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VERB FORM ERRORS MADE BY NON-ENGLISH MAJOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN VIETNAM

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Abstract

This research aims at examining the most common types of errors in using English verbs made by students in EFL (English as a foreign language) classes. Hereby, it is conducted to help students become better aware of using English verbs and contribute to creating a positive learning atmosphere at school. In addition, this current study aims to make some recommendations to help EFL teachers in schools have a more holistic view of students' mistakes so that they can apply more effective error correction methods. In order to achieve its objectives, the researcher intentionally asked students to write a letter to send to her in the first lesson of the semester from which verb-related errors that students made were identified. After analysing the errors, suggestions are proposed to help students overcome and limit errors. The research is conducted based on the viewpoints of modern linguists. The main method used is qualitative and data were collected from students' writing and classroom observation.

Keywords: EFL classes, English verbs, Errors, Error Correction

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Introduction

It can be said that grammar is one of the important elements of a language, and is sometimes defined as “the arrangement of words together to form correct sentences”. However, numerous English learners do not realize the importance of learning grammar because they think that communication can still be successful even when there are grammatical errors. In fact, this is only true in simple everyday communication situations, but for more complex situations or in writing, making grammatical errors can be a big problem and hinder communication. To date, there have been a lot of books, articles, and in-depth studies on grammatical errors conducted on native speakers, and users of English as a foreign language or second language, which have contributed to proving the necessity of studying errors. With regard to grammatical errors, those in verb forms are very common among English learners. As an EFL learner and also an EFL teacher for many years, I have realized that English verbs are always a big obstacle for Vietnamese learners because English verbs have the characteristic of “derivative” form of words, especially verbs.

Another feature of Vietnamese grammar is that people often use time adverbs which signals the time of the verb such as “đã (already), chưa (not yet), đang (in progress), sẽ (will)” when expressing the state of verbs. However, English expresses actions through changes in the structure and the appearance of derivative forms of verbs, not to mention the agreement between subjects and verbs. According to English teachers who were asked, although they have spent a lot of time helping their students to identify and practice verb forms including tenses, active and passive forms, their students still make many mistakes and errors in verb forms. This can be explained by the significant differences between the two languages in terms of word structure and formation. Therefore, an investigation into students' most common errors and implications in teaching and learning English Verb tenses will be of great contribution to the field.

Literature Review

Definitions of Errors

Corder (1986) believes that errors are deviations from grammar and violations of language usage rules and cultural conventions. Learners not only do not recognize their own errors but cannot also correct them when

the errors are pointed out. Errors show the learners' lack of communication ability in the perception and evaluation of native speakers and bilinguals. Errors are caused by empty, ambiguous meanings and are the direct cause of misunderstandings or communication disruptions. The presence of errors in interlingual communication often leads to conflicts or culture shock. Corder believes that errors are not only made by foreign language learners but also by native speakers when learning their mother tongue.

Dulay and Burt (1974) argue that errors are similar to other bad habits. They are bad manifestations that hinder effective language learning and they are factors that prevent the formation of target language habits. However, in reality, this theory, although it can partly explain errors, is still not completely accurate or cannot predict all the difficulties that learners encounter in the learning process because learners often tend to make incorrect inferences about the rules of the target language rather than relying entirely on the habits of their mother tongue.

Above, I have presented some general features of Corder's way of perceiving errors. To understand this issue more specifically, I would like to present Corder's error analysis and approach to errors.

Classification of Errors

According to Corder, there are two types of errors. The first is the error caused by confusion (referred to as mistake) and the error due to lack of knowledge (referred to as error). Mistakes appear due to psychological factors such as stuttering, anxiety, emotion or due to physical factors such as fatigue or illness. This kind of error appear randomly, irregularly, and unsystematically. The second is one caused by lack of knowledge and it appears due to limited knowledge of the language being learned and is repeated many times and systematically. However, for this type of error, foreign language learners do not know that they are making an error because it is part of an "intermediate language" (interlanguage). The intermediary language always changes during the process of learners acquiring and approaching the target language.

