

## **The Transfer Errors in Nominal Quantification by Vietnamese Speakers of English as a Foreign Language in Light of the Language Transfer Theory**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to investigate the usage of nominal quantification by Vietnamese speakers of English as a foreign language. The study identifies and explains the causes of transfer errors regarding the nominal quantification, including countable and uncountable nouns, in sentences and writing by Vietnamese employees. Typological differences between Vietnamese and English and interlingual transfer issues are hypothesized to cause transfer errors in nominal quantification when Vietnamese speakers use English. The findings revealed that Vietnamese speakers of English had difficulty quantifying nouns and failed to acquire the count-uncount distinction. Errors occurred as the numeral expression is required or grammatically relevant in English as opposed to that of grammatically unimportant category in Vietnamese, the absence or presence of number-neutral nouns, and the use of classifiers in the two languages. A negative transfer also occurred owing to cognitive differences, including the binary-numeral versus ternary-numeral categorization, the asymmetry of countability of nominal pairs, and the inflexibility-plasticity continuum of pairs of countable/uncountable nouns in Vietnamese and English.

**KEYWORDS:** nominal quantification, transfer errors, cognitive, binary- and ternary-numeral, grammatical relevance, asymmetry, plasticity

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Nouns seem to be present in virtually every sentence one writes and utters (Tsang, 2017). Nouns occupy a large number of vocabulary and plays a very important role in grammatical structure of a language like English. In sentences, nouns can be functioning as the subject, an object, an appositive, or a complement. DeCapua (2008:31) states, 'the traditional or standard definition of a noun is a word that refers to a *person, place, or thing* as in *doctor, city, chair*, respectively. The *thing* is expanded to include two subcategories: *concrete* things like *table* and *abstract* things like *experience*, but this distinction is said to be relative.

In learning about nouns, students are introduced with *countable* and *uncountable nouns*. Traditionally, a demarcation has been made between 'countable nouns' and 'uncountable nouns' (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvick, 1972). Learners are often taught that there is a distinction between countable and uncountable nouns. Countable nouns can be either singular or plural. When a countable noun is singular, we must use a determiner (articles and numeral expressions) before it, such as *a/an* or *one* as in *a boy, an apple, or one pencil*. When countable nouns are plural, they can be used without articles, but an '-s/es' at the end of a word is added as seen in *boys* or *cities*, and this is called a regular noun plural, or the word (noun) will be morphologically inflectional, for example, the plural noun *geese* derives from the singular noun *goose*, and this is called an irregular noun plural. Concrete, object things are countable in English but they are uncountable in Vietnamese. Uncountable nouns cannot be counted when they are used alone, and they have only one form. Indefinite articles are not used with uncount nouns, for example, the uncount noun *time* in *Time flies*. However, uncountable nouns can become countable when they are added by countable expressions or classifiers like *an item of* or *a piece of* as in 'many useful *pieces of* advice'. Abstract nouns are uncountable in English, but they can be countable in Vietnamese.

Notice that there is one more subcategory of nouns which have both count and noncount meanings, depending on the context (Allan, 1980), or it is called a *crossover noun* (DeCapua, 2008:55). For example, when we refer *iron* to a *malleable ductile metallic element* as in '*Iron rusts easily*', we are using this noun in its noncount sense, but when we refer to a *piece of equipment for making clothes flat and smooth* as in 'I picked up a new steam *iron* at the sale', we use this noun in a count sense. In brief, a crossover noun is countable when it is used to describe members of a set, category or a group. It is uncountable, however, when used in its general

sense to name a set, category or group.

In the cognitive perspective, Langacker (1990) defines a count(able) noun as referring to a bounded region in some domain, in which heterogeneity is crucial to bounding. For example, *pebbles* are of different size and color, and heterogeneous, and hence it is countable, while *sand* is perceived of as a homogeneous mass, and thus, uncountable. Also, Bloom (1996) introduces the principle of cognitive individuation assuming that the selective use of a count noun and a mass noun depends on whether a person interprets the referent as an individual entity or as a non-individuated entity. Therefore, the choice of a noun form depends on the speaker's perception and conceptualization of an entity at question.

