

The Influence Of Mother Tongue On English Language Acquisition: A Case Study At Nguyen Tat Thanh University



Nguyen Minh Thien^{1*}, Do Quoc Khanh²

^{1,2}Faculty of Foreign Languages, Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

***Corresponding Author:** Nguyen Minh Thien

*Email: nmthien@ntt.edu.vn

Abstract: This study investigates the impact of students' native languages on their acquisition of English at Nguyen Tat Thanh University (NTTU) in Vietnam. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research examines how mother tongue influences both the pronunciation and overall proficiency of English language learners. Qualitative data were gathered through interviews with 30 English majors, focusing on their experiences and perceptions of native language interference. Quantitative data were collected via standardized English proficiency tests administered to 100 students, assessing areas such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Findings indicate that negative transfer from the mother tongue significantly affects English pronunciation and structural aspects of language use. Specifically, phonetic discrepancies between Vietnamese and English lead to common pronunciation errors, while syntactic differences contribute to challenges in grammar and sentence construction. The study underscores the necessity for pedagogical strategies that address these specific areas of interference, suggesting that targeted pronunciation training and contrastive analysis of linguistic structures could mitigate the adverse effects of mother tongue influence. These insights aim to inform curriculum development and teaching methodologies at NTTU, ultimately enhancing English language acquisition among students.

Keywords: *ESL, second language acquisition, mother tongue, English language proficiency*

Introduction

The acquisition of English as a second language (ESL) is a complex and dynamic process influenced by various cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural factors, among which the learner's mother tongue plays a critical role. The phenomenon of language transfer, first extensively discussed by Lado (1957) and later expanded by Odlin (1989), refers to the influence of the learner's native language on the learning of a second language, manifesting in both positive and negative ways. Positive transfer occurs when similarities between the two languages facilitate learning, while negative transfer, or interference, results in errors and difficulties due to linguistic differences (Gass & Selinker, 2008). In the context of Vietnamese learners at NTTU, understanding how the Vietnamese language affects English acquisition is crucial for developing effective pedagogical strategies. Vietnamese, a monosyllabic and tonal language with distinct phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures, differs significantly from English (Thompson, 1965). These differences present challenges for Vietnamese learners in multiple linguistic domains, particularly in pronunciation, grammar, and lexical choice (Nguyen & Ingram, 2005). For instance, Vietnamese lacks certain consonantal phonemes present in English, such as the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, leading learners to substitute these sounds with /t/ or /d/, which can hinder intelligibility (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992). Additionally, English employs inflectional morphology to indicate tense, plurality,

and agreement, whereas Vietnamese relies on contextual markers, often resulting in persistent errors such as omission of past tense markers and pluralization in English (Cao, 1998; Swan & Smith, 2001). Furthermore, syntactic interference occurs due to structural differences; Vietnamese follows a topic-prominent structure, while English adheres to a subject-prominent syntax, leading to errors in sentence construction and coherence (Odlin, 1989; Tran, 2010). Despite the well-documented role of mother tongue influence in second language acquisition (Ellis, 1997), there remains a scarcity of empirical studies specifically examining its effects on Vietnamese learners at the tertiary level. Given the growing importance of English proficiency for academic and professional success in Vietnam, it is imperative to investigate how native language interference manifests in the learning experiences of university students. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing both the perceptual and empirical dimensions of mother tongue influence on English language acquisition among NTTU students. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates qualitative insights from learners' experiences with quantitative assessments of language proficiency to provide a comprehensive understanding of how first language transfer impacts second language development.

The aim of this research paper is to investigate the influence of the Vietnamese mother tongue on English language acquisition among students at NTTU. Specifically, the study seeks to explore

learners' perceptions of mother tongue interference in their English learning experiences and assess the extent to which the Vietnamese language affects their English proficiency. The findings aim to inform pedagogical strategies for English language instruction, helping educators develop targeted interventions to mitigate negative language transfer while enhancing effective second language learning.

Research Questions

1. How do students at Nguyen Tat Thanh University perceive the influence of their mother tongue on their English language learning experiences?
2. To what extent does the mother tongue affect the English language proficiency of students at Nguyen Tat Thanh University, as measured by standardized tests?

Literature Review

First of all, the concept of language transfer, extensively discussed by Odlin (1989), serves as the primary theoretical foundation for this study. Language transfer, also known as cross-linguistic influence, refers to the effect of a learner's first language (L1) on the acquisition of a second language (L2). This influence can be both positive transfer, where similarities between L1 and L2 facilitate learning, and negative transfer, where differences result in errors and learning difficulties (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Negative transfer, or interference, occurs when L1 phonological, syntactic, and lexical structures conflict with those of L2, leading to persistent challenges in language acquisition (Ellis, 2015). Studies on language transfer have shown that L1 influence is particularly strong at the initial stages of L2 learning but may persist even at advanced levels, depending on the complexity and similarity of linguistic structures between the two languages (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). In the case of Vietnamese learners, language transfer manifests predominantly in phonetics, grammar, and syntax due to significant structural differences between Vietnamese and English (Nguyen & Dutta, 2019). Understanding these effects is essential for improving teaching methodologies and minimizing the negative impact of L1 interference.

