

Tense–Aspect Errors among Vietnamese Undergraduates with English as a Minor: Patterns and Explanations

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Received: January 26, 2026

Accepted: July 13, 2026

Online Published: October 20, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v17n1p224

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v17n1p224>

Abstract

This study investigates systematic patterns of tense–aspect errors among Vietnamese undergraduates majoring in other disciplines while pursuing English as a minor at the Academy of Journalism and Communication (AJC), Vietnam. It further examines the linguistic and cognitive factors underlying these recurring errors. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-method design, the study draws on data from written production tasks, a grammar test, and semi-structured interviews involving 120 second-year undergraduates (aged 19–20) with English proficiency ranging from A2 to B1 (CEFR). The findings reveal systematic error patterns, particularly in the use of past tense, perfect and progressive aspects, and auxiliary verbs. Quantitative analysis shows that misuse of past tense forms and omission of auxiliary verbs constitute the most frequent error categories, while qualitative evidence indicates that learners rely heavily on temporal adverbials and rule-based strategies when selecting tense–aspect forms. These findings are interpreted through cross-linguistic influence, cognitive processing constraints, and interlanguage development, highlighting the effects of the typological differences between Vietnamese and English. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of tense–aspect acquisition in Vietnamese EFL contexts and offers pedagogical implications for grammar instruction in languages where the first language lacks grammatical tense morphology.

Keywords: tense-aspect, error patterns, Vietnamese EFL learners, interlanguage, cross-linguistic influence

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Mastering the English tense–aspect system remains one of the most persistent challenges for second and foreign language learners, despite decades of research on tense–aspect acquisition and advances in language pedagogy (Bardovi-Harlig, 2018; Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé 2022; Ellis, 2021).

As a result, tense–aspect errors continue to be reported across different learning contexts, even among learners with several years of formal English instruction. These persistent difficulties suggest that tense–aspect errors are not merely isolated grammatical inaccuracies but may reflect deeper cross-linguistic influence, cognitive processing constraints, and the developmental nature of second language acquisition.

1.2 Importance of the Problem

A substantial body of research has shown that tense–aspect acquisition represents one of the most complex domains of second language development. Unlike grammatical features that rely primarily on formal accuracy, successful use of tense and aspect requires learners to establish appropriate relationships between verb morphology, temporal reference, lexical aspect, and discourse context (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000, 2018, 2023; Ayoun & Salaberry, 2018). Recent reviews further indicate that successful tense–aspect acquisition depends on learners' ability to integrate linguistic form, semantic interpretation, discourse functions, and instructional input rather than relying solely on morphological knowledge (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé 2022).

Consequently, learners frequently experience persistent difficulties in selecting and interpreting tense–aspect forms, even after years of formal instruction. These difficulties have been documented across learners from diverse first-language backgrounds, suggesting that tense–aspect acquisition involves not only grammatical knowledge but also broader cognitive and conceptual processes.

These challenges are particularly pronounced among Vietnamese learners of English because Vietnamese and English differ fundamentally in how temporal meaning is encoded. Vietnamese is an analytic language that does not mark tense morphologically on verbs; instead, temporal reference is typically expressed through lexical items, aspectual particles, and contextual inference. In contrast, English requires obligatory tense and aspect marking on verbs, even when temporal information is already provided elsewhere in the discourse. Such typological differences have long been recognized as important sources of cross-linguistic influence in second language

acquisition and continue to shape learners' acquisition of tense–aspect morphology across diverse instructional settings (Odlin, 1989; Lardiere, 2009). These structural differences have long been recognized as a major source of difficulty in second language acquisition, particularly for learners whose first language lacks obligatory tense morphology. This typological mismatch creates persistent challenges for Vietnamese learners, who often rely on first-language strategies when producing English tense–aspect forms. Consequently, Vietnamese EFL learners provide a particularly valuable context for investigating how tense–aspect systems are acquired, represented, and used in second language learning.

1.3 Description of Relevant Scholarship

Research on tense–aspect acquisition has evolved from descriptive accounts of learner errors to broader theoretical explanations of how temporal and aspectual systems develop in a second language. Early studies in error analysis documented recurrent problems such as tense substitution, auxiliary omission, and the overgeneralization of inflectional morphology (Corder, 1967; Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Lardiere, 2009; Ellis, 2021). Although these studies provided valuable descriptions of learner performance, they generally treated errors as discrete linguistic phenomena rather than as systematic manifestations of underlying learner competence. Recent state-of-the-scholarship reviews further indicate that research on L2 tense–aspect acquisition has increasingly moved beyond the description of learner errors toward theoretically informed accounts that integrate interlanguage development, lexical aspect, cross-linguistic influence, and instructional perspectives (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé 2020, 2022).

