Guide for Multilingual Student Writing
Common English-Vietnamese Errors

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Introduction

This guide categorizes and explains ten of the most common errors that Vietnamese speakers tend to make when writing in English. The goal is twofold: 1) to help instructors unfamiliar with the Vietnamese language gain some insight into why these errors occur in papers of students whose first language is Vietnamese and 2) to provide instructors with some of the knowledge needed to help these students improve their writing skills in a more individualized and meaningful manner.

With the aim of making this guide a reader-friendly document, the sources consulted were not cited but are listed on the last page. Please note that most of the examples included were drawn from former student papers. In addition, an asterisk (*) is used before an error. Features being discussed are underlined, and the Vietnamese translation is written in *italics*.

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1. Verb Tenses

Type	Example	Error
Verb Tenses	I went to school yesterday.	I *go to school yesterday.

1.1. Vietnamese speakers tend to have difficulty with the use of verb tenses in English because tenses are not marked explicitly in their language, in both written and spoken forms. Speakers rely on contextual clues, such as time expressions (e.g., yesterday, today, tomorrow, next month) to determine the time in which actions take place. Vietnamese English learners tend to transfer this feature into English, resulting in the absence of correct verb tenses as in the following examples.

Example: I went to school yesterday.
Error: I *go to school yesterday.
(Hôm qua tôi đi học.)

Example: I am going to school right now.
Error: I *go to school right now.
(*Bây giờ tôi đi học.*)

Example: I will go to school tomorrow.
Error: I *go to school tomorrow.
(*Ngày mai tôi đi học*.)

Note: In general, time expressions (yesterday, today, tomorrow) are used at the beginning of sentences; however, they are placed at the end when answering the question "when."

Example: I have been going to school since last month.
Error: I *go to school *from last month.
(Tôi đi học từ tháng trước.)

1.2. However, when an emphasis on the time of action is needed, a tense marker is used (in front of the main verb). English speakers use 'do' in the simple present tense or 'did' in the simple past tense, e.g., I did go to school yesterday. Among the three principal tense markers *đã* (already), *đang* (in the process of), and *sẽ* (will), only *sẽ* functions as an auxiliary while *đã* and *đang* are adverbs.

Example: I *did* go to school yesterday.
Error: I **already* go to school yesterday.
(Hôm qua tôi đã đi học.)

Note: In the previous example, the word *đã* (already) is an adverb used as a time marker indicating the action is completed. Similarly, *đang* (in the process of) in the following example tells the reader that the action is taking place.

Example: I am going to school now.
Error: I *go/going to school now.
(Bây giờ tôi đang đi học.)

Example: I will go to school tomorrow.
Correct: I will go to school tomorrow.
(Ngày mai tôi sẽ đi học.)

Note: This final example shows that Vietnamese speakers tend to use the future tense correctly because it shares the same construction (will + base form) as its English counterpart when the future tense marker *sẽ* (will) is required for emphasis or clarity.

2. Verb Forms

Type	Example	Error
Verb Forms	My parents like to dance.	My parents like *dance.

Because Vietnamese is a non-inflected language, verbs do not have different forms as they do in English (infinitive, gerund, past participle, etc.); therefore, misuse of such variations is common among Vietnamese learners, and oftentimes, they resort to the base form of the verb in question.

2.1. Infinitive vs. gerund forms:

Example: My parents like to dance.
Error: My parents like *dance.
(Ba mẹ tôi thích khiêu vũ.)

Example: My parents like dancing.
Error: My parents like *dance.
(Ba mẹ tôi thích khiêu vũ.)

Note: While 'like dancing' and 'like to dance' have slightly different meanings in English, such distinction does not exist in Vietnamese.

Example: After a long drive, John stopped to get gas.
Error: After a long drive, John stopped *for getting gas.
(Sau một đoạn đường dài, John ngừng để (for) đổ xăng.)

Note: While the infinitive form is used in English to show the purpose for which John stopped, Vietnamese uses the preposition 'for' + verb for the same purpose.

Example: After his visit to the doctor, John stopped smoking.
Error: After his visit to the doctor, John *stopped smoke.
(Sau lần khám bác sĩ, John ngưng hút thuốc.)

