

## A QUICK ANALYSIS OF SOME TYPICAL GAPS IN PHONOLOGY AND MORPHOLOGY BETWEEN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE THAT LEAD TO VIETNAMESE STUDENTS' COMMON ERRORS

Nguyễn Phú Quỳnh Như, M.A

Language is always the most effective means of communication between human societies. Therefore, every language learner needs to know and fully understand the characteristics of a specific language. Moreover, in the process of learning a foreign language, learners should always contrast it with their mother tongue to see the similarities and differences between the two. This is a must in the process of constructing a new language system. On that basis, they can avoid unnecessary mistakes and effectively use the foreign language in real life situations. As for this paper, the aim is to compare English and Vietnamese in terms of their noticeable gaps in phonology and morphology. In addition, some typical mistakes Vietnamese students usually make will be discussed together with some proposed pedagogical solutions which help solve the problem.

Firstly, it involves the contrast between English and Vietnamese phonology- which in this paper will deal with stress and intonation. Vietnamese is a syllable-timed language where the rhythm seems to be quite even and each syllable is given about the same duration and stress as any other. On the other hand, English is a stress-timed language where “the stresses occur at regular intervals with a random number of syllables occurring between stresses” (Todd & Hancock, 1986, p.443). That explains why Vietnamese students usually do not pay much attention to stress when they speak English. Therefore, most of the English syllables are similarly stressed, which leads to the misuse of tone units. In addition, English is a non-tonal language while Vietnamese is a tonal language with six tones:

- |                                      |                           |                         |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. level (không dấu)                 | a ă â e ê i o ô ơ u ư y   | Ex: ma (= ghost)        |
| 2. high rising (dấu sắc)             | á ắ á é é í ó ó ó ú ú ý   | Ex: má (= cheek)        |
| 3. low falling (dấu huyền)           | à ằ ằ è ề ề ì ồ ồ ù ừ ù ÿ | Ex: mà (= but)          |
| 4. dipping-rising (dấu hỏi)          | ả ẳ ẳ ẻ ể ể ỉ ỏ ỏ ở ử ử ỷ | Ex: mả (= tomb)         |
| 5. high rising glottalized (dấu ngã) | ã ẫ ẫ ẽ ễ ễ ã ỗ ỗ ỡ ữ ữ ỹ | Ex: mã (=horse)         |
| 6. low glottalized (dấu nặng)        | ạ ặ ặ ệ ệ ị ộ ộ ự ự ỵ     | Ex: mạ (=rice seedling) |

(Ager, 1998)

The next thing is that Vietnamese words are separately pronounced with pauses between them. However, in spoken English, the words are not always heard as separate, distinct words but are often linked together into groups of words to help the smooth flow of speech. Moreover, although intonation exists in both languages, the Vietnamese language does not rely on intonation to express emotions, mood, and attitudes as much as the English language. That is because in English, accented, stressed, and unstressed syllables serve as “a framework onto which intonation patterns are attached” (Wells, 2006, p.1); whereas Vietnamese uses a system of morphosyntactic or syntactic markers to convey emotions, mood, modality, and attitudes (Hirst & Cristo, 1998). Because of this, Vietnamese students' utterances most often come in a flat voice

with no intonation. This is not standard English where intonation plays an important role in indicating grammatical meaning, functions, and also the speaker's attitude. To overcome this problem, teachers need to design some kinds of exercises which help students practice more, especially dialogues with a variety of contexts and intonation. They should make a clear difference between stressed and unstressed syllables, and through that, give natural intonation (Doff, 1988). Intonation would be best taught and clarified when the teacher employs the hand movements to demonstrate pitch movements or uses the blackboard to draw pitch patterns. As for students, they should also listen regularly to authentic recordings and exactly repeat what native speakers say to make the best use of the listening materials. Furthermore, they themselves can record what they say and listen to it again in order to identify their mistakes and correct their stress as well as intonation.