Subsequent SLA research has increasingly interpreted learner errors as evidence of interlanguage development, emphasizing that recurring error patterns reflect learners' evolving grammatical representations rather than random inaccuracies (Selinker, 1972; Han, 2004). At the same time, studies on cross-linguistic influence have demonstrated that learners' first language plays a crucial role in shaping the acquisition of tense–aspect systems, particularly when substantial typological differences exist between the first and second languages (Odlin, 1989; Lardiere, 2009). From this perspective, tense–aspect errors arise through the interaction of transfer effects, cognitive processing constraints, and developmental factors rather than from inadequate grammatical knowledge alone. More recent syntheses likewise emphasize that transfer interacts dynamically with developmental processes and learning conditions rather than functioning as an isolated explanatory factor (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé 2022; Bardovi-Harlig & Sprouse, 2024).

Developmental accounts further suggest that tense–aspect acquisition follows predictable learning trajectories. According to the Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen & Shirai, 1996), learners initially associate tense–aspect morphology with prototypical verb classes before gradually extending it to more abstract semantic contexts. Subsequent state-of-the-scholarship reviews have largely confirmed the continued explanatory value of the Aspect Hypothesis while also highlighting the influence of proficiency, task effects, first-language transfer, and instructional variables on learners' developmental trajectories (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé 2020). This perspective has been widely adopted in SLA research because it explains why some tense–aspect forms emerge earlier than others and why certain error patterns remain remarkably persistent despite continued language instruction.

Within the Vietnamese EFL context, research has consistently shown that learners experience persistent difficulties with English grammatical morphology, particularly in areas where English and Vietnamese differ substantially in morphosyntactic encoding. Studies have documented learners' reliance on first-language structures, delayed acquisition of obligatory grammatical forms, and challenges in coordinating form with communicative meaning (Nguyen & Newton, 2022; Tran et al., 2024). However, most existing research has focused primarily on describing learners' performance or specific grammatical features, with comparatively limited attention to the cognitive mechanisms and interlanguage processes underlying recurring tense–aspect errors. Moreover, few studies have adopted an integrated mixed-method approach that combines quantitative analyses of learner errors with qualitative evidence of learners' reasoning processes. Recent state-of-the-scholarship reviews have likewise highlighted the need for research that integrates quantitative analyses of learner performance with qualitative evidence of learner cognition, particularly in under-researched EFL contexts (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé 2022). Consequently, the relationship between observable error patterns and the linguistic, cognitive, and developmental factors that shape them remains insufficiently understood, particularly among Vietnamese university students learning English as a minor. These unresolved issues highlight the need for a more integrated investigation that not only identifies recurring error patterns but also explains the linguistic and cognitive mechanisms underlying them.

1.4 The Present Study and Research Questions

To address these unresolved issues, the present study investigates systematic patterns of tense–aspect errors in the written production of Vietnamese undergraduate EFL learners pursuing English as a minor. Rather than treating learner errors as isolated grammatical inaccuracies, the study adopts an integrated perspective that examines how recurring error patterns reflect cross-linguistic influence, cognitive processing constraints, and interlanguage development. This integrated perspective is consistent with recent calls in SLA research for explanatory models that combine linguistic, cognitive, and developmental dimensions of second language learning (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé 2022; Ellis, 2021). By combining quantitative analyses of learner performance with qualitative evidence from learner interviews, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of both the distribution of tense–aspect errors and the mechanisms underlying their occurrence. Such mixed-method approaches are increasingly recommended because they enable researchers to link observable learner performance with the cognitive processes underlying language development (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé 2022).

The study contributes to the existing literature in three important ways. First, it examines tense–aspect errors as systematic manifestations of interlanguage development rather than as isolated grammatical mistakes. Second, it integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence to establish explicit links between observable error patterns and learners’ underlying reasoning processes. Third, it interprets the findings within complementary SLA perspectives, including cross-linguistic influence and the Aspect Hypothesis, thereby providing a more theoretically grounded account of tense–aspect acquisition among Vietnamese EFL learners. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What recurring patterns of tense and aspect errors are evident in the written production of Vietnamese undergraduate learners pursuing English as a minor?

RQ2. How can these error patterns be explained in terms of cross-linguistic influence, cognitive processing constraints, and interlanguage development?

This design enables the study not only to identify systematic error patterns but also to explain the linguistic and cognitive processes underlying them. The methodological procedures employed to achieve these objectives are presented in the following section.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

To address the research questions outlined above, the present study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-method design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. This design is widely recommended for investigating complex educational and second language phenomena because it integrates quantitative patterns with qualitative explanations, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This methodological approach was selected because it enabled the study not only to identify recurring patterns of tense–aspect errors but also to explain the linguistic and cognitive mechanisms underlying these patterns.

The quantitative phase involved a written production task and a grammar test to examine the frequency and distribution of tense–aspect errors in learners’ written performance. The qualitative phase subsequently employed semi-structured interviews to explore learners’ reasoning processes, grammatical awareness, and conceptual understanding of tense and aspect. Integrating findings from both phases enhanced the explanatory power of the study by linking observable error patterns with the cognitive and developmental processes that produced them.

