

## GRAMMAR MISTAKES IN USING AUXILIARIES VERBS OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

Nguyễn Lan Hương<sup>\*</sup>

University of Agriculture and Forestry - TNU

### SUMMARY

This study was conducted to find out the common grammar mistakes in using auxiliary verbs of first year students at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry (TUAF). The descriptive method of research was used in the study, using questionnaire and English grammar exercises as the main instrument of the data collection. Results show that the serious problem of students is the confusion of auxiliary. The difference in use of "to be" and auxiliary "do" probably caused much difficulty for students. In places of *be* they put in *do* and in place of *do* they put in *be*. The ratio of misplacing *be* with *do* is higher in case of past tense (over 40% of students). Furthermore, students had encountered more difficulty in making negation and interrogation than affirmation. From the results, some possible solutions were suggested to help students reduce and prevent mistakes during the process of learning English language.

**Key words** Grammar, mistakes, auxiliary verbs, first-year, TUAF

### INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam English has been considered an ideal choice of majority of the Vietnamese and has become compulsory subject in many schools from primary to college.

At the TUAF, English is a compulsory subject for every student. They have to learn English during three semesters. Although the course book was designed to teach English to students focuses on communicating skills, it is undeniable that grammar makes communication smoother and more proper. Grammar is essentially important. Grammar has been described as the science of language, from the points of view of pronunciation, inflection, syntax, and historical development. Grammar is the branch of language study or linguistics which deals with the means of showing the relationship between words in use. They are divided as the study of inflections (Morphology) and the structure of the sentences (Syntax) and also often including phonology. [4] Without grammar, many students may become fluent at intermediate level but cannot go further. A grammarless learning approach may lead to

simplification, overgeneralization or influence of native language to target language. Therefore, grammar should be presented, either implicitly or explicitly, during learning process and errors during the learning process should be treated as by-products in learners' progress. Teachers should take good notice of the error phenomena to help learners learn from the errors. The teacher and textbook should help self-learning, whenever the textbook fails in this regard, the teacher should fill up the gap and motivate the students [1].

It is clear that the 'verb' plays an important role in English. Most sentences in English contain at least one verb. Therefore, verbs are a very complicated type of words which are used the most often and play the first important position in comparison with other word classes. As the use of the verb is complicated, mistakes are often made and the mistakes in using auxiliaries can be seen very frequently. Auxiliary verbs are always precede as main verbs within a VP. Traditionally, auxiliaries have been called *helping verbs* because they always appear together with a main verb and seem to refine its meaning. Along with inflections on the

<sup>\*</sup> Tel: 01686 323307

main verb, they indicate whether the action of the verb is in progress, repetitive or complete. This is called *aspect. Tense*, which is the time that the action occurs (i.e., present, past or future) is indicated by the inflections on the verbs, and on auxiliary verbs, or by modal auxiliary verbs like *will* [3]. A verb that is used with another verb to show its tense, form questions, form the passive, or change an aspect of its meaning. The main auxiliary verbs in English are 'be', 'have', and 'do'. An auxiliary verb is "a highly irregular verb that is used with other verbs to form voice, tense, and mood." In English, auxiliary verbs have a few grammatical functions: Support, Interrogative, Negation, Inversion, Emphasis, Ellipsis, Tag questions.

Verbs are very complicated type of words which are used most often and play the first important position in comparison with other word classes. As the use of the verb is complicated, mistakes are often made and the mistakes in using auxiliaries can be seen very frequently. Thus, mistake correction is an indispensable part in the teaching and learning process, which should take much attention. Mistake correction helps learners work out the rules of the language and make further progress.

#### SUBJECTS AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The respondents of this study were 200 freshmen English non-major students at TUAF.

This study employed the descriptive method of research. It describes the nature of a situation as it exists at the time of the study and to explore the causes of particular phenomena [5]. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and exercises made by researcher. Questionnaires were used to obtain views of how long students have learned English, why they learn English, what types of errors they often make and how they react to the errors they make.

Exercises were designed and delivered to students to examine the errors they would make.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### The questionnaire for students

The survey questionnaire was delivered to 200 freshmen at TUAF. There were 105 female students and 95 male students. The results of the study are discussed below.

Table 1: Students' years of learning English

Years of learning English	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 1 year	25	12.5
3-4 years	60	30.00
7-8 years	115	57.5

As shown in the table 1, 115 students or 57.5 percent have learnt English since primary school up to now, which means they have been learning English for over 7 years; 60 students or 30 percent have learnt English since secondary school up to now, which means they have been learning English for over 3 years; and the rest 25 (12.5%) only started learning English when entering university. However, most of them said that they only paid attention to the subjects they needed for the university entrance exam and hardly learnt English at all. Most of them came from mountainous areas where they did not have much exposure to English and could not afford their extra studies. As for the rest of 25 students, they did learn a foreign language at school but not English. When they entered university, they learnt English right from the first term. Although the course book chosen was at elementary level, they met with a lot of difficulties learning this language at university. This finding implies that when students entered university, they did not have much knowledge of English, as a result, English almost became a difficult subject for them.