Of the noun classifications, the count/uncount distinction is most crucial (Jespersen, 1924; Chomsky, 1965; Weinreich, 1966; McCawley, 1972; Bunt, 1979; Pelletier, 1979; Allan, 1980; as cited in Cao, 2001:265). Native speakers are generally unaware of these two categories of nouns. It is part of their innate grammar knowledge. However, this salient feature of English nouns is problematic for EFL/ESL learners (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Milton, 2001), as in Hargraves (2003)'s words, 'the distinction between count nouns and mass (uncount) nouns is a bane for many a learners of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL), since the distinction is either unimportant or handled differently in most other modern language.' (2003:36). EFL/ESL learners must learn and understand these differences between count and noncount nouns because the differences influence other sentence constituents. For example, count nouns can occur alone or with determiners, such as articles and expressions of quantity, e.g. *a few, several, some*. DeCapua (2008) said that different structure words signal different types of nouns. As stated, this can be troublesome for non-native English speakers for those whose mother tongue does not have the corresponding nominal system and the countable/uncountable distinction.

Notice that in some languages like English, count/mass can be considered to be 'language-specific, it is conceptually motivated because there is correspondence between the grammatical property (count vs. mass) and conceptual properties (e.g., individuation of discrete bounded entities vs. non-individuation)' (Iwasaki, Vinson & Vigliocco, 2010:191). Obviously, count-uncount distinction is syntactically significant, affecting the overall structure of a sentence that requires the native and non-native speakers alike to know the rules of that particular language. However, in other languages like Vietnamese, count-uncount distinction is not syntactically, but lexically relevant.

It is common knowledge that every noun in a sentence in English is quantified. According to Radden and Dirven (2007), 'quantification is an all-important facet of our daily lives. We quantify both things and situations. The quantification of a thing often shades over into the quantification of a situation'(2007:115). Consider the following sentences:

- (1) She *often* spent her summer in Dalat.
- (2) She spent *many summers* in Dalat.
- (3) She stayed in *three resorts*.

Sentence (1) refers to different occurrences of the same situation at different times and quantifies these occurrences by means of the use of frequency adverb *often*. Sentence (2) may also refer to different occurrences of the same situation but it is quantified by the noun quantifier *many*, while sentence (3) engages in the number of times (three) of occurrences of the situation at different times at three different resorts. The quantity in sentences (2) and (3) is indicated by means of the lexical quantifiers like *many* and *three* and by the plural marker *-s* as in *summers* and *resorts*. This article is for the quantification of instances of a thing, as in sentences (2) and (3).

When learning EFL/ESL, making errors in learning the target language is a natural process because of the structural differences between the learner's mother tongue and the target language. The bottom line is that errors should not be neglected, but they need to be addressed properly by the teachers and researchers. In the field of second language acquisition, a good number of studies on errors have been done, but not many research studies on nominal quantifications<sup>1</sup> have been carried out, not to mention the nominal quantification between Vietnamese and English. Therefore, this study is to examine the nominal quantification, including countable/uncountable distinction in Vietnamese and English. The study investigates the issue and answer the following questions:

- 1) What are underlying differences in nominal quantification in Vietnamese and in English?
- 2) What causes the transfer errors in using English nominal countability by Vietnamese speakers?

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<sup>1</sup>See nominal quantification in Gil (1993,273-317); Landman (2019:487), *quantifying nouns* in Biber et al., (1999:252), and *quantifying things* in Radden & Dirven, 2007:117-136)

## Theoretical Assumptions

The theoretical assumptions for this study are that differences in how to quantify nouns in English and Vietnamese, and along with this, differences in perception and conceptualization in nominal quantification between the English and Vietnamese people cause a negative transfer or errors in quantifying English nouns when the Vietnamese speakers use English in the Vietnamese way, called Vietnamese English. Before hypotheses are formulated, a section on errors, nominal quantification errors and error analysis has been stated.