2.2 Participants

The participants were 120 second-year undergraduate students pursuing English as a minor at the Academy of Journalism and Communication (AJC), Vietnam. They were between 19 and 20 years of age and had studied English as a compulsory subject for at least seven years. Based on institutional placement tests and course records, their English proficiency ranged from CEFR A2 to B1 (pre-intermediate to intermediate).

This group was considered particularly appropriate for the present study because English-minor students typically receive sufficient formal instruction in English grammar while continuing to experience persistent difficulties with tense–aspect usage in authentic written communication. Their proficiency level therefore provided a suitable context for investigating systematic patterns of tense–aspect errors and the interlanguage processes underlying them.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from intact classes to which the researcher had instructional access. Although this sampling strategy ensured feasibility and ecological validity, it may limit the generalizability of the findings to other learner populations. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent prior to data collection.

2.3 Data Collection

Three complementary instruments were employed to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

2.3.1 Written Production Task

Participants completed a guided narrative writing task designed to elicit authentic use of English tense–aspect forms, particularly the simple past, present perfect, and progressive constructions. The task required students to narrate a past experience based on a series of prompts, thereby encouraging relatively spontaneous written production rather than isolated sentence-level responses.

2.3.2 Grammar Test

A grammar test comprising 30 items was administered to examine learners’ controlled use of tense–aspect forms. The test included multiple-choice and sentence-completion items covering major tense–aspect constructions relevant to the participants’ proficiency level. The instrument was adapted from established EFL grammar materials for A2–B1 learners and modified to ensure contextual appropriateness and alignment with the objectives of the present study. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha, which yielded a satisfactory reliability coefficient ($\alpha = .82$).

2.3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

To complement the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sub-sample of 15 participants representing different patterns and frequencies of tense–aspect errors identified in the quantitative phase. The interviews explored

learners' reasoning processes, grammatical decision-making, learning strategies, and conceptual understanding of tense and aspect. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to encourage natural and detailed responses. They were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. To enhance translation accuracy, selected transcripts were independently cross-checked by a second bilingual researcher.

2.4 Error Identification and Coding

Tense–aspect errors were identified following established procedures in second language error analysis. An error was operationally defined as any deviation from target-like tense or aspect use in contexts where a particular grammatical form was obligatory.

Drawing upon previous SLA research and preliminary examination of the dataset, a coding framework was developed comprising six major error categories: (i) misuse of past tense forms; (ii) omission of auxiliary verbs; (iii) confusion between perfect and progressive constructions; (iv) overgeneralization of regular past tense morphology; (v) tense–aspect mismatch with temporal adverbials; and (vi) inconsistent tense usage within discourse. The coding procedure consisted of two stages. First, all written compositions and grammar test responses were manually examined to identify tense–aspect errors. Second, each error was classified according to the established coding framework.

To enhance coding reliability, an independent second rater with expertise in English linguistics coded 20% of the dataset. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, yielding a coefficient of $\kappa = 0.84$, indicating a high level of agreement. Any discrepancies were subsequently discussed until consensus was reached.

2.5 Data Analysis

2.5.1 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using frequencies and percentages to identify recurring patterns of tense–aspect errors across the dataset. Because the study sought to describe systematic error patterns rather than test causal relationships, no inferential statistical analyses were conducted.

2.5.2 Qualitative Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis proceeded through six iterative stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report production.

Throughout the analytical process, reflective memos were maintained to document coding decisions and emerging interpretations. Codes and themes were repeatedly compared with the original interview transcripts to ensure internal coherence and conceptual consistency. Representative excerpts were selected to illustrate each theme and enhance the credibility and transparency of the analysis.

2.5.3 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Following completion of the separate analyses, quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated to provide a comprehensive interpretation of learners' tense–aspect errors. The quantitative analysis addressed Research Question 1 by identifying systematic error patterns, whereas the qualitative analysis addressed Research Question 2 by explaining these patterns in relation to learners' reasoning processes, cross-linguistic influence, cognitive processing constraints, and interlanguage development. Integrating evidence from both phases strengthened the validity of the findings and enabled a more comprehensive account of tense–aspect acquisition among Vietnamese EFL learners.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed that their responses would be used solely for research purposes and would have no influence on their academic assessment. All data were anonymized before analysis, and no personally identifiable information was included in the reporting of the findings. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process.

3. Results

This section presents the findings of the study by focusing on recurring patterns of tense–aspect errors in Vietnamese EFL learners' written production. Rather than reporting isolated error types, the results are organized around systematic patterns that emerged across the written production task and grammar test. The quantitative findings are presented first to identify the major error patterns, followed by qualitative evidence from learner interviews that helps explain and contextualize these findings.