Besides phonology, there are also some gaps between the two languages at morphological level. Morphology refers to "the study of the internal structure of words and rules by which words are formed" (Fromkin, Rodman, Hyams, 2003, p.76). Here is a discussion concerning inflectional morphology which is used to change the form of a word. "An inflectional morpheme is never a free agent in an utterance for it must be attached to a lexical morpheme and it relates the word to the rest of the construction" (Geeraerts & Cuyckens, 2007, p. 635). It does not change the general meaning, but denotes certain grammatical features relevant to the syntactic or semantic interpretation of that meaning. Whereas in English, inflectional morphemes are limited to suffixes only, there is no such kind of morphemes in the Vietnamese language. All Vietnamese words are invariable and grammatical relationships are expressed by the use of auxiliary words and word order, not by altering the internal structure of the words. This will be discussed in two broad fields: nominal inflection- which in this paper involves number and case; and verbal inflection- which involves subject-verb agreement, tense, and voice.

Firstly, nominal inflection will be taken into consideration. As for number, Vietnamese has no affixes marking plural on nouns, while English has. For example:

- \* Bức tranh này thì đẹp.                      This picture is beautiful.
  - \* Hai bức tranh này thì đẹp.                      These two pictures are beautiful.
- (Bức tranh: picture; này: this/these; hai: two; thì: is/are; đẹp: beautiful)

In the above sentences, there is an inflectional morpheme "-s" added to the word picture to indicate the plural form, while the word "bức tranh" remain the same although in the second sentence it carries the plural meaning. This gap poses a problem for Vietnamese students when they have a tendency of omitting the plural suffix at the end of the word due to interference of their native language.

As for case, in English, pronoun forms are used according to their grammatical roles in the sentence; however, Vietnamese pronoun forms remain unchanged whatever the roles they are taking. For instance:

- \* Tôi ăn sáng.                                      I have breakfast.
  - \* Chó cắn tôi.                                      The dog bites me.
  - \* Con chó này là của tôi.                      This dog is mine.
- (Tôi: I/ me; chó: the dog; ăn sáng: have breakfast; cắn: bite, này: this)



\* Tôi đã ăn sáng.

\* I had breakfast.

\* Tôi chưa ăn sáng.

\* I have not had breakfast yet.

(Tôi: I; ăn sáng: have breakfast)

In the above sentences, the verb “have” has changed from its present form “have” to past form “had” corresponding to the tense of each sentence. Meanwhile, the verb “ăn” stay the same throughout the tenses; and the only difference is the addition of some tense markers to indicate the tense.

Coming up next is the voice in both languages. Again, the Vietnamese verb form remains the same regardless of the voice, while the English verb does not. Let’s have a look at the following examples:

In the passive voice:

Tôi bị chó cắn. (I am bitten by a dog.)

Ông ấy được trao giải Nobel. (He is awarded the Nobel Prize.)

In the active voice:

Chó cắn tôi. (The dog bites me.)

Họ trao giải Nobel cho ông ấy. (They award him with the Nobel prize.)

It can easily be seen that the Vietnamese verbs “cắn” and “trao” stay unchanged whatever voice they are used in; meanwhile, the English verbs “bite” and “award” have changed into “am bitten” and “is awarded” to suit the grammatical context. As for Vietnamese, there are two voice markers: “bị” and “được”. “Bị” has a negative meaning and brings the sense that the action is unfavorable to the speaker, whereas “được” brings with it a positive meaning and indicates that the action is favorable to the speaker. Therefore, unlike the English language where passive voice is indicated by the verb “be” plus past participle, voice in Vietnamese can only be distinguished by deciding the agents who carries out the action and the receiver who is affected by that action.

From these problems, in order to eliminate students’ confusion about inflectional morphology, teachers need to clarify the issue in details by contrasting the two languages as well as give their students as many exercises as possible to help them apply and memorize the rules.

In short, those are some typical gaps in phonology and morphology between English and Vietnamese which account for Vietnamese learners’ common errors in acquiring the target language. As in any progress of acquiring a new language, the inevitable existence of errors from learners cannot be denied and should be accepted as part of the process. Therefore, teacher’s pedagogical precaution towards those errors is of extreme importance and it is his responsibility to successfully explore prevailing language learning difficulties and construct appropriate reading materials to help learners.

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