### Errors, nominal quantification errors, and error identification principles

#### Errors and mistakes

It is important to distinguish *errors* from *mistakes* when conducting research in error analysis. Mistakes occur because of memory lapses, physical tiredness or psychological conditions like anxiety or nervousness, and are therefore unsystematic. According to Corder (1981), mistakes are akin to slips of the tongue, and users are able to recognize and correct them. Mistakes reflect 'occasional lapses in performance: they occur because in a particular instance, the learner is unable to perform what he or she knows' (Ellis, 1997: 17). Conversely, an error is 'a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker' (Brown, 2007: 258). Dullay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) define errors as the flawed side of learner's speech or writing. Errors are systematic deviations from the norms of the language being learned, and the learners consistently get it wrong (Cummingworth, 1987; Norrish, 1987). Gass and Selinker (2008) state that 'errors can be taken as red flags; they provide windows onto a system that is, evidence of the state of a learner's knowledge of the L2' (2008:102).

Errors caused by the impact of the native language are called 'interlingual errors', defined as 'those caused by the influence of the learners' mother tongue on the production of the target language in presumably those areas where languages clearly differ' (Schachter & Celce-Murcia, 1977:443). The transfer of the learners' native language has been proven in many studies to be a significant cause of ESL learners' errors. Still, there are other errors caused by the effect of the target language itself, called 'intralingual errors'.

This paper is not concerned with the mistakes, but with the errors that can be concluded from the experts' aforementioned ideas in that an error is a systematic deviation made by the learner because they do not know the correct rules of the target language.

#### Nominal quantification errors

As stated, every English noun in a sentence must be quantified. If it is not quantified or incorrectly quantified, it can be regarded as an error. Therefore, *a nominal quantification error is understood to be the type of error that speakers incorrectly express the numeral meaning of a noun in terms of its singularity or plurality, and/or misuse noun quantifiers to denote the numeral meaning of that noun.* Consider the following sentences:

(4a) \*Bill was great inspiration to *all of the member* of his family.

(4b) Bill was *a* great inspiration to *all of the members* of his family.

In (4a), *inspiration* must be quantified by an indefinite article as it refers to a specific instance; and *member* must be inflectionally changed to *members* as in (4b) because its plural form is needed to agree with *all*.

(5a) \**New product* is really delicious and good for your health.

(5b) *A new product/ The new product* is really delicious and good for your health.

(5c) *New products/ The new products* are really delicious and good for your health.

In (5a), the noun phrase *new product* has not been quantified, it needs, therefore, to be quantified by adding an article as in (5b) *a (new)product* or *the (new) product*, or it should be marked in its plural form as in (5c) like *(new) products* or *the (new) products*.

(6a)\*I need *some feedbacks* because it will be used in my current research.

(6b) I need *some feedback* because it will be used in my current research.

In (6a), the noun *feedbacks* is not correctly used as it is uncountable noun, and it does not take its plural form.

(7a) \*My dad gets *paper* every day on his way to work.

(7b) My dad gets *a paper* every day on his way to work.

In (7a), the noun *paper* is used incorrectly because of its uncountability, and the sentence requires a countable noun *a paper*, referring to *a newspaper*.

As can be seen from sentences (4a), (5a), (6a), and (7a) the nominal quantification is not used correctly, and that has been already pinpointed.

#### Error identification principles

To determine whether the quantification of instances of a thing is used correctly or not, two criteria are employed, including (a) the appropriacy of meaning and syntax of a noun at question, and (b) the appropriacy of context in which a noun at question is quantified. Therefore, an instance is called an error if it does not meet the aforementioned principles. The next section is about the theoretical assumptions about the causes of the transfer errors.