3.1 Overall Distribution of Tense–Aspect Errors

Table 1. Tense and aspect error categories

Error category	Description	Example
Misuse of simple past	Incorrect verb form used for past events	She <i>go</i> to school yesterday
Omission of auxiliary verbs	Missing auxiliaries in perfect or progressive constructions	He <i>working</i> all day
Confusion: Present perfect vs. past	Inappropriate substitution between past and present perfect	I <i>have seen</i> him yesterday
Confusion: progressive vs. perfect	Misuse or blending of aspectual markers	She <i>is walking</i> since morning
Overgeneralization of regular forms	Application of regular past endings to irregular verbs	He <i>goed</i> to the market
Tense-aspect agreement errors	Mismatch between verb form and temporal reference	Tomorrow, I <i>was visiting</i> them
Inconsistent verb chains	Improper sequencing of multiple verbs or auxiliaries	He <i>had went</i> to school before you came
Aspectual redundancy	Unnecessary repetition of tense/aspect elements	She <i>is going</i> to working yesterday
Temporal misalignment	Tense form not matching with time adverbials	I <i>am eating</i> dinner last night

An overview of the major tense–aspect error categories identified in the data is presented in table 1. Analysis of the written texts and grammar test revealed a high frequency of tense–aspect errors, indicating that such difficulties persisted even among learners at the pre-intermediate to intermediate levels. Errors were not randomly distributed; instead, they clustered around specific tense–aspect categories.

As shown in table 1, errors related to past tense usage, auxiliary verb omission, and confusion between perfect and progressive aspects accounted for a substantial proportion of the total errors. In contrast, present simple forms were generally used with greater accuracy. These error categories involve tense–aspect forms that require more complex form–meaning mappings and discourse-level interpretation.

3.2 Frequency Patterns of Major Tense–Aspect Error Types

Table 2. Frequency of tense-aspect error types in student data

Error type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Misuse of past tense forms	137	31.7%
Omission of auxiliary verbs	115	26.6%
Confusion between perfect and progressive aspects	78	18.1%
Overgeneralization of regular past tense forms	54	12.5%
Tense-aspect mismatch with time adverbs	32	7.4%
Inconsistent tense usage within texts	16	3.7%
Total	432	100%

Further analysis of error frequencies is provided in Table 2, which summarizes the distribution of major tense–aspect error types across the dataset. Among these, misuse of past tense forms constituted the most frequent error category, accounting for 31.7% of the total errors identified.

Learners frequently substituted present tense forms for past tense in contexts referring to completed past events. Incorrect verb inflections, including the use of base forms and overgeneralized regular past forms, were also common. These errors occurred not only in isolated sentences but also across extended written texts. In a substantial number of instances, past time reference co-occurred with temporal adverbs in the absence of appropriate past tense marking.

A preliminary comparison of learners' performance by proficiency level suggested that A2 learners produced more errors in basic tense marking and auxiliary use, whereas B1 learners produced relatively fewer such errors but continued to experience difficulties with aspectual distinctions.

3.3 Patterns of Misuse of Tense–Aspect Forms: Perfect and Progressive Aspects

Table 3. Error patterns in the use of perfect and progressive aspects

Error type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Use of present perfect instead of past simple	34	43.6%
Use of progressive aspect with stative verbs	18	23.1%
Use of progressive forms for habitual actions	13	16.7%
Blending of perfect and progressive markers (e.g., <i>has working</i>)	9	11.5%
Other aspectual misuses	4	5.1%
Total	78	100%

Another salient pattern concerned learners' confusion between perfect and progressive aspectual constructions. As summarized in table 3, the most frequent error involved the use of the present perfect in contexts where the past simple was more appropriate, particularly in narrative descriptions of completed past events. This type of error accounted for the largest proportion of aspect-related misuses, indicating that the present perfect was frequently used in narrative contexts referring to completed past events.

In addition to perfect aspect errors, progressive forms were frequently used in non-target-like ways. Learners often applied progressive marking to stative verbs or habitual actions, resulting in constructions that deviated from standard English usage. In these cases, progressive

marking was applied to stative verbs and habitual actions, deviating from standard usage.

A smaller but still notable group of errors involved the blending of perfect and progressive markers within a single verb phrase, reflecting uncertainty in selecting appropriate aspectual combinations. Taken together, these error types point to persistent difficulties in distinguishing between key aspectual meanings, including completion, duration, and relevance to the present. The same error patterns were observed across multiple tasks, indicating that these misuses were not limited to isolated instances.

3.4 Omission and Misuse of Auxiliary Verbs

Table 4. Error patterns in the omission and misuse of auxiliary verbs

Error type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Omission of auxiliary be in progressive constructions	46	40.0%
Omission of auxiliary have in perfect constructions	38	33.0%
Incorrect auxiliary–verb combinations (e.g., is have gone)	17	14.8%
Incorrect tense marking on auxiliary verbs	9	7.8%
Redundant or unnecessary auxiliary insertion	5	4.4%
Total	115	100%

A further recurring pattern involved the omission or incorrect use of auxiliary verbs in tense–aspect constructions. Table 4 summarizes the major error types related to auxiliary verb usage identified in the data. Learners frequently omitted auxiliary verbs in both perfect and progressive constructions, accounting for a substantial proportion of the errors in this category.

