



VIETNAMESE INTERFERENCE IN TEENAGERS' ENGLISH SPEAKING PERFORMANCE AT A PRIVATE CENTER IN DONG THAP

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Abstract:

This study investigates Vietnamese L1 interference in the spoken English of 30 teenage EFL learners (aged 12–17) at A2 and B1 levels in a private language center in Dong Thap Province, Vietnam. Adopting an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, data were collected from IELTS-style speaking tests and stimulated recall interviews (SRI). Quantitative error analysis of approximately 200 minutes of recorded speech indicated that lexical errors (36.76%) and phonological errors (34.03%) were the most frequent, followed by grammatical errors (29.21%). Analysis of Stimulated Recall Interview data revealed that learners were often able to identify their errors in retrospect but were unable to self-correct during spontaneous speech, suggesting that metalinguistic awareness did not readily translate into real-time monitoring under cognitive demands. The findings suggest that L1 transfer remains a common feature of teenage learners' spoken interlanguage in communicative contexts and point to several pedagogical implications for reducing such interference.

Keywords: Vietnamese L1 interference, error analysis, stimulated recall interview, teenage EFL learners, speaking performance

1. Introduction

English is widely used for communication, study, and employment in today's globalized world (Crystal, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2011). However, Vietnamese learners often face difficulties in speaking English because their first language influences pronunciation, grammar, and lexical choice, especially in spontaneous speech, where learners must produce language quickly with limited time for planning and self-correction (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Sweller, 2011). These difficulties are particularly evident when learners

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speak under cognitive pressure, since real-time speech production can reduce fluency and place greater demands on cognitive resources (Feng, 2022).

Vietnamese and English differ substantially in structure (Lado, 1957; Odlin, 1989; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). Vietnamese is an isolating language without any inflections, whereas English uses plural forms, subject-verb agreement, tense inflection, and final consonants (Nguyen & Vu, 2024; Tran & Nguyen, 2022). Because of this, it is possible that Vietnamese learners will transfer their native language structures to the target language speech, resulting in mistakes such as final consonant deletion, literal translation, and non-native grammar as reflected in studies on Vietnamese lexical transfer in collocations (Nguyen, 2023). All these phenomena can be associated with the cognitive nature of the speech production process (Sweller, 2011; Maximova & Soloveva, 2022).

Although various works concerning the impact of L1 interference on Vietnamese EFL learners have been done, most of these were devoted to college students or learners who had formal schooling (Bui, 2022; Van Ha & Duong, 2024). In general, current research has mostly been devoted to individual linguistic factors and has ignored teenage learners at private language centers. Additionally, while several recent studies have explored Vietnamese EFL learners' speaking errors across lexical, grammatical, and phonological dimensions, very few have combined error analysis with stimulated recall interviews. This integrated approach is especially rare when investigating both error patterns and learners' own retrospective awareness among teenagers.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating Vietnamese L1 interference in the spoken English of 30 teenage learners (aged 12–17) at A2 and B1 levels in a private language center in Dong Thap Province. It aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of L1 transfer in this under-researched population and instructional context.

Accordingly, the study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What types and frequencies of Vietnamese L1 interference errors occur in the spoken English of teenage EFL learners at a private language center in Dong Thap Province? (2) How do learners account for these errors when reflecting on their own speech?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in language transfer, contrastive analysis, error analysis, and interlanguage. Language transfer refers to the influence of the first language on second-language production and may be either facilitative or negative, depending on the relationship between the two languages (Lado, 1957; Odlin, 1989; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). In the present study, the concept is used to explain how Vietnamese may shape learners' English speaking performance.

Contrastive analysis, originally proposed by Lado (1957), is useful for identifying structural differences between Vietnamese and English that may lead to learning difficulties. Although its predictive power has been debated, it remains a valuable

descriptive tool for examining recurring learner errors (Lado, 1957; Odlin, 1989). For this reason, it is appropriate for a study that focuses on grammatical, lexical, and phonological interference in spoken English.