### **Differences in expressing nominal quantification in English and Vietnamese**

Nominal quantification in English and Vietnamese is different from each other in terms of the means, principles and importance of expressing nominal quantification. Regarding the means of nominal quantification, every English noun at issue must be quantified or determined if it is singular or plural so that a noun quantifier and/or the inflectional form of a noun will be used to reflect its numeral meaning, as in *a boy*, referring to a count noun with a singular meaning and an ‘-s’ added to *boy* to make it a plural form as *boys*. In Vietnamese, there is no plural marking of a noun, but it has determiners to quantify a noun. Also, it has a nominal form indicating a noun at issue is either singular or plural, called the number-neutral form of a noun. Look at the following:

(8a) *Học sinh* của tôi(thì) rất ngoan.

(8b) *My student is* very good.

(8c) *My students are* very good.

The noun *Học sinh* in (8a) can be expressed in its singular form *student* as in (8b) or its plural form *students* as in (8c). The use of *Học sinh* as a bare noun that can be construed as singular or plural and are not inflected for number (Diep, 2005; Massam, 2012).

The bare noun use lends itself to another issue, that is, the principle of expressing a numeral meaning of a noun or quantifying a noun at issue. In English, any noun at issue needs to explicitly display its numeral category as it will have to meet the agreement with other constituents, like a verb, of the sentence. Look at sentence (9):

(9) One of the girls who \_\_\_\_\_ working in this department \_\_\_\_\_ my niece.

A. is/ are

B. are/ is

C. is/is

D. are/are

The first verb to agree with the subject *who (the girls)* in its plural form and the second verb must be accorded with the subject *One* in its singularity. Therefore, the answer to the two blanks in (9) is **B** as fully written as ‘*One of the girls who are* working in this department *is* my niece.’ However, it is not the case in Vietnamese, as can be seen in (8b) and (8c), whether the subject noun is singular or plural does not affect the verb of the sentence. This issue can be seen in (10) and (11):

(10) *Một con chim đang hát* trong vườn.

*A bird is singing* in the garden.

(11) *Mấy con chim đang hát* trong vườn.

*Some birds are singing* in the garden.

Whether a singular noun *Một con chim* (a bird) or a plural noun *Mấy con chim* (some birds) is the subject, the same verb form *đang hát* in Vietnamese is employed. (This is completely different in English when a choice of the verb form *is singing* or *are singing* depends on whether the noun functioning as the subject of the sentence is singular or plural accordingly.)

In terms of the importance of denoting the numeral meaning of a noun, every English noun at issue is quantified to indicate its singularity or plurality. This is critically important because a noun has not only its lexical meaning but also its syntactic significance, affecting other constituents like a verb, of a sentence. In contrast, the numeral meaning of a noun is not syntactically relevant in Vietnamese, and not necessary to be mentioned unless otherwise asked or contextually determined, as put by Ghomeshi and Massam (2012:6) ‘number does not play a strongly grammatical role it is not the key decider of count and mass’. Therefore, the use of a bare noun or number-neutral noun, which makes it hard to determine if it is singular or plural is common in Vietnamese. This salient number-neutral category in Vietnamese is absent in English.

In short, English nouns are lexically and syntactically strict and rule-governed, whereas nouns are ambiguously and optionally used in Vietnamese unless otherwise contextualized. This difference may challenge Vietnamese EFL speakers when using English.