In addition to omission, learners also produced incorrect auxiliary–verb combinations and errors involving tense marking on auxiliary verbs. These errors were particularly evident in longer and syntactically more complex sentences, suggesting that increased syntactic complexity placed greater demands on learners' grammatical processing. These findings point to systematic difficulties in coordinating multiple grammatical elements within a single verb phrase.

3.5 Insights from Learner Interviews

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews provided valuable insights into the cognitive and conceptual factors underlying the tense–aspect error patterns identified in the quantitative analysis. A thematic analysis of the interview data revealed three major themes: (i) reliance on temporal adverbials, (ii) limited understanding of aspectual meaning, and (iii) preference for rule-based strategies over meaning-based processing. These themes help explain why specific error patterns, such as past tense omission and confusion between aspectual forms, were consistently observed across participants. As summarized in table 5, these themes are associated with specific learner perspectives and corresponding error patterns.

Table 5. Summary of learner interview themes and related tense–aspect error patterns

Theme	Description of learner perspectives	Representative learner statements	Related error patterns
Reliance on temporal adverbs	Learners reported selecting tense primarily based on time adverbials, with limited attention to verb morphology	"If I write yesterday, I think the reader already knows the time, so the verb form is not very important."	Past tense omission; tense–time mismatch
Limited understanding of aspectual meaning	Aspectual distinctions were perceived as abstract and difficult to conceptualize, especially the present perfect	"I know the rule, but I don't really know when to use the present perfect in writing."	Confusion between past simple and present perfect
Rule-based rather than meaning-based strategies	Learners relied on memorized rules or surface cues instead of discourse context	"I just follow the formula, not the situation in the text."	Inappropriate aspect choice

3.5.1 Reliance on Temporal Adverbials

A prominent theme emerging from the interviews was learners' strong reliance on temporal adverbials (e.g., *yesterday*, *last year*, *now*) as the primary means of expressing time reference. Many participants reported that they considered temporal adverbials sufficient to convey temporal meaning, often treating verbal tense marking as secondary or even optional.

For example, one participant stated:

"When I write 'yesterday', I think the reader already understands the time, so I don't need to change the verb."

Similarly, another learner explained:

"I usually focus on words like 'last week' or 'now'. If I use those, I feel the sentence is already clear."

A third participant expressed a similar view:

"I think time words are more important than verb forms because they show clearly when the action happens."

These responses indicate that learners prioritize lexical means of expressing temporal reference, a strategy that aligns with the structure of Vietnamese, where tense is not morphologically marked on verbs. This reliance helps explain the high frequency of past tense omission and tense–time mismatches identified in the quantitative data. Rather than representing random errors, these patterns reflect a systematic preference for lexical over grammatical encoding of time.

3.5.2 Limited Understanding of Aspectual Meaning

Another recurring theme concerned learners' difficulty in understanding and applying aspectual distinctions, particularly the present perfect. Many participants described aspectual forms as abstract, confusing, and difficult to use in actual writing contexts.

One learner noted:

"I know the present perfect form, but I don't really understand when to use it. Sometimes I just use it for past actions."

Another participant commented:

"The difference between past simple and present perfect is very confusing. I often choose based on feeling."

A similar difficulty was expressed by another learner:

"I remember the rule, but when I write, I am not sure which one is correct, so I just choose one."

These excerpts suggest that learners lack a clear conceptual understanding of aspectual meanings such as completion, duration, and relevance to the present. Instead of using aspect to express nuanced temporal relationships, they tend to associate forms like the present perfect with general past reference. This finding helps explain the frequent substitution of the present perfect for the past simple observed in the quantitative data.

3.5.3 Rule-Based Strategies and Surface-Level Processing

A third theme identified in the interviews was learners' reliance on rule-based strategies and surface-level cues rather than meaning-based processing. Many participants reported using memorized grammatical rules or fixed patterns without fully considering the communicative context.

For instance, one learner stated:

"I usually follow the structure I learned in class. I don't think too much about the meaning."

Another participant explained:

"When I see certain words, I try to match them with the grammar rule I remember."

A further example illustrates this tendency:

"I try to apply the formula correctly, but sometimes I don't know if it fits the situation."

These responses indicate that learners' tense–aspect usage is often driven by memorized grammatical rules rather than by an integrated understanding of form–meaning relationships. This reliance on surface-level strategies appears to contribute to errors such as inappropriate aspect choice, overgeneralization, and incorrect auxiliary use.

3.5.4 Integration with Quantitative Findings

The qualitative findings provide a coherent explanatory framework for the error patterns identified in Sections 3.2–3.4. The reliance on temporal adverbials corresponds directly to the high frequency of past tense omission and tense–time mismatches. Similarly, learners' limited understanding of aspectual meaning explains the frequent confusion between the past simple and the present perfect, as well as the misuse of progressive forms. Finally, the use of rule-based strategies accounts for patterns such as overgeneralization and inconsistent tense usage.