Error analysis provides the main analytical basis for the study. Corder (1967) argued that learner errors are evidence of an evolving linguistic system rather than random failures, and that systematic errors reveal the learner's current competence. This perspective is especially relevant here because the study examines repeated spoken errors and treats them as signs of systematic learner production rather than isolated mistakes (Corder, 1967; James, 1998).

Interlanguage is used as a supporting concept. Selinker (1972) described interlanguage as a developing system shaped by native-language transfer, learning strategies, and communication strategies. In this study, it helps explain why learner speech may show stable transitional forms influenced by Vietnamese (Selinker, 1972).

2.2 L1 Interference in Speaking Performance

L1 interference in speaking is especially visible when learners must produce language rapidly and with limited time for planning. In these situations, learners resort to well-known structures and concepts of their native tongue in their attempt to be fluent (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Sweller, 2011). This aspect becomes especially important for Vietnamese learners of English because the two languages have differences in terms of morphology, phonology, and lexicons, and thus, there will likely be cross-linguistic transfer of knowledge in speech (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; Le, 2024).

In terms of grammar, Vietnamese learners may encounter problems with those aspects of English grammar that are present in English but not in Vietnamese, like plurals, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, and the use of copulas (Lado, 1957; Le, 2024). From the viewpoint of error analysis, learners' mistakes in using these structures may be analyzed as systematic errors (Corder, 1967).

At the lexical level, transfer may appear in the form of literal translation, non-target-like collocations, or the use of Vietnamese-based conceptual mappings during English speech (Nguyen, 2023; Gass & Selinker, 2008). In spoken interaction, such lexical choices may help sustain communication, but they also reveal the strong influence of the first language on meaning construction (Selinker, 1972).

At the phonological level, the contrast between Vietnamese and English is particularly important. Vietnamese learners often omit word-final consonants and simplify consonant clusters in English, especially where morphological endings carry little weight in the first language (Tran & Nguyen, 2022). Recent work also suggests that omission rates are shaped not only by L1 transfer but also by frequency of use and morphological status (Disney & Le, 2024). For a study concerned with oral performance, this phonological dimension is central rather than peripheral.

2.3 Related Studies and Research Gap

Recent studies have shown that Vietnamese learners continue to experience first-language-related difficulty in spoken English. Three major causes of speech errors mentioned by researchers studying spontaneous speech are the interference of the mother tongue, cognitive load, and no exposure to a real-life English-speaking environment. Speech errors play an important role in the fluency and confidence of learners as well as their engagement in speaking activities (Lam & Luong, 2025). Apart from that, it was discovered that there are cross-linguistic effects on the speaking of Vietnamese people, which include language transfer on a variety of levels (semantic, pragmatic, and structural) (Cao & Badger, 2023).

There are two issues associated with such research. Firstly, most research tends to concentrate on certain areas of the linguistic system in question without taking into consideration the simultaneous occurrence of various types of errors in spontaneous speech. This makes it possible not to pay attention to the effect of interference on the levels of grammar, vocabulary, and phonology of foreign speakers. Secondly, there are certain contextual problems connected with the choice of participants who are mostly school/university students. This context matters because private centers may offer communicative instruction, but learners still often rely on Vietnamese outside the classroom, especially when speaking under time pressure (Lam & Luong, 2025; Tran & Pham, 2025).

A further gap is the lack of studies combining error analysis with learners' retrospective reflection on their spoken errors. Some research has identified the role of L1 influence and cognitive pressure in spontaneous speech, but fewer studies have linked observable errors with learners' own awareness of them after performance (Lam & Luong, 2025).