Table 2: Students' purposes of learning English

Purposes of Learning English	Frequency	Percentage
to pass the exams	150	75
to read and understand E documents	30	15
to be able to communicate with foreigners	20	10

Table 2 shows that most students (75%) only learn English to pass the exams. A large number of them were not interested in English as they found English difficult. Only 15 percent liked English and wanted to learn English in order to help them understand documents in English.

**Table 3: Students' frequency of making mistakes**

Numbers of respondents	Always (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Rarely (%)
200	55	25	15	5

From the table 3, we can see that 55% of the students always make mistakes during learning process. 25% of the students sometimes make mistakes in using auxiliary verbs. Only 5% of the students say that they hardly ever make mistakes when they use auxiliary verbs. The table further implies that majority of the students can not avoid making mistake when they learn English language.

Table 4 represents students' attitudes towards role of auxiliary clearly. Most of them (61%) believed that the knowledge of auxiliary helped them make grammatically correct sentences. 25 % of the students thought that their knowledge of auxiliary only helped them

use auxiliary correctly. 10% said that their knowledge of auxiliary would help better communicate with foreigners. These students explained that to express their ideas well in English, they not only needed a rich vocabulary but also good understandings and use of grammar and auxiliary was part of grammar. These students also added that learning auxiliary was very useful since auxiliary help them produce proper English. 6 out of 200 students said that auxiliary helped them understand English grammar.

**Table 4: Students' attitudes towards role of auxiliary**

Attitudes towards role of auxiliary	Frequency	Percentage
using AVs correctly	50	25
making grammatically correct sentences	122	61
communicating	20	10
understanding English grammar	8	4

### The exercises for students

Exercises were given to students in order to gain information about different areas of errors they would make in using English auxiliary

### Exercise 1

**Table 5: Students' mistakes in different types of verbs**

Sent n°	Correct answer	Percent-age (%)	Incorrect					
			CA	Per (%)	MA	Per (%)	S-V Ag	Per (%)
1	didn't	45	wasn't	32	not	3	don't	20
2	are	77.5	do	14		0	is	8.5
3	have	76	Do/are	18.5		0	has	10.5
4	do	59.5	Are/hav	34		0	does	6.5
5	has	46.5	Is/docs	33.5		0	have	20
6	does	41	is	29.5		0	do	29.5
7	does	41	is	29.5		0	do	29.5
8	Doesn't	37.5	Isn't	31	not	2.5	Don't	29
9	was	47	did	31		0	Were/is	22
10	did	29	Were/w	25.5		0	do	45.5

CA: Confusion of auxiliary

MA: Missing auxiliary

S-V Ag: Subject-verb agreement

Mis-A: Mis-ordering auxiliary

RA: Redundant auxiliary

The main purpose of this exercise is to check students' use of "do" and "to be". The mis-ordering and redundant auxiliary errors are not shown in table 5. The explanation for this is that the exercise asked students to do the gap-filling; therefore they knew that a verb was required for

each gap and there was little chance for them to misplace the verb. The result shows that the number of incorrect answers approximates to that of correct answers. It is shown quite clearly in the table that a large number of students were confused on the correct use of *be* with *do*.

Table 6: Students' mistakes in different types of sentences

Types of sentences	Types of verbs	Numbers of sentences	Mistakes				
			Confusion of Aux	Missing auxiliary	Subject-verb agreement	Mis-ordering Aux	Redundant Aux
Negative	Ordinary	1	39.5	15	12	0	0
	Modal <i>can</i>	1	0	0	0	6	11
	<i>be</i>	1	6	16.5	6	0	0
Affirmative	Ordinary	1	0	0	0	0	69.5
	<i>be</i>	1	19	0	0	0	0
	Modal <i>can</i>	1	0	0	0	0	11.5
Positive	Ordinary	1	26.5	7.5	12.5	0	0
	<i>be</i>	1	27	0	6.5	0	0
	Modal <i>can</i>	1	0	0	0	11	9

In terms of subject-verb agreement errors, most of the cases students made errors in supplying a plural verb instead of singular, that is, in the sentences where subject was singular and needed a singular form of the verb, students also put in a plural form. However, the serious problem of students shown in table 5 is the confusion of auxiliary. The difference in use of "to be" and auxiliary "do" probably caused much difficulty for students. In places of *be* they put in *do* and in place of *do* they put in *be*. The ratio of misplacing *be* with *do* is higher in case of past tense. The data collected points out that in sentences where *was/were* was needed, *did* was often used. It could be implied that a large number of students realize the past tense in the sentences and they took *did* as the signal.

The confusion occurred quite clearly in questions with a singular subject and an ordinary verb (around 30% of students). In such cases, "does" had to be added at the beginning of the sentence. However, the use of "is" was rather common. These students may be influenced by the use of *to be* at the beginning of the program when *to be* was first introduced. They took it for granted that *to be* was put at the beginning of a sentence to make a question.

