2. Interview analysis

First of all, the majority of respondents agreed that their inaccuracies in writings often appeared in writing tests under time pressure due to the insufficient time to prepare and review. An interviewee, however, claimed that the first drafts of his writing assignments contained grammatical errors which were influenced by Vietnamese writing habits rather than in tests or exams due to his concentration on producing ideas. In addition, most students admitted that they were not aware of the Vietnamese influence errors. Only two students responded that they were able to detect a few of their own mistakes.

Answers to the third question proved the helpfulness of academic assistance in class. Most interviewees reported that their teachers often pointed out the influences for them. On the

other hand, peer-feedback was believed to be less effective than expected by all interviewees. It could be explained as most of the students did not have enough capabilities to detect the Vietnamese influences. The responses to the first three questions indicated that in general, the students were highly influenced by their mother tongue and lacked the abilities to find the inaccuracies in their and their classmates' writings.

However, several measures for FELTE freshmen to mitigate Vietnamese influence in English language writings were suggested by the interviewees. The students who were less affected by Vietnamese writing routines reported that they usually learned English via reliable websites such as “phrases.co.uk” and “thefreedictionary.com”. They also formed a habit of constantly watching TV shows and reading books in English to get more familiar with native speakers' thinking process. Specifically, one student who obtained an IELTS Certificate with writing score of 7.0 in 2020 declared that he wrote paragraphs and essays about social topics and shared them via major websites on a regular basis.

PART IV: DISCUSSION

The findings helped the researchers to find out the answers to two intended research questions.

1. How Vietnamese writing habits affect subjects' English writing skills

Vietnamese writing habits affect first-year English-majored students in terms of grammar, vocabulary and sentence conjunctions. Specifically, grammar-related inaccuracies such as putting the subordinate clause prior to the main one was proven to be the most commonly made mistakes. The rates of students who found themselves making mistakes in terms of word choice, word order and sentence conjunctions were much lower. The data gathered from questionnaire responses and interviews indicated that at B1+/B2 level of English Proficiency, most of FELTE freshmen could avoid basic mistakes like making a sentence with “However...but” or “Because...so”. It is also noteworthy that when in an examination room and experiencing time pressure, first-year English-majored students make mistakes caused by native language interference much more often.

2. Appropriate methods for FELTE first-year students to mitigate mother tongue interference in their English language writing

Every English learner, especially FELTE freshmen knows for sure that to alleviate the influences of Vietnamese writing habits, it is a must to think in English instead of their mother tongue. However, not everyone knows how to train themselves to think in English. Fortunately, the researchers are able to suggest several measures after interviewing some of the questionnaire respondents and discuss with them in-depth about their learning routines. The students who said they rarely or even never made the mistakes included in the questionnaire claimed that they built a habit of watching TV shows and reading books in English on a regular basis to familiarize themselves with native speakers' thinking process. Broadening self-knowledge of vocabulary and idioms with the help of reliable and helpful websites such as "phrases.co.uk" and "thefreedictionary.com" is another problem-solving approach. Last but not least, writing skills need to be cultivated in other environments outside school. Therefore, students should try to write in English as much as possible instead of only writing to complete their assignments. A daily habit of sharing thoughts and information via social networkingsites will boost students' abilities to use English in the written form.

PART V: IMPLICATIONS

Although all the researcher put all his efforts into conducting this study, the appearance of mistakes is inevitable. There are several reasons for that unwanted result:

- [1] The amount of time for carrying out this research was quite limited.
- [2] The researcher was only able to work with subjects from 4/20 classes from FELTE, ULIS.

