(REVIEW ARTICLE)

Common Errors in Learning English Ditransitive Verbs and Their Complements: A Contrastive Analysis between English and Vietnamese

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Abstract

This study investigates the errors commonly made by Vietnamese learners of English in the acquisition and use of ditransitive verbs and their complements. While ditransitive verbs play a central role in English syntax by allowing two objects, their syntactic and semantic patterns diverge significantly from those in Vietnamese. Such divergences often lead to systematic errors in sentence construction, particularly in the ordering of direct and indirect objects, the use of prepositions, the identification of object types, and the distinction between complements and adjuncts. Drawing on a combination of contrastive analysis and error analysis, this research identifies five major error types: (1) misordering of complements, (2) misuse or omission of prepositions, (3) misidentification of object types, (4) confusion between finite WH-interrogative clauses and nominal relative clauses, and (5) difficulties in distinguishing between ditransitive verbs and complex transitive verbs. The findings highlight the influence of first language transfer from Vietnamese, where object positions are relatively flexible and prepositions function differently. The study concludes with pedagogical recommendations aimed at reducing errors and enhancing learners' syntactic competence. It is hoped that the results will contribute not only to improving teaching strategies but also to refining translation and grammar instruction for Vietnamese learners of English.

Keywords: Ditransitive verbs; Double object construction; Indirect object; Direct object; Preposition use; Vietnamese learners of English; Error analysis; Contrastive analysis

1. Introduction

English ditransitive verbs, also known as double-object verbs, form a crucial part of English syntax because they allow verbs to take both a direct and an indirect object. Typical examples include give, send, offer, and show. In these constructions, the verb licenses two objects, usually in the order of indirect object (IO) followed by direct object (DO), as in He gave Mary a book. Alternatively, English also permits the prepositional pattern He gave a book to Mary.

While these constructions appear relatively straightforward, they are among the most problematic areas for learners of English as a foreign language, particularly those whose first language is Vietnamese. Vietnamese allows more flexibility in word order, and prepositions play a different syntactic role compared to English. As a result, learners often carry over Vietnamese syntactic habits into English, producing ungrammatical or awkward sentences.

A number of studies (Alexander, 1998; Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973, 1990; Huddleston, 1984; Leech & Svartvik, 1984; Michael, 1994) have addressed the classification of English verb patterns and the difficulties they pose to learners. However, relatively few have focused specifically on the systematic errors made by Vietnamese learners when dealing with ditransitive verbs and their complements. This study seeks to fill that gap by providing a detailed analysis of such errors.

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The research aims to:

- + Identify the common errors Vietnamese learners make with ditransitive verbs.
- + Explain these errors in terms of cross-linguistic influence and syntactic complexity.
- + Offer practical suggestions for teaching and learning.

By adopting both contrastive and error analysis approaches, this study hopes to illuminate the specific difficulties faced by Vietnamese learners and propose solutions that can enhance teaching methodology and learner competence.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design combining contrastive analysis and error analysis. Contrastive analysis involves comparing the syntactic features of English and Vietnamese ditransitive verbs to predict areas of difficulty. Error analysis examines actual learner performance to categorize common mistakes.

2.2. Data Collection

The data consist of Examples from standard English grammar references, including Alexander (1998), Quirk & Greenbaum (1973, 1990), Huddleston (1984), and Leech & Svartvik (1984). These examples illustrate correct English usage.

Common learner errors observed in Vietnamese classrooms and reflected in prior studies. These errors are reconstructed and analyzed in contrast to correct forms.

Contrastive structures from Vietnamese, translated into English to demonstrate typical transfer-induced errors.

The analysis focuses on five main error categories (Sections 3.1.1–3.1.5), each illustrated with authentic or constructed examples to show the divergence between English and Vietnamese.

3. Findings

3.1. Errors in the Ordering of Complements

English allows both S + V + IO + DO and S + V + DO + IO patterns in many cases:

He bought Jane a present.

He bought a present for Jane.

