Analyzing Some Persistent Errors in English Made by Vietnamese Speakers

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Language educators distinguish two types of errors found in the interlanguages of language learners: developmental and interference. While developmental errors reflect a normal pattern of development common among all language learners, interference errors are caused by the learners' native languages. This paper deals with a number of persistent types of interference errors in English made by Vietnamese speakers, who were either former students of mine at the University of Saigon (1965-1975) or Vietnamese American writers whose articles I was asked to edit in the last 20 years or so. It should be noted that these students and writers were all learners of English as a foreign or second language. I will share my analysis of these particular errors and then make a recommendation on how to help Vietnamese speakers overcome these errors.

Some types of persistent errors in English made by Vietnamese speakers

It appears that these errors tend to occur when the syntactical structures of Vietnamese and English are strikingly different. In the scope of this paper, I will analyze the errors Vietnamese speakers persistently make in the following areas of English, which involve the handling of (1) linking verb "be" before adjectives, (2) indefinite and definite articles, (3) complicated verb tenses, (4) subject pronouns and object pronouns, and (5) complex sentences introduced by subordinate conjunctions.

Sentences containing errors are preceded by a pound sign (#), glosses of Vietnamese terms are kept inside square brackets ([ ]), and examples in both languages are inside quotation marks.

(1) Linking verb

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

"Nó đói"

[He hungry]

"He is hungry."

"Giáo-sư Smith thông-minh vô cùng."

[Professor Smith intelligent without end]

"Professor Smith is extremely intelligent."

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

"My child very sick today."

" Our elderly parents not happy to be away from Vietnam."

(2) Articles

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

" His dream is to become lawyer, not teacher."

" The exhausted man went to the bed without eating dinner."

" We truly hope that we will hear a good news soon."

(3) Verb tenses

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):

"Hắn đã gặp một bạn cũ tuần rồi."

[He past-marker meet one friend old week just past]

"He met an old friend last week."

"Ông thầy đang dạy cú-pháp tiếng Việt."

[Mr. teacher present-marker teach syntax language Viet]

"The teacher is teaching Vietnamese syntax."

"Khi có thì-giờ tôi sẽ thăm bác tôi tại Houston."

[When have time I future-marker visit father's older brother my in Houston]

"When I am free, I will visit my uncle in Houston."

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

"We live in California since 1975."

" I really wish I can speak English like you."

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

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

(4) Subject pronouns and object pronouns

In English complex sentences, subordinate clauses, like main clauses, must have subjects and verbs. In a similar situation,

however, the subordinate clause in Vietnamese usually does not require a subject:

"Cha tôi làm việc cho đến khi xỉu."

[Father my past-marker do work until faint]

"My father worked until he fainted."

"Nếu không có việc làm, họ sẽ không có đồ ăn."

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

"If they do not have jobs, they will not have food."

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

" My father worked until fainted."

" If not have jobs, they will not have food."

In Vietnamese sentences, direct object pronouns are frequently "understood":

"Người đàn-ông ấy vô-lễ lắm nên không ai ưa."

[Person man that impolite very so nobody likes]

"That man is very impolite, so nobody likes him."

" Tặng bạn máy hình này. Tôi mua ở Nhật đấy!"

[Give friend machine picture this. I buy in Japan you know]

"This camera is for you. I bought it in Japan, you know."

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

"That man is very impolite, so nobody likes."

"This camera is for you. I bought in Japan, you know."

(5) Complex sentences introduced by subordinate conjunctions

English commonly begins a complex sentence with its subordinate clause led by a conjunction like "because,"

"although," "if," "even if," and so on. The main clause of the sentence then follows:

"Because he was reckless, he caused a terrible accident."

"Although my parents are poor, they are quite generous."

"If you did that thing, I would hate you."

"Even if she had time, she would not want to see you!"

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

"Vì nó cẩu-thả NÊN nó đã gây ra một tai-nạn khủng-khiếp."

[Because he reckless SO he past-marker cause an accident terrible]

"Because he was reckless, so he caused a terrible accident."

"Tuy song thân tôi nghèo NHƯNG họ khá hào-phóng."

[Although parents my poor BUT they quite generous]

"Although my parents are poor, but they are quite generous."

"Nếu anh làm chuyện đó THÌ tôi sẽ ghét anh."

[If you do matter that THEN I would hate you]

"If you did that thing, then I would hate you."