Due to all reasons mentioned above, researchers who aim at examining the Vietnamese interference in English language writing in the future can fill the gap of my research by investigating on a larger and more practical scale, or into other influences that were not scrutinized in my investigation.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: THEQUESTIONNAIRE

I. Subject's information

1. Name:
2. Class:
3. Email address:

II. Please answer the following questions:

1. Were you:
 - A. A student who majored in English at a specialized school ? (Eg: Foreign Language Specialized School, HNUE High School, provincial gifted high schools, etc.)
 - B. A student whose major was not English at a specialized school ?
 - C. Going to a non-specialized school ?
 - D. Others

2. What are your English proficiency certificate and your **WRITING** score ? When did you obtain your certificate ? (Eg: IELTS Certificate 7.5 - 2018). If you haven't got one, write N/A. (Note: DO NOT answer the OVERALL score)

III. Choose the options that are most suitable for yourself

Section A: Grammar

1. How often do you put the subordinate clause before the main clause when WRITING ? (Eg: When we study in primary schools, we can have wonderful memories with friends.)

A. Never	B. Rarely	C. Sometimes
D. Often	E. Always	F. Unsure

2. How often do you put the adverbial clause of TIME before the main clause when WRITING ? (Eg: At the same time, the teacher should be a facilitator in the learning process of students.)

A. Never	B. Rarely	C. Sometimes
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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SAMPLE

Interviewer: Shall we begin ?

Subject X: Sure.

Interviewer: Your response to our questionnaire says that you weren't going to a specialized school, and you got an IELTS Certificate with the writing score of 7.0 in 2020. Is that true ?

Subject X: Yeah, it's true.

Interviewer: It also indicates that you find yourself highly influenced by Vietnamese writing habits in terms of grammar such as putting the subordinate clause before the main clause. I want to know if you often make these mistakes in writing exercises that you do at home, with enough time to prepare and review or in writing tests under time pressure.

Subject X: Those influences are usually found in the first drafts of my writing assignments. That's because at that time, I tend to focus more on the ideas than on the grammar. I take a look at my writing assignments before writing the second drafts and correct my mistakes, so usually things go quite well at this stage. That's how I do writing exercises at home. When it comes to tests and exams, I try my best to make things right at the first time.

Interviewer: So that means you usually recognize your own mistakes and correct them when writing draft 2.

Subject X: Yeah, you got it.

Interviewer: Have your classmates and teachers ever pointed out those inaccuracies for you during peer-check or marking ?

Subject X: They usually don't. My teachers often give comments when I make mistakes in terms of tenses or word choices. Probably because those influences of Vietnamese writing habits don't appear in the final versions I submit.

Interviewer: Have you ever found the interference we mention in our questionnaire in your peers' writings ?

Subject X: According to my memory, my friends don't make mistakes in terms of word choice and word order. However, sometimes they forget to use a comma before FANBOYS.

Interviewer: Well, have you ever detected any other influence in yourself and your classmates ?

Subject X: My peers have a tendency to directly translate idioms into English instead of using the ones native speakers use. Rather than that I see no interference.

Interviewer: Could you please give me an example ?

Subject X: Many of my friends use the phrase “polish one’s name” when they mean “đánh bóng tên tuổi”, which is a direct translation.

Interviewer: You told me that you usually try to self-correct before writing draft 2. Do you have any other way to mitigate the Vietnamese influences ?

Subject X: I spend a lot of time on “phrases.co.uk” and “thefreedictionary.com” to broaden my own knowledge. When I’m stuck I try to express my ideas in other ways, sometimes longer than the actual English idiom. For instance, I use the phrase “bolster one’s reputation” when I mean “đánh bóng tên tuổi”.

Interviewer: Do you often watch English TV shows ? I’m asking because some researchers claim that watching English TV shows helps you to think more like the natives.

Subject X: News program is the only TV show I watch that isn’t in English.

Interviewer: Are those programs related to your personal interests such as sports, music, economics and politics or do you watch them to cultivate your listening skills ?

Subject X: They’re the programs of my interests.

Interviewer: Do you read books on a regular basis ? If so, what’s your favorite type ?

Subject X: I read quite a lot, about one book per month. Most of them are non-fiction. My go-to books are those about history and politics.

Interviewer: Is there another environment for you to use English in the written form besides classes such as a part-time job ?

Subject X: Yes, there is. I usually write stuff on Reddit. I haven’t got a part-time job, but when I do, I’m pretty sure writing will be involved.

Interviewer: That was the last question. Thank you so much for your time and contribution to our survey.

Subject X: You’re welcome.

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