Similar L1 interference patterns have also appeared in learners from other languages with very different structures. For instance, recent research on Chinese EFL students found they often struggle with word-final consonants and consonant clusters, largely because of how their native phonotactics work (Wang et al., 2024). In the same way, studies on Thai EFL learners have linked frequent collocation mistakes to direct first-language influence and insufficient knowledge of English word combinations (Boonraksa & Naisena, 2022). Taken together, these findings indicate that the typological features of isolating or less inflectional languages tend to shape learners' interlanguage in consistent ways. The current study builds on this by focusing on Vietnamese teenage learners in a private language center in a provincial setting. Therefore, this study examines L1 interference in teenage learners' English speaking at a private language center in Dong Thap Province and also explores their retrospective awareness of these errors.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, in which quantitative error analysis was followed by stimulated recall interviews (SRI) to explain learner performance (Lok et al., 2023). The first phase used quantitative error analysis to identify and count the types and frequencies of L1 interference in learners' speaking performance, while the second phase used stimulated recall interviews to explore learners' retrospective awareness of those errors and the cognitive processes behind them.

The mixed-methods approach is appropriate because the research questions require both an account of what errors occurred and an explanation of why those errors occurred during spontaneous speech. Quantitative analysis provides a systematic overview of grammatical, lexical, and phonological errors, whereas SRI adds interpretive depth by capturing learners' own reflections immediately after speaking tasks.

3.2 Context and Participants

The study was conducted at a private English language center in Dong Thap Province. The participants were 30 teenage EFL learners aged 12–17 years from a private English language center in Dong Thap Province. Teenage learners were selected because they were at a developmental stage where speaking performance is sufficiently developed for error analysis but still likely to show clear first-language influence. The sample size of 30 was considered appropriate for an exploratory study that aimed to identify recurring patterns of L1 interference while still allowing close analysis of individual speaking data. Although the sample size is consistent with exploratory linguistic research, the findings are context-specific and may not be fully generalizable to the broader Vietnamese EFL population.

The quantitative phase did not aim to test hypotheses or generalize findings to the broader EFL population. Instead, it focused on identifying recurring patterns of Vietnamese L1 interference within a specific instructional context. The qualitative phase, through stimulated recall interviews, provided explanatory depth to these patterns rather than population-level representativeness. This approach aligns with mixed-methods research principles, which prioritize complementarity and contextual understanding between phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Qualitatively, six participants were purposively selected from the original group of 30 learners. Participants exhibiting the highest frequency and greatest variety of errors were deliberately selected, as they were most likely to provide detailed and meaningful retrospective reflections on the L1 interference they experienced while speaking. This selection aligned well with the explanatory purpose of the stimulated recall interview (SRI) phase. Their reflections were meant to offer deeper explanatory insights into the cognitive processes behind those errors, rather than to represent the views of the whole group.

3.3 Instruments

Data were collected using two main instruments:

3.3.1 Speaking Test Recordings

The speaking test was adapted from the center's end-of-course assessment and followed an IELTS-like format with two parts. Part 1 included short interview questions on familiar topics such as news and chatting with friends. Part 2 required learners to speak for one to two minutes on a personal topic. Topics were mainly drawn from English Plus 3 and English Plus 4, supplemented by everyday-life themes to encourage spontaneous oral production. Each test lasted approximately 5–10 minutes per participant.

3.3.2 Stimulated Recall Interviews (SRI)

The stimulated recall interviews were semi-structured and conducted individually via Google Meet. Selected error-containing segments from the speaking tests were replayed to prompt learners to verbalize their thoughts during speech production. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to facilitate accurate and detailed responses.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection followed a structured four-phase process: (1) obtaining ethical approval and consent, (2) pilot testing instruments and protocols, (3) administering one-on-one speaking tests in a controlled environment (yielding approximately 200 minutes of recorded speech), and (4) conducting SRI sessions immediately after the tests to maximize recall accuracy.

3.5 Data Analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Errors were classified as interlingual when they showed a clear and plausible link to Vietnamese linguistic structures and were further supported by learners' own explanations during the stimulated recall interviews. Errors that lacked any obvious connection to their L1 were not counted as instances of Vietnamese interference.

Errors were identified and classified using an adapted version of Corder's (1967) and James's (1998) error analysis taxonomy. All errors were categorized into lexical, grammatical, and phonological levels with respective subcategories (see Table 1 for coding criteria and examples).