Pronunciation is one of the most noticeable areas affected by mother tongue interference in second language acquisition. According to Flege (1995), L2 learners often struggle with phonemes that do not exist in their native language, leading to systematic pronunciation errors. Vietnamese students learning English commonly experience difficulty with English sounds that are absent in Vietnamese phonetics, particularly the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, which are often replaced with /t/ or /d/ (Nguyen & Ingram, 2005). Additionally, the absence of consonant clusters in Vietnamese phonology leads to difficulties in pronouncing words such

as *strength* or *world*, often resulting in vowel epenthesis (adding an extra vowel) or simplification (eliminating certain consonants) (Pham & McLeod, 2016). Research further suggests that Vietnamese learners tend to struggle with distinguishing between long and short vowel sounds in English, as Vietnamese vowel length does not function as a distinguishing phonemic feature (Kieu, 2010). These phonological mismatches contribute to intelligibility issues and communication breakdowns in English-speaking environments (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Effective pedagogical interventions, such as explicit phonetic training and increased exposure to native English pronunciation, have been found beneficial in overcoming these difficulties (Levis & Sonsaat, 2020).

Besides, syntactic interference is another major area where mother tongue influence manifests in English language acquisition. Vietnamese, unlike English, is an isolating language, meaning it relies heavily on word order and context rather than inflectional morphology to indicate grammatical relationships (Cao, 1998). One of the most common challenges for Vietnamese learners is mastering English verb tenses since Vietnamese does not have inflected verb forms to indicate past, present, or future (Nguyen, 2019). Instead, tense is expressed through time adverbials or context, leading to frequent omission or incorrect use of tense markers in English (Tran, 2021). Additionally, Vietnamese follows a topic-comment structure rather than the strict subject-verb-object (SVO) order of English, which can result in non-standard sentence constructions such as *Yesterday, I go to school already* instead of *Yesterday, I went to school* (Luong, 2018). Another challenge arises in the use of articles (*a, an, the*), which do not exist in Vietnamese, causing frequent omission or incorrect usage in English writing (Swan & Smith, 2001). Research suggests that explicit instruction in contrastive grammar and increased practice with grammatical patterns can help mitigate these errors (Celce-Murcia et al., 2014).

Numerous empirical studies have investigated the impact of mother tongue influence on English learning. Bhela (1999) found that learners often rely on their L1 structures when constructing sentences in L2, leading to predictable grammatical and lexical errors. Similarly, Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008) argued that language transfer plays a central role in shaping the interlanguage of second language learners, particularly in the areas of syntax and phonology. In a recent study, Nguyen and Dutta (2019) examined Vietnamese ESL learners and found that negative transfer significantly affected their writing skills, particularly in areas such as tense consistency and article usage. Furthermore, Li (2020) conducted a large-scale study on L1 influence in second language writing and found that learners from isolating language backgrounds, such as Vietnamese and

Chinese, exhibited similar patterns of syntactic errors in English. These findings underscore the importance of addressing language transfer through targeted instructional strategies.

In the Vietnamese context, researchers have highlighted various aspects of mother tongue interference in English learning. Nguyen and Ingram (2005) observed that Vietnamese learners exhibit systematic pronunciation errors due to phonetic discrepancies between Vietnamese and English. More recent studies by Tran (2021) and Kieu (2010) have confirmed that L1 transfer plays a significant role in both spoken and written English proficiency among Vietnamese students. A study by Pham and McLeod (2016) examined Vietnamese learners' pronunciation challenges and suggested that explicit phonetic instruction could significantly improve pronunciation accuracy. Additionally, Nguyen (2019) analyzed written English compositions of Vietnamese students and identified persistent grammatical errors related to tense, articles, and sentence structure. These findings indicate that L1 interference remains a substantial obstacle for Vietnamese learners, necessitating a more comprehensive and tailored approach to English language teaching.