"Ngay cả nếu có thì-giờ nàng CŨNG không muốn thấy anh!"

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

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

The reality of mother-tongue influence

The types of persistent interference errors made by Vietnamese speakers in English analyzed above do not appear to support the claim by some linguists that mother-tongue interference is negligible in interlanguage. This observation about undeniable mother-tongue influence is also shared by the authors of articles in a book covering 19 language backgrounds edited by Michael Swan and Bernard Smith (1987) entitled *Learner English.* It is a practical reference book which compares the relevant features of the students' own languages with English, helping teachers predict and understand the problems their students have. About the book's specialist contributors , Swan and Smith commented that:

> They are all clearly convinced that the interlanguages of the learners they are discussing are specific and distinct (so that it makes sense to talk about Thai English, Japanese English, Greek English and so on); and they all obviously see mother-tongue influence as accounting for many of the characteristic problems they described. (p. xi).

Expressing the same belief, Lily Wong Fillmore and Catherine Snow (2000) wrote in their paper entitled *What Teachers Need To Know About Language*:

> The native Chinese speaker who treats plurals and past tenses as optional rather than obligatory in English is reflecting the rules of Chinese. Of course such a learner needs to learn how to produce grammatical English sentences. But understanding the variety of structures that different languages and dialects use to show

> meaning, including grammatical meaning such as plurality or past tense, can help teachers see the logic behind the errors of their students who are learning English. (p. 15).

It is now obvious that merely exposing learners to language is not enough and that a more form-focused approach is needed, because activities focusing on message alone are inadequate to help learners develop an accurate knowledge of the target language (Robinson, 1996; Dekeyser, 1998). I believe this form-focused approach is crucial when the structures of the target language and the learners' native one differ the most. In this situation, global "acquisition" activities are much less effective than analytic "learning" activities, which involve a conscious manipulation of language rules.

Intervention, sensitization, and consciousness-raising

Intervention by teachers is critical, as Fillmore and Snow (2000) cogently argued, "In order to teach effectively, teachers need to know which language problems will resolve themselves with time and which need attention and intervention" (p.7) in reaction to the fact that "over the past two decades, some teacher education programs and in-service workshops have suggested that there is no need to teach English directly" (p.24).

Sensitization (or using features of the learners' first language to help them understand the second) and consciousness-raising (or helping the learners by drawing attention to features of the second language) are effective ways for instructional intervention (Cook, 2001). Ever enthused about explicit grammar teaching, the author of *Second Language Learning And Language Teaching* confided:

> The French subjunctive was explained to me at school not just to give me academic knowledge of the facts of French, but to help me to write French. After a period of absorption, this conscious rule was supposed to become part of my unconscious ability to use the language. (p. 41).

A five-step instructional intervention

Suppose you have noted that some of your Vietnamese-speaking students keep using the simple present tense instead of the present perfect tense to express an action that took place in the past but still continues at the moment of speaking (# "I am here since last week"), even though they have been exposed to the present perfect tense ("I have been here since last week") on numerous occasions. To help these students overcome this interference error in tense usage, you will do well by implementing the following five-step instructional intervention involving sensitization, consciousness-raising, practice, and rule-making:

Step 1

Lining up learners' output and standard counterpart:

(A) I am here since last week.

(B) I have been here since last week.

Step 2

Sensitization:

Inform the learners that sentence (A) reflects Vietnamese syntax, is a word-for-word translation from Vietnamese (Tôi ở đây từ tuần qua) into English, and therefore must be corrected.

Step 3

Consciousness-raising:

Ask students to look at sentence (B) and see how the verb form differs from that in sentence (A). Tell them that the verb "am" in sentence (A) is in the simple present tense, and that the verb "have been" in sentence (B) is in the present perfect tense. Remind them how the present perfect tense is formed (have / has + past participle of main verb) and used (to express an action that took place in the past but still continues at the moment of speaking).

Step 4

Practice:

Show learners additional sentences containing the present perfect tense, such as "John has been here since this morning" and "Our parents have lived in Texas for many years." Have them produce sentences of their own, using the present perfect tense correctly.

Step 5

Rule-making:

Help learners make a rule whereby they can form and use the present perfect tense in English, based on what they have consciously learned and successfully practiced. Check on their use of this tense periodically. Remember that old habits die hard!

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