### **Differences in conceptualizing nominal quantification in English and Vietnamese people**

There are some differences in the way the English and Vietnamese people conceptualize and think about nominal quantification. The first difference is about the meaning of numeral categorization. English has a binary-numeral system, namely singularity and plurality, each of which affects other constituents like a verb (see Table 1 below) of a sentence. That means, there is an agreement between a noun at issue in case of functioning as the subject of a sentence and a verb. In contrast, Vietnamese involves ternary-numeral system regarding singularity, plurality and number-neutrality. Number-neutral categorization is a special case in the Vietnamese language, coming from a bare noun (see *Học sinh* in (8a)) that cannot be determined if it is singular or plural without the context, but it still has a full meaning (Nguyen, 1975 as cited in Dinh, 2015; Diep, 2005; Nguyen, 2015). Consider the following:

(12a) *Con mèo đang nằm ngủ.*

*A cat is sleeping.* / or *The cat is sleeping.*

(12b) *Mấy con mèo đang nằm ngủ.*

*Some cats are sleeping.*

(12c) *Mèo* là loài vật có ích.

\**Cat* is a useful animal.

*A cat* is a useful animal. / or *Cats* are useful animals.

As illustrated in the above Vietnamese sentences, *mèo* in (12a) is used with a classifier *con* to indicate a singular number, *mèo* in (12b) used with *mấy con* to refer to plurality, and *mèo* in (12c) used in a bare noun to indicate an undetermined numeral meaning, so the noun *mèo* in (12c) is called a number-neutral noun which can be interpreted singular or plural in English. The numeral category in Vietnamese and English can be illustrated in Table 1:

	Numeral	English	Vietnamese
Noun	singularity	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
	Plurality	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
	<i>Number-neutrality</i>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Verb	singularity	Yes	No
	Plurality	Yes	No
	<i>Number-neutrality</i>	No	No

**Table 1:** Numeral categorization in English and Vietnamese.

Notice that the number-neutral categorization is not present in English, but it is frequently employed in Vietnamese communication in many cases. Typically, the neutral number is used when it is referred to a general statement or judgment, as in (12c) above and its translated versions, or as in (13):

(13) *Cọp* thường đi săn vào ban đêm.

\**Tiger* often hunts by night.

*A tiger* often hunts by night. (a) / or *Tigers* often hunt by night. (b)

Either *A tiger* in (a) expressed in a generic singular or *Tigers* in (b) expressed in a generic plural can be used to refer to *Cọp* in (13).

Another case in which the Vietnamese people tend to use a number-neutral category is when there is no definite or exact number set, as in (14):

(14) ‘...Tính đến thời điểm hiện tại, đã có *công nhân* tử vong và nhiều *công nhân* vẫn còn bị mắc kẹt trong hầm.’ (Báo Mới Online, ngày 13/10/2020).

\* (14a) ‘... Up to the present time, *worker* had been killed, and many others have still been trapped at the plant.’

(14b) ‘... Up to the present time, *some workers* had been killed, and many others have still been trapped at the plant.’

In Vietnamese, the number-neutral noun *công nhân* (worker) is used as seen in (14a), manifesting no specific quantity or number of workers. In contrast, in English, the noun *workers* must be specified by a determiner (an article like *a*, a quantifier like *some* or the likes) since *worker* is a countable noun.

The Vietnamese people also use number-neutral nouns when the context is thought of as a clue to interpret if the noun at issue is singular or plural, as in (15a):

(15a) Nhà nó vừa mới mua *xe hơi*.

His family has just bought *a car*.

The noun *xe hơi* (car) in (15a) is understood to refer to a singular meaning by the Vietnamese people, as the context *Nhà nó* (His family) *vừa mới mua xe* (has just bought a car) to show his financial wealth, and his family cannot buy more than *one car* unless his family is dealing with car business. In Vietnamese, in the event of placing an emphasis on the exact number of cars, the number is added (in this case, *một* meaning *one*) as in (15b).

(15b) Nhà nó vừa mới mua *một chiếc xe hơi*.

His family has just bought *a car*.

Both (15a) and (15b) indicate the same singular numeral meaning, equivalent to the English sentence of ‘His family has just bought *a car*’.

Therefore, it can be safe to say that the number-neutral element in Vietnamese is one of the main reasons for negative transfer in nouns with an unquantified expression by Vietnamese speakers when using English.