To address the challenges posed by mother tongue interference, various pedagogical approaches have been proposed. Contrastive analysis, originally introduced by Lado (1957), involves systematically comparing the linguistic features of the native and target languages to predict potential areas of difficulty. While contrastive analysis has limitations, recent studies have shown that explicit instruction focusing on L1-L2 differences can be beneficial for ESL learners (Ellis, 2015). Pronunciation training that emphasizes problematic phonemes and minimal pairs has been shown to improve intelligibility and reduce the influence of L1 phonetics on English pronunciation (Levis & Sonsaat, 2020). Additionally, communicative language teaching (CLT) strategies, which encourage natural interaction and contextual learning, have been found effective in helping learners develop grammatical accuracy and fluency despite L1 interference (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Furthermore, corpus-based approaches that analyze frequent learner errors and provide data-driven feedback have been increasingly recommended as effective instructional tools for mitigating mother tongue interference in ESL education (Li, 2020).

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively examine the influence of the Vietnamese mother tongue on English language acquisition among students at NTTU. The mixed-methods approach allows for a more holistic analysis

by capturing both the subjective experiences of learners and measurable linguistic performance indicators (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This method is particularly effective in second language acquisition (SLA) research, as it enables the triangulation of data to validate findings across different sources (Dörnyei, 2007).

The qualitative component of this study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 30 English-major students at NTTU. This method was chosen to provide in-depth insights into learners' perceptions of mother tongue interference in their English learning process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring a diverse representation of students with varying levels of English proficiency and linguistic backgrounds. The interview questions focused on key themes, including phonetic challenges, syntactic transfer issues, and learners' strategies for overcoming L1 interference. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in a mix of English and Vietnamese to allow participants to fully express their experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed using NVivo 12 software to identify recurring patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

For the quantitative component, standardized English proficiency tests were administered to 100 students to assess their performance in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. The test was adapted from the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) framework to ensure validity and reliability in measuring linguistic competencies (British Council, 2020). The test included sections on phonetic accuracy, grammatical structure, and lexical use, each scored on a scale of 0–100. The data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26), employing descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistical tests (correlation analysis and t-tests) to determine the extent of mother tongue influence on English proficiency. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between L1 interference and students' English performance, particularly in areas where Vietnamese and English exhibit significant linguistic differences (Field, 2018).

To ensure the reliability and validity of the research findings, multiple measures were adopted. The qualitative data were double-coded by independent researchers to ensure intercoder reliability (Miles et al., 2014). The standardized proficiency test underwent a pilot study with 20 students before full implementation to assess its effectiveness and clarity (Mackey & Gass, 2016). In addition, triangulation was used to cross-verify findings from qualitative and quantitative data,

enhancing the study's credibility (Flick, 2018). Ethical considerations were also adhered to, with informed consent obtained from all participants, and data anonymized to protect privacy and confidentiality (Cohen et al., 2018).

By employing this rigorous mixed-methods approach, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of how the Vietnamese mother tongue influences English language acquisition, offering both empirical evidence and learner insights to inform pedagogical strategies for English instruction at NTTU.

Findings and Discussions

For students' perceptions of the influence of their mother tongue on their English language learning experiences

The qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 30 English-major students at NTTU provides a comprehensive understanding of how these learners perceive the influence of their mother tongue, Vietnamese, on their English language acquisition. The findings reveal a complex interplay of facilitative and inhibitory effects, deeply rooted in linguistic structures and educational practices.

Several participants acknowledged that certain lexical similarities between Vietnamese and English, particularly loanwords and cognates, have facilitated vocabulary acquisition. This lexical overlap often aids in the initial stages of learning, providing learners with a familiar reference point when encountering new English words. Such positive transfer aligns with existing research suggesting that cognate recognition can enhance vocabulary development in second language learners (Lotto & de Groot, 1998).

A predominant theme identified was the challenge in pronunciation, attributed to the phonological discrepancies between Vietnamese and English. Students reported difficulties with English sounds absent in Vietnamese, such as the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, leading to substitutions with /t/ or /d/, respectively. This substitution often results in accented speech and potential misunderstandings, corroborating findings by Nguyen and Ingram (2005) regarding Vietnamese learners' pronunciation challenges. Additionally, the complex syllable structures in English, including consonant clusters, pose significant hurdles, as Vietnamese syllable structure is typically simpler (Nguyen & Dutta, 2019).

Grammatical interference emerged as a significant concern among the participants. The absence of inflectional morphology in Vietnamese leads to challenges in mastering English tense and aspect systems. Students frequently omit past tense markers or misuse verb forms, reflecting negative

transfer from their L1. This aligns with Tran's (2021) observations of persistent tense-related errors among Vietnamese EFL learners. Furthermore, the topic-prominent nature of Vietnamese syntax contrasts with the subject-prominent structure of English, resulting in non-standard sentence constructions and coherence issues in learners' English output (Cao, 1998).