Errors from Different Perspectives

According to behaviourism, humans are organisms capable of performing a variety of behaviours that appear depend on three important factors in the learning process including stimulation to create a response,

reinforcement to confirm the appropriateness of the response, and repetition of the response in the future to form a habit. Learning a foreign language is also a type of habit formation. According to this theory, errors are considered a nuisance, unacceptable, and must be prevented at all costs. If these errors are accepted, it is very dangerous because it has a negative impact on learning, so teachers need to let students focus on imitating and memorizing the form or expression of the patterns, then try to apply those patterns skilfully into their mind.

According to psycholinguists, in reality, the learning process cannot be simply one-way of imitating, where there is a stimulus and there is a response, but it is a process influenced by both internal and external factors. After conducting research, linguistic psychologists have discovered that pre-pubescent children make a lot of creative mistakes in the process of learning their mother tongue, meaning that at the beginning stage of learning their mother tongue, children usually create sentences that are completely different from the sentences that adults want them to follow. In their research, Dulay and Burt (1974) discovered that learners often make more mistakes in the process of learning a second or foreign language. These mistakes are similar to the ones children often make in the process of acquiring their first language.

From the perspective of interlingual communication, three main factors are required in the communication process known as language knowledge, communication skills, and cultural understanding. These aspects help speakers know how to choose the appropriate communication code in specific communication contexts and create conditions for them to decode information accurately in each communication situation. In interlingual communication, language knowledge is the fundamental factor, while communication skills and cultural understanding play a decisive role in understanding both the meaning and significance of the information received. Learners make language errors if they lack understanding of the target language. Learners can also make errors when listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the target language if their interactional skills are poor. Lack of understanding the target language's culture makes it difficult for learners to avoid making cross-cultural pragmatic errors.

Related Research

Considered an important element in a clause, English verbs are a familiar topic of research both within the country and oversea. Ngoan (2004) studied the role of modal verbs in language behaviours. Rahayu et. Al (2025) conducted a survey of Indonesian postgraduate students' in-text citations. The results indicated that most reporting verbs were shown in the present tense and the students tended to endorse a source by using the words "state," "mention," and "explain" most frequently.

Corder (1986), one of the linguists who made great contributions to the field of error analysis, affirmed: "all learners can make mistakes" [p. 256]. In fact, the issue of making mistakes and errors in using English has been of interest to many linguists, researchers, learners, and teachers worldwide in general and in Vietnam in particular. Up to now, there have been a series of studies, books, and articles related to this issue.

Regarding errors in using English, Fitikites (1961) published the book "Common mistakes in English", in which the author listed the types of errors that English learners often make. The author also affirmed that making mistakes is inevitable, even for those who use English as their first language.

Nigel (1995) pointed out in his dictionary of common grammatical errors "ABC of common grammatical errors" that grammatical errors are often made by English learners at different language levels.

In Vietnam, Chau (2001) conducted a study on "Analysis of common English errors of students of the College of Economics and Business Administration" and made recommendations for teaching English at schools. Giang and Khuong (2014) examined negative transfers of cognitive non-factive modal verbs from English into Vietnamese, providing useful insights for learners of English and especially Vietnamese learners of English.

As can be seen, research on errors as well as verbs in English are not scarce. However, there has been little research that has investigated the types of errors in the use of English verbs by tertiary students in the Vietnamese context. Therefore, conducting an investigation on errors in verb forms among students at a university in Danang will be very practical.

Methodology

Participants

200 second year students from Vietnam-Korea University of Information and Communication Technology, the University of Danang were chosen to be the subjects of this study. All of them do not major in the English language subject, which means that they are studying the majors of Information and technology and have only basic knowledge of English.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Number of participants	Years of learning English	Level	Major at university	Geographical origin
200	9-12	Pre-intermediate and intermediate	Information and technology, Computer science	Urban, rural and highlands

Data Collection and Analysis

Theoretically, there are several different methods for data collection. As mentioned above, the study aimed to investigate common verb form errors and propose some solutions to overcome the problem. Therefore, data collection came from two main different sources namely students' writing and classroom observation.