Note: The infinitive form (to smoke) is used erroneously, which is a transfer from L1 (first language) to L2 (second language) by Vietnamese speakers.

2.2. Infinitive vs. base forms:

Example: Lan likes to play the piano.
Error: Lan *like play the piano.
(*Lan thích chơi đàn piano.)*

Note: The phrase “like play” in the previous example is a transfer from L1 to L2, where an infinitive is not required after the word like.

Example: Lan can play the piano.
Error: Lan *can to play the piano.
(Lan có thể chơi đàn piano.)

Note: The phrase “can to play” is an overgeneralization of the English structure verb + to + verb. In Vietnamese, the base form of a verb is used when it is preceded by either another verb (like, want, need, etc.) or an auxiliary (can, would, should, etc.) as shown in the first example. However, the second example seems to suggest that the writer learned and attempted to apply the English verb + infinitive rule but failed to recognize that ‘can’ is an auxiliary, which requires the base form of the main verb.

2.3. Simple past vs. past participle forms of irregular verbs:

Example: Austin has taken the test three times.
Error: Austin has *took the test three times.
(Austin đã thi ba lần.)

2.4. Simple past forms of regular vs. irregular verbs:

Example: He bought a car.
Error: He *buyed a car.
(Anh ấy đã mua xe.)

3. Inflectional Endings

Type	Example	Error
Inflectional Endings	I have two dictionaries.	I have two *dictionary.

Because Vietnamese is a non-inflected language, Vietnamese speakers tend to leave out English word endings as in the following examples.

3.1. Plural Marker 's'

There is no plural marker in Vietnamese. Number (plural or singular) is determined by a numeral or quantifier preceding the noun.

Example: I have two dictionaries.
Error: I have two *dictionary.
(*Tôi có hai cuốn từ điển.)*

3.2. Third person 's' in the present tense

Example: Joe buys food on the weekend.
Error: Joe *buy food on the weekend.
(*Joe mua thực phẩm cuối tuần.)*

Example: He does his homework at night.
Error: He *do his homework at night.
(Anh ấy làm bài tập vào buổi tối.)

3.3. Possessive 's'

Because the English possessive 's' construction (John's car) does not exist in Vietnamese, speakers tend to drop the 's' and often misuse this possessive construction.

Example: Ana's car is red.
Error: *Ana car is red.
(Xe Ana màu đỏ.)

Note: While English prefers the noun + of + noun construction to mark possession when the possessor is inanimate (e.g., the legs of the table), the same construction is used for both animate and inanimate possessors in Vietnamese.

Example: The legs of the table (inanimate) are sturdy.
Correct: The legs of the table are sturdy.
(Mấy cái chân của cái bàn rất chắc.)

Example: Ana's car is red.
Error: *The car of Ana is red.
(Xe của Ana màu đỏ.)

Error: *The car Ana is red.
(*Xe Ana màu đỏ.)*

Note: The two errors in the example above are both correct in Vietnamese because '*của*' (of) is optional.

4. Word Forms

Type	Example	Error
Word Forms	Tran is an independent worker.	Tran is an *independence worker.

Because Vietnamese is a non-inflected language, adjectives, nouns, and adverbs share the same forms, which results in incorrect use of word forms as in the following examples.

4.1. Adjectives vs. nouns vs. adverbs

Example: Tran is an independent worker.
Error: Tran is an *independence worker.
(Trần là một nhân viên độc lập.)

Example: Nguyen values her independence.
Error: Nguyen values her *independent.
(Nguyên tôn trọng sự độc lập của mình.)

Example: Trung-Son prefers working independently.
Error: Trung-Son prefers working *independent.
(Trung-Son thích làm việc độc lập.)

Example: Celine Dion has a beautiful voice; she sings beautifully.
Error: Celine Dion has a beautiful voice; she sings *beautiful.
(Celine Dion có chất giọng tuyệt vời; cô ấy ca tuyệt vời.)

4.2. Adjectives vs. verbs

Example: Marijuana is now legal in California; it was legalized in 2017.
Error: Marijuana is now legal in California; it was *become legal in 2017.
(Hiện nay cần sa đã hợp pháp ở bang California; nó đã được hợp pháp hóa năm 2017.)