Table 1: Summary of Error Taxonomy and Coding Criteria

Level	Subcategory	Coding criteria	Example
Lexical Errors	Formal misselection	A wrong lexical item is chosen although the intended meaning is clear.	<i>tall building</i> for <i>high building</i>
	Misformation	A lexical item is formed in a non-target-like way.	<i>childs</i> for <i>children</i>
	Confusion of sense relations	A semantically related but inappropriate word is used.	<i>big</i> for <i>important</i>
	Collocation errors	A word combination is unnatural or directly translated from L1.	<i>heavy work</i> for <i>hard work</i>
	Connotation errors	A word is used with an inappropriate register or implied meaning.	<i>kid</i> in a formal context
	Stylistic errors	A lexical choice sounds unnatural in context.	overly direct phrasing in a polite request
Grammatical Errors	Omission	An obligatory grammatical element is missing.	missing plural marker in <i>two friend</i>
	Addition	An unnecessary grammatical element is inserted.	extra article before an uncountable noun
	Misformation	A wrong grammatical form is used.	<i>She have</i> instead of <i>She has</i>
	Misordering	Grammatical elements appear in the wrong order.	<i>weather hot</i> for <i>hot weather</i>
Phonological Errors	Segmental errors	Individual speech sounds are deleted, substituted, or added incorrectly.	final /s/ is omitted in plurals
	Suprasegmental errors	Stress, rhythm, or intonation is produced non-target-like.	stress placed on the wrong syllable

To ensure reliability, 20% of the transcripts were randomly selected and independently coded by two raters. The inter-rater reliability reached 87.4% agreement. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved until full consensus was achieved. The first researcher then coded the remaining transcripts using the finalized scheme.

Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency counts and percentages in Microsoft Excel. Qualitative data from the stimulated recall interviews were transcribed, translated where necessary, and used directed content analysis to identify explanatory patterns relevant to the quantitative error categories already established. The integration of quantitative error patterns and qualitative insights was conducted to better understand both the occurrence and cognitive underpinnings of L1 interference.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, written consent was obtained from the participants' parents and the language center's teachers. The teenage learners themselves were also asked for assent. They were clearly informed that their participation was entirely voluntary, that they could withdraw

at any time without any negative consequences, and that the recorded speaking tests would be used only for research purposes and would not affect their school grades or academic records in any way.

To protect confidentiality, all participants were assigned alphanumeric codes instead of their real names in transcripts, notes, and reports. Audio recordings and interview transcripts were stored securely and used exclusively for this study. All data will be permanently deleted once the research is completed.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1 Overview of L1 Interference Errors

Quantitative analysis of a 200-minute oral corpus identified a total of 623 systematic interlingual errors. To enable standardized comparison, raw error frequencies were converted into percentage rates. Table 2 presents the distribution of these errors across the three main linguistic domains and their respective subcategories.

Table 2: Frequency and Distribution of Total Interlingual Errors

No.	Level	Number of errors	Error rate (%)
1	Lexical errors	229	36.76
2	Grammatical errors	182	29.21
3	Phonological errors	212	34.03
Total		623	100

As shown in Table 2, lexical errors accounted for the largest proportion, with 229 cases, representing 36.76% of the total. Phonological errors followed closely behind with 212 cases (34.03%), while grammatical errors occurred less frequently, with 182 cases, equivalent to 29.21%. Overall, the distribution shows that lexical and phonological interference were slightly more prominent than grammatical interference in the learners' spoken English.

4.1.2 L1 Interference in Grammatical Performance

Grammatical deviations accounted for 29.21% of the total errors, with grammatical misformation being the most frequent subcategory (16.21%). Table 3 details the distribution of grammatical errors and learner prevalence rates.