The students were first asked to answer the questions about their expectation before starting the new English course. There are 5 guided questions and 1 open-ended option for the students to express themselves in English. After being collected, students' writing samples were analysed so that verb form errors can be identified. These errors were then summarized, classified, and illustrated in percentages.

After the frequency of errors from students' writing had been revealed, I conducted ten observations of the class in which the students were studying. I organized different error correction methods for students to participate namely Teacher correction, Self-correction, Teacher's error simulation, and Peer correction. By giving students opportunities to approach as many correction techniques as possible, I intend to see how

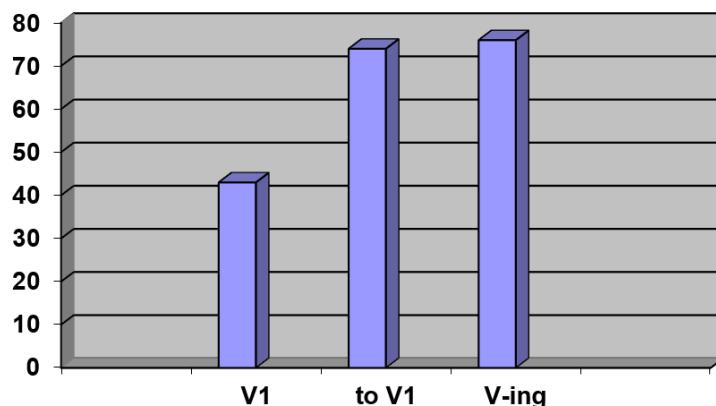
students react to the error correction methods being used and whether these methods are effective or not in helping students' learning.

Findings and Discussion

Students' Common Errors in English Verb Form

The results of the analysis of the collected data show that a large number of students still make many mistakes when using English verb forms. Of course, the data cannot fully reveal the actual situation of English learning at universities in Vietnam, but the data has helped teachers recognize a significant number of grammatical errors. To be specific, 76% of students make mistakes in gerunds and present participles (V-ing), which is a surprising result while they have been familiar with this grammar since their final years of secondary and high school. The second most frequent error is recorded in the infinitive verb form with "to" (to V1) (74%). The infinitive verb form without "to" (V1) is still a big challenge for the students, although the error rate is somewhat lower, at 42%.

Figure. Frequency of English Verb Form Errors



Verb Form Errors with "V-ing"

In English, a verb is added "ing" when it is in the continuous tense structure and comes after the verb "be". In addition, it can be placed at the beginning of the sentence as the subject or right after the preposition and some verbs. However, a large number of students do not have a firm grasp of the following usages. This phenomenon can be explained by the highest percentage (76%) of all errors compiled. The following is a detailed list of errors surrounding the verb form adding "ing":

Table 2. Summary of Errors with “V-ing”

Error Types	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Direct object for a verb	174	25.1%
Direct object for a preposition	227	32.8%
Subject	290	42.1%
Total	691	100%

As mentioned, a verb at the beginning of a sentence can have many derivative forms depending on its function in the sentence, which makes it difficult for EFL learners. One of the characteristics of verbs in English is that they can become nouns by adding “ing”, also known as gerunds. Meanwhile, Vietnamese has fixed adverbs at the beginning of noun phrases such as “sự/ cái/ việc/con”. Therefore, there is an error rate of 42.1% in this form. Following is an example:

Wrongly written sentence	Suggested sentence
<u>Speak</u> English is difficult.	<u>Speaking</u> English is difficult.

In the above example, the student was not aware that the verb “speak” functions as the subject of the sentence and thus did not change it into the gerund form (adding “ing”). The high frequency of errors of this type may be because most students are used to such imperative sentences as “Stand up!” or “Open your book!” which their teacher frequently use during classroom when giving instructions or asking them to do something.