Note: In Vietnamese, 'làm' (make) or 'hóa' (transform/become) are used to change a noun or an adjective to a verb as in the following examples: 'làm đẹp' (make beautiful = beautify) and 'hợp thức hóa' (become legal = legalize). For this reason, such verb phrases may be used more frequently than their inflected forms (make beautiful vs. beautify, make legal vs. legalize, etc.).

5. Word Order

Type	Example	Error
Word Order	Where did you go yesterday?	Yesterday you went *where?

5.1. Affirmative statements: English and Vietnamese share the same basic subject-verb-object (S-V-O) structure. For example, the sentence "Mary studies engineering at San José State University" directly translates to Vietnamese. *(Mary học kỹ sư ở trường đại học San José State.)*

5.2. Questions

5.2.1. Wh- questions: What, where, when, and how questions are formed using the same S-V-O order with the wh- question words being placed at the end.

Example: Where did you go yesterday?
Error: *Yesterday you went *where?
(Hôm qua bạn đi đâu?)

5.2.2. Who and why questions: These two questions are formed with the wh- words in the beginning as in English. In Vietnamese, the who question uses the same structure that English does. For example, "Who can answer this question?" directly translates to Vietnamese. *(Ai có thể trả lời câu hỏi này?)*

The why question is formed as follows:
Tại sao (why) + S-V-O? (without an auxiliary and 'tại' is optional)

Example: Why did you come early?
Error: Why *you came early?
(Tại sao bạn đến sớm? or *Sao bạn đến sớm?)*

5.2.3. Yes/no questions: These questions are formed in the S-V-O order with the word 'có' (yes) and 'không' (no) inserted as follows: S + có (yes) + V + O + không (no)?

Example: Does your group meet every week?
Error: *Your group meets every week yes or no?
(Nhóm bạn có họp mỗi tuần không?)

5.3. Negative statements

5.3.1. Negative statements without modal verbs are formed the same way they are in English, with the function word 'không' (no/not) taking the place of the auxiliary as follows: S + không + V + O.

Example: Our group does not meet every week.
Error: Our group *no/not meets every week.
(Nhóm chúng tôi không họp mỗi tuần.)

5.3.2. Negative statements with modal verbs are formed similarly with the exception of the function word 'không' (no/not) being placed immediately after the subject as follows: S + không + modal + V + O.

Example: Our group cannot meet every week.
Error: Our group *no/not can meet every week.
(Nhóm chúng tôi không thể họp mỗi tuần.)

5.4. Reverse order: Below are pairs of words that appear in the reverse order in Vietnamese compared to their sequences in English.

5.4.1. In Vietnamese, nouns come before adjectives.

English: Adjective + Noun
Vietnamese: Noun + Adjective

Example:	an environmental issue	a large project
Error:	an *issue environmental	a *project large
	(vấn đề môi trường)	*(một dự án lớn)*

5.4.2. In Vietnamese, the pronoun 'I' is used in the initial position in a compound subject.

English: My teammates and I
Vietnamese: I and my teammates

Example: My teammates and I completed the project on time.
Error: *I and my teammates completed the project on time.
(Tôi và các bạn cùng nhóm hoàn thành dự án đúng thời hạn.)

5.4.3. In Vietnamese, a date begins with the day followed by the month and year; each is preceded by the words *day*, *month*, and *year*.

Example: January 12, 2018
Error: 12 January 2018
(ngày [day] 12 tháng [month] 1 năm [year] 2018)

Note: Dates written in numbers could be confusing when the days are from the 1st to the 12th, coinciding with the 12 months as in the following example:

Example: 1/12/2018 can be read as two different dates.
English: January 12, 2018
Vietnamese: December 1, 2018

6. Pronouns

Type	Example	Error
Pronouns	I talk to her every day.	I talk to *she every day. *Me talk to *she every day.

In Vietnamese, subject and object pronouns share the same forms for each person in both singular and plural. Second and third person pronouns are gender specific, and the choice of pronouns is dependent on three main factors: age, social status, and attitude toward the person(s) being addressed.