However, restrictions exist. When the direct object is a clause, it cannot precede the indirect object:

Ann told me that I should take a holiday. ✅

Ann told that I should take a holiday to me. ✗

Similarly, with fixed verb-preposition combinations such as accuse somebody of something or convict somebody of something, word order cannot be altered:

They accused Helen of stealing the gold bullion. ✅

They accused stealing the gold bullion for Helen. ✗

Vietnamese, by contrast, permits greater flexibility in object placement, which may lead learners to assume English follows the same principle.

Pedagogical implication: Learners should be trained to recognize when object inversion is permissible and when it is not, with special emphasis on fixed collocations and clause objects.

3.2. Errors in the Use of Prepositions

Prepositions present a major challenge. Learners often omit required prepositions when reversing object order:

He gave the girl a doll. → He gave a doll to the girl. ✅

He gave a doll the girl. ❌

Similarly:

He bought the girl a hat. → He bought a hat for the girl. ✅

He bought a hat the girl. ❌

Another source of error is the incorrect assumption that the Vietnamese word cho always translates as for:

We booked you a double room with bath. ✅

We booked for you a double room with bath. ❌

Finally, some verbs require to-infinitives after the object, but learners omit to:

I asked him to go. ✅

I asked him go. ❌

Pedagogical implication: Learners should practice alternating between double-object and prepositional constructions, with attention to obligatory prepositions.

3.3. Errors in Identifying Object Types

Vietnamese learners often misclassify direct and indirect objects. For instance:

He bought his wife a gold watch.

Incorrect: his wife = DO, a gold watch = IO

Correct: his wife = IO, a gold watch = DO

A reliable test is inserting to or for:

The dentist gave her a filling. → The dentist gave (to) her a filling.

Pedagogical implication: Teaching should emphasize syntactic tests for object identification rather than relying solely on semantic intuition.

3.4. Errors in Identifying Direct Object Clause Structures

Learners struggle to distinguish between nominal relative clauses and finite WH-interrogative clauses:

He asked me what caused the fire. (Finite WH-interrogative clause)

He told me what caused the fire. (Nominal relative clause)

The distinction is subtle but crucial. Nominal relatives can be paraphrased as noun phrases with relative clauses (He told me the reason that caused the fire), while WH-interrogatives cannot.

Pedagogical implication: Instruction should incorporate paraphrasing exercises to clarify the structural difference between the two clause types.

3.5. Errors in Identifying Sentence Structures

Learners frequently confuse ditransitive verbs (SVOO) with complex transitive verbs (SVOA). Compare:

They gave it to Sam. → Sam was given it. (SVOO)

He took the rubbish to the tip. → No passive possible (SVOA).

Similarly:

Will you get some milk for Liz? → Liz was got some milk. (SVOO)

Will you iron this dress for Liz? → Liz was ironed this dress. ✖ *(SVOA).*

Two diagnostic tests help:

Passive transformation: Only IOs can become subjects in passives.

Word-order alternation: *He gave it to Sam → He gave Sam it* (valid for SVOO, invalid for SVOA).

Pedagogical implication: Teachers should train learners to apply these tests to avoid confusing indirect objects with adverbials.

4. Conclusion

The analysis reveals that Vietnamese learners of English face persistent difficulties with ditransitive verbs due to cross-linguistic transfer and syntactic complexity. The five major error categories—misordering of complements, misuse of prepositions, misidentification of object types, confusion over clause complements, and misclassification of sentence structures—demonstrate both surface-level mistakes and deeper conceptual misunderstandings.

Pedagogical solutions include:

- Explicit teaching of object order restrictions.
- Focused practice on prepositional alternations.
- Use of diagnostic tests (to/for insertion, passivization, word-order alternation).
- Paraphrasing exercises for clause complements.
- Clear distinction between indirect objects and adverbials.

By addressing these areas, teachers can reduce errors and enhance learners' grammatical competence. For Vietnamese learners, mastering ditransitive verbs is not only essential for accurate sentence construction but also for effective translation and communication in English.

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