Another difference in conceptualizing the nominal quantification results from the asymmetry of the pairs of specific count/uncount nouns in the two languages on the continuum.

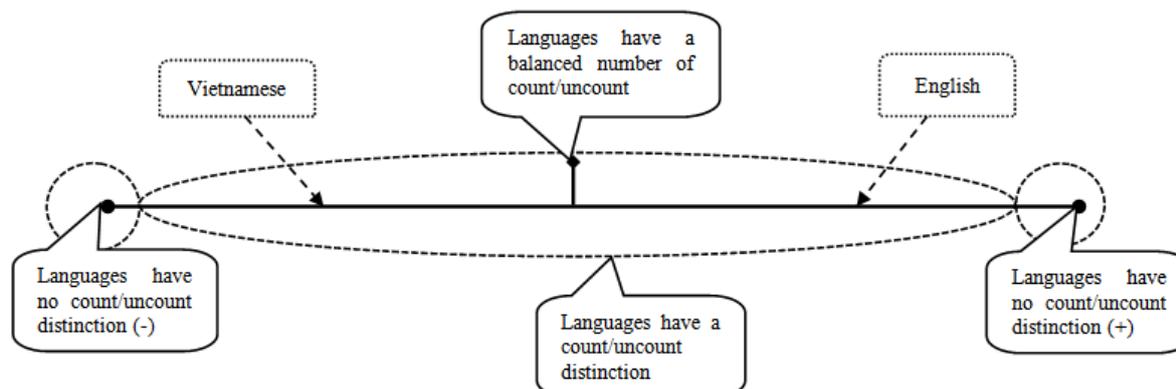


Figure 1: The distribution of languages about count/uncount nouns on the continuum.

The elliptical scope from Figure 1 shows that Vietnamese and English are classified as the languages with count/uncount nouns. However, Vietnamese is toward the negative end (-), referring to languages with all uncount nouns (e.g., Chinese), and in fact, most Vietnamese nouns are uncount. In contrast, English is toward the positive end (+), indicating languages with count nouns (e.g., Hopi, or Halkomelem Salish), and English is said to have more count nouns.

Notice that the two languages have both similar and different features in count/uncount nouns, but linguistically, the nominal countability of Vietnamese is not the same as that in English. This leads to a possibility that a noun in this language is countable, but it is uncountable in the other language, and vice versa.

Look at the following sentences:

- (16a) Có năm, sáu thông tin trong bài báo này.
- (16b)\*There are *five or six informations* in this article.
- (17a)\*Tôi đem cất sáu chén vào tủ.
- (17b) I put *six bowls* in the cupboard.

In (16a), the abstract noun *thông tin* (information) is countable in Vietnamese, and it can directly go with a number and another quantifier for a count noun. In contrast, this abstract noun *information* is uncountable in English, and it can be only used with a number or other numeral quantifiers when a classifier like *a piece of*, or *an item of* is added, so (16b) should be written as ‘There are *five or six pieces of information* in this article’. In (17a), the concrete, object noun *chén* (bowls) cannot stand right after a number in Vietnamese, but it can become countable with the addition of a classifier<sup>2</sup>. Conversely, the object noun *bowl* is countable in English. To a larger extent, the majority of abstract nouns are countable in Vietnamese but they are not countable in English, and vice versa the object nouns are all countable in English, but they are for the most part uncountable in Vietnamese. This distinction, however, should not be considered to be absolute because the chances are that some nouns in the two languages are both abstract, some both concrete, because the distribution of count/uncount nouns on the continuum is not evenly scaled or one-to-one balanced. This asymmetry of pairs of count/uncount nouns in Vietnamese and English contributes to committing errors in nominal quantification by Vietnamese EFL speakers.