The second most popularly-made errors were related to verb functioning as a direct object for a preposition. Look at the following example:

Wrongly written sentence	Suggested sentence
I'm interested in <u>listen</u> music.	I'm interested in <u>listening</u> to music.

When a verb is a direct object for another verb, students made the fewest errors with the verb. One instance of this error type is as followed:

Wrongly written sentence	Suggested sentence
I don't mind <u>do</u> homework.	I don't mind <u>doing</u> homework.

Verb Form Errors with “To V1”

Compared to the bare infinitive form, the infinitive with “to” is a real challenge for students with the error frequency reaching 74%. Of those, the structure “adjective + to infinitive” has the highest counts, constituting nearly one-third of the error number, followed by the structure “verb + object + to infinitive” with 176 out of 668 errors found.

Table 3. Summary of Errors with “to V1”

Error Types	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Direct object for a verb	142	21%
Direct object for a question word	147	22%
In the structure “adjective + to infinitive”	203	30%
In the structure “verb + object + to infinitive”	176	27%
Total	668	100%

The table has revealed that the structure “adjective + to infinitive” was the most challenging to students when nearly one-third of them made errors with the verb. Following is the example:

<i>Wrongly written sentence</i>	<i>Suggested sentence</i>
I happy <u>learn</u> with teacher.	I'm happy <u>to learn</u> with you, teacher.

Closely following the above structure, the structure “verb + object + to infinitive” also caused troubles for the students. Most of them did not add “to” before the “infinitive”, as in the following extracted sentence:

<i>Wrongly written sentence</i>	<i>Suggested sentence</i>
I want teacher <u>helps</u> me.	I want you <u>to help</u> me, teacher.

The student put the verb “help” into the present form by adding “s” to the end of the verb, which might be because they thought the verb “help” should agree with the object “teacher” preceding it. This error was made due to a lack of understanding of the grammar structure.

The two remaining structures of “Direct object for a verb” and “Direct object for a question word” had a bit lower frequency of errors, as shown in the sentences:

Wrongly written sentences	Suggested sentences
I want <u>become</u> a web design.	I want <u>to become</u> a web designer.
I don't know who <u>speaking</u> to.	I don't know who <u>to speak</u> to.

It's obviously seen that most students chose the "infinitive" form of the verbs rather than put them into the correct form of "to" or "V-ing" basing on the structures.

Verb Form Errors with "V1"

It can be said that students are quite familiar with the bare infinitive form of verbs from the first years of study, especially for daily suggestions in English classes such as "Stand up!" or "Open your book!". Therefore, compared to the total verb form errors, there are only 42% of errors recorded in this type of verb. A breakdown can be seen in the following figure:

Table 4. Summary of Errors with "V1"

Error Types	Frequency	Percentage (%)
After model verbs	130	34%
In the structures of "suggestion", "request" or "proposal"	80	21%
In the structure "Verb + O + bare infinitive"	170	45%
Total	380	100%

Of the three types, the structure "Verb + O + bare infinitive" had the highest level of errors, which can be seen in the example below:

Wrongly written sentence	Suggested sentence
It can make my English <u>improves</u> .	It can make my English <u>improve</u> .

The student seemed to be good at English grammar in that he/she put the verb "improve" in the present tense to agree with the preceding noun "English". However, this does not match with the overall structure.

Model verbs are quite commonly-used in English grammar, but there were still a big number of errors made by students when they use a verb after them, as illustrated in the below example:

<i>Wrongly written sentence</i>	<i>Suggested sentence</i>
I can not speaking English.	I cannot <u>speak</u> English.

The fewest mistakes were made in the structures of “suggestion”, “request”, or “proposal”, which accounted for one-fifths of the total error counts. See the following extract for detail:

<i>Wrongly written sentence</i>	<i>Suggested sentence</i>
Teacher <u>listens</u> to me!	Teacher, <u>listen</u> to me!