In conclusion, the results from exercise one shows students difficulty in differentiating "be"

and auxiliary "do". They almost took *be* instead of *do* in present tense while in the past tense *did* was considered the signal of the past.

Redundant auxiliary errors were a serious phenomenon with ordinary verbs and only occur in affirmative sentences (69.5% students committed this error). It could be inferred that a large number of students bore a deep notion of using *be* together with another ordinary verb although *be* did not function as any type of auxiliaries. Luckily, only a few number of students used *be* with modal verbs. It can be seen that this type of error did not occur with the copular *be*, that is, students might use *be* before an ordinary or a modal, they did not use an ordinary before *be*.

No students made subject-verb agreement with modal verbs. This type of error is shown with both *be* and *do* to make a comparison. Though students might often make errors of forms of *be* in positive sentences, they were more likely to commit errors in negative and interrogative sentences where an ordinary verb was used.

The table shows that students had more difficulty in making negation and interrogation than affirmation. Only 18 students (9%) used *do* in an affirmative sentence where *be* must be used. The number is three to four times higher in questions and

negative sentences respectively. The result shows that students were most likely to get confused *do* with *be* in the present simple.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusion

The study found a great deal of errors made by first-year students. There are different sources of the errors but imperfect learning and overgeneralization are the leading factors. Errors are observed to be indispensable. Many methodologists and linguists have studied errors and error correction and come to the conclusion that errors are very useful in language learning and error correction helps learners work out the rules of the language and make further progress. Errors tell teachers of languages how much progress learners have to make towards the language target, where and when they need help and what sort of help they need. In addition, through errors researchers can discover what learners should do to better acquire the language. [2]

### Recommendations

The first-year students can not avoid making mistakes during their learning foreign language process. It is necessary for both teachers and students realize what sorts of common mistakes students often make and then find out appropriate solutions to reduce mistakes. The following can be taken into consideration. First of all, in learning English tenses, students need to understand their form, meanings and uses clearly to avoid confusing auxiliary or missing auxiliary verbs. Secondly, students need to practise using

English grammar as much as possible. Students should work in pairs or in groups. They can learn each other's mistakes. From that, they use auxiliary verbs correctly. Finally, students should bear in mind that "practice makes perfect". Apart from the above-mentioned positive solutions for students, there are some effective suggestions for teachers. Firstly, teachers should consider students' mistakes in using auxiliary verbs as a natural and normal sign. If they are much worried about students' mistakes and disappointed with their students, they may develop negative attitude.

Secondly, teachers should apply the more positive and effective correcting techniques. Thirdly, whenever students make mistakes, teachers should not interrupt or criticize them immediately because mistake correction is not a frightening act.

## REFERENCES

1. Chandra Bose (2005). "The problems in learning modal auxiliary verbs in English at high school level" *Language in India*. Volume 5 11
2. Corder, S. P 1967 "The significance of learners' errors" *International Review of Applied Linguistics*
3. Cowan, R (2008) "The Teacher's Grammar of English". A Course Book and Reference Guide, Cambridge University Press
4. Hải, H T H (2003). "A study on grammatical and textual errors in paragraphs written by the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students at the English department - college of foreign languages - Vietnam national University". MA Thesis, VNU.
5. Sevilla, "Research Method" Manila. Rex Book Store Inc, 1994.

**TÓM TẮT**  
**NHỮNG LỖI NGỮ PHÁP KHI SỬ DỤNG TRỢ ĐỘNG TỪ**  
**CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC NÔNG LÂM –**  
**ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN**

**Nguyễn Lan Hương\***

*Trường Đại học Nông Lâm – ĐH Thái Nguyên*

Nghiên cứu này được tiến hành để tìm ra những lỗi ngữ pháp trong việc sử dụng trợ động từ mà sinh viên năm thứ nhất trường đại học Nông Lâm Thái Nguyên thường mắc phải. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp mô tả với câu hỏi điều tra và các bài tập ngữ pháp tiếng Anh là công cụ chính để thu thập dữ liệu. Kết quả cho thấy rằng lỗi cơ bản mà sinh viên mắc phải là sự nhầm lẫn giữa các trợ động từ. Sự khác biệt trong việc sử dụng "to be" và "do" gây ra nhiều khó khăn cho sinh viên. Hơn nữa, sinh viên gặp nhiều khó khăn trong sử dụng câu phủ định, câu nghi vấn hơn câu khẳng định. Từ đó, nghiên cứu đưa ra một số giải pháp tích cực để giúp các bạn sinh viên tìm ra lỗi và khắc phục lỗi trong quá trình học ngôn ngữ tiếng Anh.

**Từ khóa** *lỗi, ngữ pháp, trợ động từ, sinh viên năm nhất, TUAH*

*Ngày nhận bài: 11/9/2016; Ngày phản biện: 03/10/2016; Ngày duyệt đăng: 31/03/2017*

---

\* Tel: 01686 323307