One last difference in conceptualizing nominal quantification between in Vietnamese and in English is likely to result from the plasticity of count/uncount nouns in the two languages. According to researchers in the Vietnamese language, there does not exist a count and uncount noun in its real sense in Vietnamese. Look at the following:

- (18a) Cho hai bia và một cà phê.
- (18b) I’d like *two beers* and *one coffee*<sup>3</sup>.
- (18c) Cho hai [*chai*] bia và một [*tách*] cà phê.
- (18d) I’d like *two bottles of beer* and *one cup of coffee*.

In (18a), *bia* (beer) and *cà phê* (coffee) are concrete, object nouns usually considered to be uncountable in Vietnamese. Hence, if these nouns want to achieve a numeral meaning, a classifier should be added before these nouns to make them countable. As in (18c), *chai* (bottle) and *tách* (cup) is added to turn *bia* (beer) and *cà phê* (coffee) into countability. However, Diep (2005:486) argues that some uncountable, object nouns in Vietnamese ‘can stand right after an exact number, without the intermediary of a classifier’. In other words, concrete or

<sup>2</sup>Object nouns in Vietnamese cannot go with such quantifiers as *những, các, một, mỗi, từng* (Diep, 2005:482)

<sup>3</sup>This sentence is accepted and more common in spoken English and for pragmatic use, but not for linguistic structure.

object nouns can be either used with or without a classifier, and they still have a full meaning. This leads to the notion that the count/uncount distinction in Vietnamese is asymptotically stable. In English, conversely, a wide range of plasticity of pairs of count/uncount nouns is seen. Pairs of count/uncount nouns can change their countability flexibly and change their meanings accordingly. Look at the following sentences:

(19a)\*She was fired for a poor *performance*

(19b)\*She gave superb *performance* as Lady Macbeth.

(20a)\*This door is made of a *glass*.

(20b)\*He'd like *glass* of juice.

The noun *performance* in (19a) should refer to *a standard or a level*, hence *uncountable*, so no indefinite article is needed, whereas the noun *performance* in (19b) indicates *a show or an event*, and it is *countable*, a quantifier is, therefore, needed. The noun *glass* in (20a) refers to *a substance* and is *uncountable*, while that in (20b) refers to *an object, a container*, and it is *countable*; so it needs an article. It is safe to say that some count/uncount nouns in English have a wide range of plasticity in changing their countability and having new meanings, and this salient feature can

occur to count and uncount nouns alike.

From the above mentioned, it can be summarized that the linguistic and cognitive differences in the two languages are likely to result in errors in nominal quantification by Vietnamese speakers when using English. The current paper aims to examine the set issue, and as for error analysis, this study follows Corder's (1981) model that consists of five steps, namely error collection, identification, description, explanation, and evaluation. Error evaluation step, however, is thought to require the researcher to apply a particular research methodology, and so it is not for the present study.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### *Participants*

Participants in this study include Vietnamese EFL speakers working for domestic and international companies in Vietnam, freelancers, university teachers of subjects other than English. These participants graduated from the universities that required their students to demonstrate an English language requirement to be certified as Intermediate-level speakers of English upon graduation. The participants were reported to use English in their work on a daily basis.

### *Procedures of data collection and analysis*

Two kinds of exercises were used in order to achieve the participants' consistency in test behaviors. The exercise type of multiple-choice questions divided into a 20 two-choice questions and another 20 four-choice questions was used along with the type of writing by describing their current jobs and suggesting ways for making their jobs more rewarding. In the writing task, the participants were asked to use as many nouns as possible and noun quantifiers given beforehand. Both exercises were designed in the form of a link, using Google Forms application and sent online to 70 target participants who were expected to complete the exercises within 75 minutes.

The result of the multiple-choice exercises was received directly and readily displayed on Google Forms. Regarding the writing, 32 full pieces of writing were received from the participants. The count/uncount nouns used from the writing were highlighted and then were sent to two separate native English professors who proofread and checked if there was any misuse of the count/uncount nouns and nominal quantification. It was concluded that the feedback from the two professors was virtually the same.