Clearly, as for the above structures, they are quite familiar and commonly-seen and used by students right from the very early stage of learning English. Maybe for this reason, students have the lowest error rates. This partly suggests that if learners have the opportunity to use grammatical structures repeatedly, the frequency of making errors can be reduced.

Pedagogical Implications

Effective Error Correction Methods

From classroom observation data, some implications related to teachers' classroom error correction of verb forms have been made. Followings are further discussions on how the four methods can be applied to help students better learn from their own mistakes and errors.

Teacher correction

For students, teacher's feedback and correction is really important in their learning progress. This method includes two types: Direct correction and indirect correction. The former has more forms of implementation, and therefore teachers need to choose the form that is suitable for their students.

For example: When a student makes a mistake in the structure of “V-ing”, the teacher should write the correct sentence structure on the board with highlighting, and then ask another student to compare the correct sentence structure with the incorrect one. In that way, the student will learn from their own mistakes/errors. The teacher continues to let students give other examples to practice the sentence structure.

Correct sentence: Do you mind opening the window?

Incorrect sentence: Do you mind to open/open the window?

New sentence: Do you mind(shut) down the computer?

Self-correction

In reality, not all students like the teacher's direct error correction method, which means underlining the error and correcting it. When asked why, two students say that they want to be involved in the error correction process. In other words, the teacher should only do part of the job which is pointing out the errors and then create opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and intelligence to find ways to correct the errors. This effort of the students makes the error correction process more meaningful and beneficial for their learning because through this method, students once again remember and deepen the knowledge they have encountered.

Teacher's error simulation

Teachers can let students speak or write freely, record basic errors and then correct them for the whole class - avoid pointing out someone's errors because this can easily cause students to feel "losing face".

Students' exercises will be posted on the board and shown through the projector as an example. Teachers and students together discuss and find errors in students' work. This is a method that students really like, but teachers also need to pay attention to the way they do it, how they express themselves, and the students' attitudes during the correction process.

Peer correction

This is also a way to correct errors that is very easy to attract students' interest. Students work in groups, practicing and correcting errors at the same time. Group correction will make students' speaking and writing lessons easier and more interesting.

For example, the teacher can give this group's work to another group to correct errors, or form a speaking practice group, or practice writing with all types of students, meaning both good and excellent students work with average and weak students so that they can correct each other's errors.

Conclusion

It can be said that making errors is one of the problems that everyone has to face whenever using a language. Therefore, finding, analysing, and

proposing some effective measures to overcome and avoid errors will be meaningful for both teachers and students. This is also the main reason and motivation for me to conduct and complete this research.

First, the research has discovered the frequency as well as common error types made by 200 research subjects. For each error type, the researcher also divided it into small categories. To clarify the data, used figures were also used.

Secondly, some methods were proposed to help teachers in correcting and limiting grammatical errors in general and verb forms in particular. I believe that error correction methods as well as grammar teaching will be very meaningful and contribute to improving the quality of grammar teaching and changing the awareness and attitude of teachers and students towards making errors.

Regarding verb forms, EFL teachers should allocate time to teach all verb forms with the simplest and most typical structures. In this way, students can fully and systematically grasp verb forms in English. Up to now, verb forms have been taught separately, making some students feel confused and unable to remember them for a long time. After teaching all common forms, teachers should also summarize them into a table as a guidebook for students to review whenever they want.

Finally, it is critical that teachers raise students' awareness of the need to participate in grammar lessons. It is obviously necessary for students to have a positive attitude towards learning. However, some students cannot break their shyness to participate actively in classroom activities. It is; therefore, the teacher's duty to encourage their students to overcome themselves and participate in the lesson. The fact is that the more students engage in lessons, the more they understand them.

Future Research

If the further research is conducted in this direction, the following aspects will be taken more consideration and investigation:

- The influences of Vietnamese cultural aspects on the use of verb forms in English
- A contrastive analysis of verb forms between Vietnamese and English

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