Table 3: Statistical Frequencies of Grammatical Error Categories

Error Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Participant Prevalence
Misformation	101	55.49	Very High (86.67%)
Omission	31	17.03	Moderate (56.67%)
Addition	32	17.58	High (70.00%)
Misordering	18	9.89	Low
Total	182	100	

Grammatical errors made up 29.21% of all errors, with misinformation being the most frequent subtype at 101 cases, or 55.49% of grammatical errors. Omission and addition occurred at similar levels, with 31 and 32 cases, respectively, whereas misordering was less frequent at 18 cases. In the speech data, learners frequently produced forms such as *"She have two close friend"* and *"I very busy,"* showing persistent difficulty with subject-verb agreement, plural marking, and copular structures. In the SRI, the same learner reported, *"When I am talking, I am worried about generating ideas. After listening to me talk, I realize I made too many mistakes."* This response accompanied the recurring grammatical errors observed in the speech samples.

4.1.3 L1 Interference in Lexical Performance

Lexical deviations represented the largest category of L1 interference, accounting for 36.76% of total errors, with misinformation being the dominant subtype (34.35%). This category affected over 90% of the participants. Table 4 presents the detailed distribution of lexical error types.

Table 4: Statistical Summary of Lexical Error Categories

Error Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Participant Prevalence
Formal misselection	39	16.95	High
Misinformation	79	34.35	Very high
Confusion of sense relations	36	15.65	High
Collocation errors	33	14.35	High
Connotation errors	0	0.00	-
Stylistic errors	28	12.17	Moderate
Total	229	100	

Within this category, misinformation was the most frequent subtype, while formal misselection, confusion of sense relations, collocation errors, and stylistic errors also appeared at notable levels. The actual speech data illustrate this tendency clearly. For example, learners produced literal translations such as *"light street"* (for đèn đường) and *"heavy work"* (for công việc nặng nhọc), which reflect direct transfer from Vietnamese into English. They also frequently relied on generalized lexical items such as *"play"* and *"things"* in contexts where more specific words were needed. Connotation errors were included in the taxonomy as a potential category but were not attested in the data.

The SRI responses supported this pattern, as one learner reported, *"Whenever I want to say something in English, I always have to first think in Vietnamese... I think probably at least 80% of the time,"* while another noted that translating nhà cao tầng as *"high building"* sounded wrong even though it was the first form that came to mind.

4.1.4 L1 Interference in Phonological Performance

Phonological deviations accounted for 34.03% of the total errors, with segmental errors (63.21%) substantially outnumbering suprasegmental errors (36.79%).

Table 5: Distribution of Phonological Errors

Error Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Participant Prevalence
Segmental Errors	134	63.21	Very High (100%)
Suprasegmental Errors	78	36.79	High (93.33%)
Total	212	100	

Phonological errors accounted for 34.03% of the total errors, with 212 cases recorded in the corpus. Segmental errors were the dominant subtype, representing 63.21% of all phonological errors, whereas suprasegmental errors made up the remaining 36.79%. This indicates that most phonological interference occurred at the level of individual sounds rather than stress and intonation.

The speech samples show a recurring pattern of final consonant deletion and sound simplification. For instance, one learner pronounced live as /li/ and another simplified speak to /pi:k/, while nothing was realized as /'nʌtɪŋ/ through substitution of non-native sounds. At the suprasegmental level, learners often produced flat stress patterns that reflected Vietnamese prosody rather than English rhythm and intonation. These findings were reinforced by the SRI data: learners reported focusing mainly on meaning and fluency during speech production, while pronunciation monitoring was limited.

4.2. Discussion

The quantitative findings indicate that lexical errors constituted the largest proportion of L1 interference (36.76%), followed closely by phonological errors (34.03%) and grammatical errors (29.21%). These findings resonate with those of a few other investigations carried out on Vietnamese speakers of EFL, in which the same aspects were found to be particularly noteworthy (Le, 2024; Tran & Nguyen, 2022; Lam & Luong, 2025). More precisely, the high frequency of such phenomena as the presence of semantic calques and L1 collocations ("light street" for đèn đường and "heavy work" for công việc nặng nhọc) corresponds to the expected influence of the typological differences between Vietnamese, which is an isolating language with no inflections, and English, a language with numerous morphemes and conventionalized collocations (Lado, 1957; Odlin, 1989; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). Nevertheless, the question of whether the described patterns of language acquisition are motivated more by typological differences or lack of vocabulary knowledge requires further examination.