The convergence between quantitative and qualitative data supports the interpretation of tense–aspect errors as systematic features of learners' interlanguage rather than as incidental performance errors. By linking observable error patterns with learners' reported strategies and conceptual difficulties, the integrated analysis provides a more comprehensive and theoretically grounded account of tense–aspect acquisition.

4. Discussion

The present study sought to address two complementary research questions: (1) to identify recurring patterns of tense–aspect errors in the written production of Vietnamese undergraduate EFL learners pursuing English as a minor, and (2) to explain these patterns in terms of cross-linguistic influence, cognitive processing constraints, and interlanguage development. By integrating quantitative analyses of learner performance with qualitative evidence from learner interviews, the present study provides converging evidence that tense–aspect errors are systematic rather than random, reflecting the interaction of linguistic transfer, developmental processes, and learners' evolving grammatical representations.

The discussion that follows interprets these findings through three complementary perspectives: cross-linguistic influence, cognitive processing constraints and interlanguage development, and developmental accounts of tense–aspect acquisition, particularly the Aspect Hypothesis. Together, these perspectives provide a more comprehensive explanation of why tense–aspect errors remain persistent despite years of formal English instruction.

4.1 Cross-Linguistic Influence and Typological Mismatch

The quantitative findings revealed that errors involving past tense marking and tense–aspect selection constituted the most frequent error categories, while the interview data provided important insights into the linguistic reasoning underlying these patterns.

A central finding of the study is that learners' tense–aspect errors are strongly shaped by cross-linguistic influence arising from typological differences between Vietnamese and English. Vietnamese, as an analytic language, does not encode tense morphologically on verbs; instead, temporal reference is typically conveyed through lexical means such as temporal adverbials, aspectual particles, and contextual inference. English, by contrast, requires obligatory morphological marking of tense and aspect even when temporal information is already available in the discourse.

This fundamental mismatch provides a compelling explanation for several recurring error patterns identified in the data. In particular, the frequent omission of past tense marking in the presence of temporal adverbs suggests that learners rely on L1-based strategies in which lexical time reference is sufficient for temporal interpretation. Interview data further corroborate this interpretation, as learners explicitly reported that once a temporal adverbial (e.g., *yesterday*, *last year*) is used, additional marking on the verb is perceived as redundant.

Such patterns are consistent with previous research on cross-linguistic influence in tense–aspect acquisition, which shows that learners from tenseless or weakly tensed language backgrounds often experience persistent difficulty acquiring obligatory tense morphology in English (Odlin, 1989; Lardiere, 2009; Bardovi-Harlig & Sprouse, 2024). Rather than representing mere performance errors, these patterns reflect deeper transfer of conceptual and grammatical strategies from the first language.

4.2 Cognitive Processing Constraints and Interlanguage Development

In addition to cross-linguistic influence, the findings can be interpreted in terms of cognitive processing constraints and the developmental nature of interlanguage systems (Han, 2004; Ellis, 2021). The recurrent omission and misuse of auxiliary verbs, particularly in more complex verb phrases, suggest that learners face difficulties in coordinating multiple grammatical elements simultaneously. When producing language under processing pressure, learners may prioritize lexical content over grammatical accuracy, leading to the omission of less salient elements such as auxiliary verbs.

This interpretation aligns with cognitive accounts of second language production, which emphasize the role of limited attentional resources (Ellis, 2021). Tense–aspect morphology, especially in auxiliary-based constructions, requires the integration of form, meaning, and syntactic structure. For learners whose grammatical representations are still developing, this integration may not yet be automatized, resulting in systematic errors.

The convergence between quantitative error frequencies and learners' interview responses further suggests that these recurring patterns cannot be explained solely by insufficient grammatical knowledge. Instead, the qualitative evidence indicates that learners experience persistent difficulties in coordinating grammatical form with temporal and aspectual meaning during language production. This interpretation is also supported by recent evidence from East Asian EFL contexts, where Li (2023) found that Chinese learners of English relied more heavily on lexical and contextual temporal information than on grammatical tense morphology when interpreting temporal meaning.

Insights from the interview data further support this explanation. Many learners reported relying on memorized rules or surface-level strategies rather than meaning-based processing. For example, learners often described selecting verb forms based on fixed formulas without fully understanding the underlying aspectual meanings. This suggests that their knowledge of tense and aspect remains largely declarative rather than procedural, limiting their ability to apply grammatical forms flexibly in context. These processing difficulties are likely to be further reinforced by learners' continued reliance on first-language patterns. This interpretation is consistent with recent evidence suggesting that cross-linguistic influence may continue to shape learners' tense choices even after several years of formal instruction, particularly when the first and second languages differ substantially in the grammatical encoding of temporal meaning (Huang et al., 2025).