SUBJECT		OBJECT	
English	**Vietnamese**	**English**	**Vietnamese**
I	Tôi	me	Tôi
you (singular)	Bạn (neutral) Anh (male) Chị (female) Mày (neutral, derogatory)	you	Bạn (neutral) Anh (male) Chị (female) Mày (neutral, derogatory)
he	Anh ấy (male)	him	Anh ấy (male)
she	Chị ấy (female)	her	Chị ấy (female)
it	Nó (neutral, object, animal, or derogatory term for human)	it	Nó (neutral, object, animal, or derogatory term for human)
we	Chúng ta	us	Chúng ta
you (plural)	Các bạn (neutral) Quý vị (neutral, honorific) Các anh (male) Các chị (female) Các anh chị (mixed) Tụi mày (neutral, derogatory)	you	Các bạn (neutral) Quý vị (neutral, honorific) Các anh (male) Các chị (female) Các anh chị (mixed) Tụi mày (neutral, derogatory)
they	Các bạn ấy /Họ (neutral) Các quý vị ấy (neutral, honorific) Các anh ấy (male) Các chị ấy (female) Các anh chị ấy (mixed) Chúng nó (neutral, objects, animals, or derogatory term for human)	them	Các bạn ấy /Họ (neutral) Các quý vị ấy (neutral, honorific) Các anh ấy (male) Các chị ấy (female) Các anh chị ấy (mixed) Chúng nó (neutral, objects, animals, or derogatory term for human)

6.1. Subject and object pronouns are used interchangeably (as with 'you' and 'it' in English).

Example: I talk to her every day.
Errors: I talk to *she every day.
*Me talk to *she every day.
(Tôi nói chuyện với cô ấy mỗi ngày.)

Example: She talks to me every day.
Errors: *Her talks to me every day.
She talks to *I every day.
(Cô ấy nói chuyện với tôi mỗi ngày.)

6.2. Other pronouns

6.2.1. In Vietnamese, kinship terms (father, mother, son, daughter, aunt, uncle, nephew, niece, etc.) are also used instead of pronouns in both family and social settings.

Example: My mother said: "I already made dinner for you."
Error: My mother said: "*Mother already made dinner for *son."
(Mẹ tôi bảo : "Me đã làm cơm tối cho con rồi".)

6.2.2. Vietnamese speakers may also use personal names (Lan, Hoa, Anne, John, etc.) in the place of pronouns in friendly, intimate settings, especially among peers or family members in the same age group or family/social ranks.

Example: John said: "Don't worry, Hoa. I will help you."
Error: John said: "Don't worry, Hoa. *John will help *Hoa."
(John nói : "Hoa đừng lo. John sẽ giúp Hoa".)

6.2.3. In formal settings, nouns denoting professions or social roles such as doctor, professor, teacher, engineer, nurse, defendant, etc. are also used instead of pronouns.

Example: Addressing the judge, John said: "I request that you review the evidence carefully."
Error: Addressing the judge, John said : "*The defendant requests that *the judge review the evidence carefully."
(John trình bày với vị chánh án, "Bi cáo yêu cầu chánh án xem xét các chứng cớ thật kỹ".)

7. Possessive Adjectives and Pronouns

Type	Example	Error
Possessive Adjectives and Pronouns	Your car is outside.	*Car of you is outside.

Vietnamese does not have possessive adjectives or pronouns; such concepts are expressed in a unique manner by its speakers as follows.

7.1. Possessive adjectives: To express possessive relationships, Vietnamese speakers use the possessive marker ‘của’ (belonging to) between the entity being possessed and the pronoun referring to (or name of) the possessor: noun + của + pronoun.

Example: Your car is outside.
Errors: *Car of you is outside.
(Xe của bạn ở bên ngoài.)

*You car is outside.
(Xe bạn ở bên ngoài.)

Note: Because the possessive marker ‘của’ is optional in most cases, both of the above errors are possible.

7.2. Possessive pronouns: Possessive pronouns are formed the same way as possessive adjectives in Vietnamese.

Example: Avinie’s project is challenging. Mine is simple.
Error: *Project of Avinie is challenging. *Project of me is simple.
(*Dự án của Avinie phức tạp. Dự án của tôi đơn giản.)*

8. Reflexivity

Type	Example	Error
Reflexivity	We have to help ourselves.	We have to help *us.

8.1. Reflexive pronouns: Because Vietnamese does not have reflexive pronouns (myself, yourself, himself, etc.), Vietnamese speakers use the reflexive marker 'tự' or 'tự...mình' to express reflexivity. As a result, object pronouns are often used, incorrectly, to express reflexivity in English sentences.