In the case of grammar mistakes, the type of misformation (55.49%) was more widespread than the type of omission. In part, this finding contradicts some earlier studies where omission was the main type of grammatical mistake made by Vietnamese students (Hoang & Oanh, 2025). One possible explanation is that learners at A2 and B1 levels in this private center had received explicit instruction on grammatical rules, encouraging them to attempt target-like structures (e.g., subject-verb agreement or plural forms) even though they often applied them incorrectly. The present data also suggest a close relationship between phonological and grammatical errors, especially the omission of final consonants that serve as plural or tense markers. This observation lends tentative

support to the phonology-morphosyntax interface account proposed in recent studies (Disney & Le, 2024; Nguyen & Vu, 2024), though the exact interaction between these levels requires more fine-grained analysis.

There are also signs of such a difference in the data of stimulated recall interviews. While students had a sufficient level of metalinguistic awareness while analyzing the audio recording of themselves, most of the time, they were not able to monitor themselves while speaking spontaneously. Such a correlation can be explained by cognitive load theory (Sweller, 2011). Such error patterns appear to represent systematic features within the learners' developing interlanguage (Selinker, 1972; Corder, 1967; James, 1998).

By combining quantitative error analysis with stimulated recall interviews in the under-researched context of teenage learners in a private language center in the Mekong Delta, this study makes a distinctive contribution to the field. Unlike most previous research that has examined either linguistic errors or cognitive factors in isolation, the present study links observable L1-induced error patterns with learners' own retrospective accounts. This integrated approach offers deeper insights into the complex interplay between linguistic transfer and cognitive constraints in spontaneous speech, an aspect that remains insufficiently explored in the Vietnamese EFL context. The findings thus not only extend current understandings of interlanguage development among teenage learners but also carry practical implications for communicative language teaching in provincial private centers.

5. Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

This study examined Vietnamese L1 interference in the spoken English performance of teenage EFL learners at a private language center in Dong Thap Province. The findings indicate that lexical and phonological errors were the most prevalent, followed by grammatical errors, and revealed a notable awareness-performance gap shaped by cognitive demands during spontaneous speech.

By highlighting the importance of analyzing teenagers in private communication settings in Vietnam, the study makes an important contribution to the literature, as this group of language users has not been studied much before. Even more significantly, by combining quantitative analyses of transfer errors with the qualitative method of stimulated recall interviews, the paper provides a unique opportunity for insight into both language phenomena and cognitive processes associated with L1 transfer when speaking English.

From the pedagogical perspective, the results obtained in the study may be considered as having several important implications for the process of teaching EFL in similar settings. Given the small and context-specific sample, the following implications are intended for practitioners working in similar private communicative settings with teenage EFL learners in provincial Vietnam, rather than as generalizable recommendations.

Firstly, since lexical errors accounted for 36.76% of all interference, with misinformation being the most common type (34.35%), teachers should focus on teaching vocabulary in natural collocations rather than single words, while explicitly addressing common Vietnamese-to-English translation pitfalls such as “light street” or “heavy work.” For grammar, which accounted for 29.21% of the errors (with misinformation dominating at 55.49%), instructors can use targeted recasts during speaking activities to address issues like subject-verb agreement, plural forms, and copula verbs, without constantly interrupting the flow of communication. Finally, given that phonological errors represented 34.03% of the total (mostly segmental errors at 63.21%), short pronunciation warm-up activities focusing on final consonants and consonant clusters could be introduced before main speaking tasks to help improve accuracy.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small ($n = 30$) and was drawn exclusively from one private language center in Dong Thap Province. Because the analysis was conducted at the level of error counts, raw frequency was used instead of normalized rates. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific, reflecting the characteristics of teenage EFL learners in private communicative settings in a provincial area of the Mekong Delta. Caution is needed when generalizing the results to other learner populations, such as public school students or learners in urban contexts.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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