4.3 Developmental Perspectives and the Aspect Hypothesis

Beyond the effects of cross-linguistic influence and cognitive processing constraints, the observed patterns also reflect developmental characteristics of tense–aspect acquisition. These findings are consistent with developmental theories of SLA, particularly the Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen & Shirai, 1996), which proposes that learners acquire tense–aspect morphology in predictable stages influenced by the inherent lexical aspect of verbs. Under this account, past tense marking typically emerges first with telic verbs (e.g., achievements and accomplishments), whereas progressive aspect is initially associated with activity verbs. More abstract aspectual distinctions, such as the present perfect, tend to develop at later stages of acquisition. This interpretation is also consistent with recent reviews suggesting that lexical aspect remains a central explanatory framework for understanding developmental trajectories in L2 tense–aspect acquisition, although additional cognitive and instructional factors also influence learner outcomes (Salaberry, 2024).

The error patterns observed in the present study partially align with these developmental predictions. The high frequency of past tense misuse suggests that learners have not yet fully stabilized the mapping between past time reference and verbal morphology, particularly across different verb types. Moreover, the inappropriate use of progressive forms with stative verbs indicates overextension of aspectual marking beyond its prototypical contexts, a phenomenon commonly observed in earlier stages of aspectual development.

Most notably, the persistent confusion between the past simple and the present perfect is consistent with the view that the present perfect represents a later-acquired and more complex aspectual form. Learners' tendency to use the present perfect in contexts requiring the past simple suggests that they may interpret the perfect primarily as a marker of pastness rather than as an aspectual form expressing current

relevance. This finding is consistent with the Aspect Hypothesis, which predicts that learners initially rely on more concrete temporal distinctions before acquiring more abstract aspectual meanings.

At the same time, the data also reveal divergences from predicted developmental sequences, likely due to the influence of learners' first language. The strong reliance on temporal adverbials, for example, may override aspectual distinctions that would otherwise emerge through developmental processes. This interaction between cross-linguistic influence and developmental constraints highlights the need to consider multiple explanatory dimensions in understanding tense–aspect acquisition.

4.4 Integrating Cross-Linguistic, Cognitive, and Developmental Factors

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that no single theoretical perspective adequately explains Vietnamese learners' tense–aspect errors. Rather, the evidence supports an interactionist account in which cross-linguistic influence, cognitive processing limitations, and developmental factors jointly shape learners' interlanguage systems (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé 2022). Cross-linguistic influence appears to guide learners' initial hypotheses about how temporal meaning is encoded, particularly their reliance on lexical time expressions instead of obligatory verbal morphology. Cognitive processing constraints further limit learners' ability to coordinate tense, aspect, auxiliary verbs, and discourse context during language production. At the same time, developmental factors explain why some tense–aspect distinctions, especially the present perfect, remain unstable even after prolonged formal instruction.

The integration of quantitative error patterns with qualitative interview evidence strengthens this interpretation by demonstrating that learners' errors are systematic manifestations of evolving interlanguage rather than isolated grammatical failures. These findings therefore support contemporary SLA perspectives that emphasize the interaction between cross-linguistic influence, cognitive processing, and developmental trajectories in second language acquisition.

4.5 Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the present study have several pedagogical implications for English language teaching in EFL contexts where learners' first language does not encode tense morphologically. Drawing on both quantitative error patterns and qualitative interview evidence, the findings suggest that persistent tense–aspect difficulties arise not only from insufficient grammatical knowledge but also from cross-linguistic influence, cognitive processing constraints, and the developmental nature of interlanguage. Consequently, instructional practices should move beyond rule-based explanations and adopt approaches that integrate grammatical form, temporal meaning, and communicative use. This recommendation is further supported by a recent review of instructional research, which concludes that approaches integrating grammatical form, meaning, and communicative use are generally more effective in promoting tense–aspect development than decontextualized grammar instruction (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé 2025).

First, given learners' strong reliance on temporal adverbials, instruction should explicitly distinguish between lexical and grammatical means of expressing temporal reference. Raising learners' awareness of the typological differences between Vietnamese and English may help reduce negative transfer and encourage more appropriate use of tense–aspect morphology in authentic communication.

Second, the persistent difficulty learners experienced with forms such as the present perfect indicates the need for greater emphasis on aspectual meaning rather than morphological form alone. Contextualized input, guided noticing activities, and discourse-based practice may help learners develop a more accurate understanding of how tense–aspect forms convey different temporal relationships in real communicative contexts.

Third, the interview findings suggest that many learners relied primarily on memorized grammatical rules instead of conceptual understanding. This highlights the importance of instructional activities that encourage learners to interpret and produce tense–aspect forms in meaningful discourse, thereby facilitating the gradual transition from declarative knowledge to proceduralized language use.

Finally, from a cognitive perspective, repeated exposure and scaffolded communicative practice are essential for helping learners coordinate tense, aspect, auxiliary verbs, and temporal reference during language production. Such practice may gradually reduce processing demands and promote more accurate and fluent use of tense–aspect forms.