Example: We have to help ourselves.
Error: We have to help *us.
(Chúng ta phải tự giúp mình.)

Example: I made that cup of tea myself.
Error: I made that cup of tea *me.
(*Tôi tự pha tách trà cho mình.)*

8.2. Emphatic pronouns: In Vietnamese, the emphatic marker 'chính' is used in lieu of a reflexive pronoun in a sentence where an emphatic reflexive pronoun is used in English, e.g., John himself answered the phone. As a result, Vietnamese speakers may incorrectly use the corresponding pronoun for emphatic reason as in the following examples.

Example: I myself made a cup of tea.
Error: *Me I made a cup of tea.
(Chính tôi pha tách trà.)

Example: My father himself made a cup of tea.
Error: My father *he made a cup of tea.
(Chính ba tôi pha tách trà.)

9. Punctuation Marks

Type	Example	Error
Punctuation Marks	My father said: “I will show you later.”	My father said * : “I will show you later”.*

9.1. Commas and periods are placed outside quotation marks.

Example: My father said: “I will show you later.”
Error: My father said * : “I will show you later”*.
(Ba tôi nói : “Ba sẽ chỉ con sau”.)

Example: “I will show you later,” said my father.
Error: “I will show you later”*, said my father.
(“Ba sẽ chỉ con sau”, ba tôi nói.)

9.2. Some of the rules for using commas in Vietnamese are very different from those in English as shown in the following examples.

9.2.1. Commas are used to separate independent clauses, without requiring a conjunction before the last clause.

Example: During the test, John fell asleep, and Maria left the room.
Error: During the test, John fell asleep, * Maria left the room.
Note: This correct usage in Vietnamese is a comma splice in English.

9.2.2. Commas are used to separate decimals from whole numbers (while periods are for separating groups of thousands).

Example: 10,874,532.00
Error: 10*.874*.532,00

9.2.3. Commas are used between a clause and a transition in a compound sentence.

Example: It rained heavily; however, they managed to have a picnic.
Error: It rained heavily*, however they managed to have a picnic.
Note: This correct usage in Vietnamese is a comma splice in English.

9.2.4. A comma is not required when a dependent clause precedes an independent clause.

Example: Because it rained heavily, the concert was cancelled.
Error: Because it rained heavily * the concert was cancelled.

9.2.5. A comma is not used to introduce direct speech in dialogue; a colon is instead used with a space before and after.

Example: My father said, "I will show you later."
Error: My father said *: "I will show you later"*.
(Ba tôi nói : "Ba sẽ chỉ con sau".)

Note: An extra space is required before the colon in Vietnamese.

10. Capitalization

Type	Example	Error
Capitalization	In Viet Nam, Monday is the first day of the week.	In Viet Nam, *monday is the first day of the week.

10.1. Days and months are not capitalized in Vietnamese, and they can also be written as numbers because both are numbered, except for Sunday *(Chủ nhật)*.

Example: In Viet Nam, Monday is the first day of the week.
Error: In Viet Nam, *monday is the first day of the week.
(Ở Việt Nam, thứ hai là ngày đầu tuần. OR
Ở Việt Nam, thứ 2 là ngày đầu tuần.)

Example: Vietnamese New Year is usually in February.
Error: Vietnamese New Year is usually in *february.
(Tết Việt Nam thường vào tháng hai. OR
Tết Việt Nam thường vào tháng 2.)

Example: October 5, 2018
Error: *5/10/2018, which is read as May 10, 2018 in English
Note: See detailed discussion on dates in section five of this guide.

10.2. In Vietnamese, capitalization is *always* required after colons and semicolons. In English capitalization is optional after a colon if a complete thought (sentence) follows it; the word following a semicolon should never be capitalized.

Example: Vette left the room: she was upset.
Error: Vette left the room*: *She was upset.
(Vette rời khỏi phòng: Cô ấy tức giận.)*

Example: Some students drive; others take public transportation.
Error: Some students drive*; *Others take public transportation.
(Một số sinh viên lái xe nhà ; Số khác đi xe buyt.)

Note: An extra space before the colon or semicolon is required in Vietnamese.

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