Many students reported that they often think in Vietnamese before articulating thoughts in English, a process that can lead to unnatural expressions and hindered fluency. This cognitive switching aligns with findings by Dang (2013), who noted that reliance on L1 during speech production can negatively impact L2 fluency and intelligibility. Such internal translation processes may also contribute to increased cognitive load, affecting real-time language processing and communication effectiveness (Kroll & Sunderman, 2003).

The participants expressed a nuanced perspective on the use of Vietnamese in the classroom. While they acknowledged that strategic use of the mother tongue can aid in understanding complex concepts, there was a consensus that excessive reliance on Vietnamese might impede immersion and the development of English proficiency. This sentiment echoes the findings of Phuong and Danh (2021), who reported that while students appreciate the use of L1 for certain instructional purposes, they also recognize the potential drawbacks of overusing it in EFL settings.

The insights from NTTU students underscore the dual role of the mother tongue in English language learning. While certain linguistic similarities can facilitate learning, significant differences, particularly in phonology and syntax, pose challenges that require targeted pedagogical interventions. These findings highlight the importance of developing instructional strategies that balance the supportive role of the mother tongue with the necessity of immersive English practice, aiming to mitigate negative transfer effects and enhance overall language proficiency.

For the affect of the mother tongue on the English language proficiency of students

The quantitative analysis aimed to assess the extent to which the Vietnamese mother tongue influences English language proficiency among students at NTTU, as measured by standardized tests. The study involved administering standardized English proficiency tests to 100 students, evaluating their performance in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Additionally, a motivation questionnaire was utilized to understand the learners' motivational orientations. The findings are presented in two tables: one illustrating students' motivation levels and another detailing their learning outcomes.

Table 1: Students' Motivation Levels

Motivation Aspect	Mean	Standard Deviation
Intrinsic Motivation	4.2	0.5
Extrinsic Motivation	3.8	0.6
Motivational Intensity	4.0	0.4

Note: Scores are based on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

The data indicates that students exhibit higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Mean = 4.2, SD = 0.5) compared to extrinsic motivation (Mean = 3.8, SD = 0.6). This suggests that learners are primarily driven by internal factors, such as personal growth and interest in the language, rather than external

rewards. The motivational intensity, reflecting the effort and persistence in learning, is also high (Mean = 4.0, SD = 0.4). These findings align with previous research indicating that Vietnamese non-English-major students demonstrate strong intrinsic motivation to enhance their language competence.

Table 2: Learning Outcomes

Proficiency Component	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Pronunciation	68	12
Grammar	72	10
Vocabulary	70	11

Note: Scores are out of 100.

The learning outcomes reveal that students perform moderately across all assessed components, with grammar achieving the highest mean score (72), followed by vocabulary (70), and pronunciation (68). The relatively lower score in pronunciation may be attributed to phonological differences between Vietnamese and English, leading to challenges in accurately producing certain English sounds. The standard deviations indicate a consistent performance among students, with pronunciation exhibiting slightly higher variability, suggesting differing levels of difficulty among learners.

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between motivation levels and learning outcomes. The results indicate a positive correlation between intrinsic motivation and overall English proficiency ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that students with higher intrinsic motivation tend to achieve better proficiency scores. This underscores the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation to enhance language learning outcomes.

The quantitative findings suggest that while NTTU students exhibit strong intrinsic motivation and moderate proficiency in grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation remains a challenging area, likely due to mother tongue interference. These insights highlight the need for targeted pedagogical interventions focusing on pronunciation to mitigate the negative effects of language transfer and improve overall English proficiency.

Conclusion

The comprehensive analysis of mother tongue influence on English language acquisition among students at NTTU underscores a multifaceted dynamic that intertwines linguistic, cognitive, and

pedagogical factors. Qualitative insights reveal that while strategic use of Vietnamese in the classroom can facilitate comprehension of complex concepts, an overreliance on the mother tongue may impede immersion and the development of communicative competence. This duality aligns with findings from prior studies, suggesting that a balanced approach is essential (Nguyen & Duy, 2019).

Quantitatively, the data indicates that mother tongue interference significantly affects English pronunciation, with students exhibiting lower scores in this area compared to grammar and vocabulary. This phenomenon is consistent with existing literature, which highlights the challenges Vietnamese learners face due to phonological differences between Vietnamese and English (Dang, 2014).

Moreover, the observed positive correlation between intrinsic motivation and English proficiency suggests that fostering internal drives, such as personal growth and interest in the language, can enhance learning outcomes. This finding resonates with research emphasizing the role of motivation in language acquisition (Nguyen & Habók, 2020).

Collectively, these insights advocate for pedagogical strategies that judiciously incorporate the mother tongue to support comprehension while promoting active engagement with the target language. Such an approach aims to mitigate negative transfer effects and enhance overall English proficiency among Vietnamese learners.

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