Taken together, these pedagogical implications support an integrated instructional approach that combines contrastive awareness, meaning-focused instruction, and communicative practice. By aligning classroom instruction with insights from SLA research, teachers may be better equipped to address the persistent tense–aspect difficulties experienced by Vietnamese EFL learners (Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé 2022).

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that Vietnamese learners' tense–aspect errors cannot be attributed to isolated grammatical deficiencies. Instead, they arise from the dynamic interaction of cross-linguistic influence, cognitive processing constraints, and developmental characteristics of interlanguage. Understanding these interacting factors not only advances theoretical accounts of tense–aspect acquisition but also provides a stronger empirical foundation for designing pedagogical interventions that address the persistent challenges experienced by Vietnamese EFL learners.

5. Conclusion

The present study investigated recurring patterns of English tense–aspect errors in the written production of Vietnamese undergraduate EFL learners pursuing English as a minor and explored the factors underlying these patterns through a sequential explanatory mixed-method design. By integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence and interpreting the findings through complementary SLA

frameworks, the study provides a more comprehensive account of tense–aspect acquisition while offering an empirically grounded basis for future research and pedagogical practice.

The findings suggest that learners experience systematic difficulties across several areas of tense–aspect use, particularly in past tense marking, auxiliary omission, perfect and progressive constructions, and tense–aspect selection. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence further indicates that these recurring errors are best understood not as isolated grammatical inaccuracies but as systematic manifestations of interlanguage development. Rather, they appear to reflect the combined influence of cross-linguistic transfer from Vietnamese, cognitive processing constraints, and developmental characteristics of tense–aspect acquisition. These interpretations are broadly consistent with established perspectives in second language acquisition, including Interlanguage Theory and the Aspect Hypothesis.

The study contributes to the existing literature in three important respects. Empirically, it provides a systematic description of tense–aspect error patterns among Vietnamese university students learning English as a minor. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of integrating quantitative error analysis with qualitative interview evidence to establish explicit connections between observable learner performance and the reasoning processes underlying grammatical choices. Theoretically, it supports an interactionist account of tense–aspect acquisition in which cross-linguistic influence, cognitive processing, and developmental factors jointly shape learners’ evolving grammatical systems.

The findings also carry important pedagogical implications. Rather than relying primarily on rule-based grammar instruction, classroom practices may benefit from integrating grammatical form, temporal meaning, and communicative use while explicitly addressing the typological differences between Vietnamese and English. Such an approach may better support learners’ conceptual understanding of tense and aspect and facilitate the gradual development of proceduralized grammatical knowledge.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The participants were recruited from a single Vietnamese university through convenience sampling, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other learner populations. In addition, the study focused primarily on written production and therefore did not examine learners’ spoken use of tense–aspect forms. Finally, the cross-sectional research design does not capture how tense–aspect knowledge develops over time.

Future research could extend the present study by employing longitudinal designs to investigate developmental changes across different proficiency levels, incorporating spoken production data to examine real-time language use, and evaluating the effectiveness of instructional interventions designed to address persistent tense–aspect difficulties. Comparative studies involving learners with different first-language backgrounds may also contribute to a broader understanding of the interaction between cross-linguistic influence and developmental processes in tense–aspect acquisition.

Overall, the present study suggests that persistent tense–aspect errors among Vietnamese undergraduate EFL learners are most appropriately understood as systematic manifestations of developing interlanguage rather than isolated grammatical deficiencies. By integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence within complementary SLA frameworks, the study provides a more comprehensive account of tense–aspect acquisition while offering an empirically grounded basis for future research and pedagogical practice.

Declaration of AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Grammarly as supportive tools for language refinement, including grammar checking and improving the clarity and readability of the text. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited all AI-assisted outputs to ensure accuracy, consistency, and academic integrity. The author remains fully responsible for the content and final version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all students who voluntarily participated in this study. They also wish to thank their colleagues for their valuable comments and constructive feedback on earlier versions of the manuscript. Their support and encouragement throughout the research process are greatly appreciated.

Author contributions

Luong Ba Phuong, as the first and corresponding author, conceived and designed the study, supervised the research, developed the research methodology, analyzed and interpreted the data, drafted the manuscript, substantially revised the manuscript in response to reviewers’ comments, and was responsible for all correspondence with the journal throughout the submission and revision process. Tran Quoc Viet contributed to data collection, assisted with data analysis and interpretation, and critically reviewed the manuscript. Nguyen Thi Thanh Huong contributed to the literature review, assisted with data collection, participated in manuscript editing and proofreading, and provided valuable comments during manuscript revision. All authors read, approved, and agreed to be accountable for the final version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence

the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this study prior to data collection.

Ethics approval

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Academy of Journalism and Communication, Vietnam. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and all data were anonymized to ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality throughout the research process.

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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