The principle for identifying nominal quantification errors was set. The appropriacy of meaning and grammatical structure of a noun at question and the appropriacy of the context in which this noun is quantified were examined. Other types of errors such as orthographic, inconsistently spelt or developmental errors are not regarded as the objects of this study.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result was a collection of responses from 51 out of 70 participants invited to join the study. A set of 40 multiple choice questions taken by 51 participants made up a total of 2040, of which 747 nominal quantification errors at issue were found. For the writing task, 32 full pieces of writing were received from 51 respondents, a finding of 52 errors at issue was identified for analysis.

Our findings by and large supported the above hypotheses. Errors by Vietnamese EFL speakers were caused by many reasons grouped into typological differences, numeral categorization, asymmetry and plasticity of pairs of count/uncount nouns.

### *Errors occurred as a result of differences in numeral expression between in Vietnamese and in English*

According to Holmes (2009), although some errors result from conceptual transfer, most errors occur as a result of learners' applying the semantics and syntax of their mother tongue within the scope of the target language. Arguably, Vietnamese and English have means to quantify a noun, but the means and principles for denoting the nominal quantification are not the same owing to typological differences. Every English noun at question is of a definite numeral category indicating if it is singular or plural. Any noun used in a sentence must be quantified because it is lexically and syntactically relevant, and it affects the sentence's overall structure. However, in Vietnamese, the numeral category of a noun is not syntactically important, and a noun is of more lexical significance. This leads to the use of a bare noun or a number-neutral noun, practicing a habit of using an unquantified number or denoting the numeral meaning optionally or at the user's choice. Considering the differences in language types between Vietnamese and English, the test result showed that nominal quantification errors occurred, illustrated as follows:

- (1) \*'... My job is giving me too *much of skill* for my life...' (BZ 20)  
[*'much of skill'* needs to be changed to the count counterpart '*many skills*' referring to '*many tasks*']
- (2) \*'... I make so *many fired rice*...' (BZ45)  
[*'many fried rice'* changed to '*much fried rice*' or '*many fried rice dishes*']
- (3) \*'.... near my restaurant had *a lot of bus station* ..., and so *many post office*...' (BZ45)  
[ '.... near my restaurant there are *a lot of bus stations*..., and so *many post offices*...'; an '*s*' needs to be added to *station* and *office* to make them in the plural forms.]

Sentences (1), (2), and (3) showed the errors occurred due to the differences in expressing the nominal quantification through the quantifier. In Vietnamese, only one form of the word '*nhieu*' to indicate the plural noun, and this word '*nhieu*' can be combined with a count or uncount noun. However, in English, several options, namely *many*, *much*, *a lot of*, *lots of*, *a great number*, and others are found, and the choice of a certain option depends on whether the noun at issue is countable or uncountable, together with an '*-s/es*' is added to the noun at issue as illustrated above.

The Vietnamese EFL speakers have a habit of using an estimated number or a number-neutral number through the use of a bare noun, leading to transfer errors in quantifying English nouns, as shown in the table below.

Texts extracted from respondents' writing	Texts corrected
(4a). *'... All of them are friendly and easy-going to share <i>lifestyle as well as career</i> .' (ED01)	(4b). '... All of them are friendly and easy-going to share <i>lifestyles as well as careers</i> .'
(5a). *'... Our office will organize <i>meeting</i> ' (ED01)	(5b). '... Our office will organize <i>meetings</i> .'
(6a). *'...I'm interested in <i>environmental topic</i> .' (ED03)	(6b). '...I'm interested in <i>environmental topics</i> .'
(7a). *'... <i>Good environment</i> will be the place where people with <i>different background</i> can earn a living' (BZ07)	(7b). '... <i>A good environment</i> will be the place where people with <i>different backgrounds</i> can earn a living.'

**Table 2.** Examples of nominal quantification errors due to the use of number-neutral nouns

The italicized nouns from (4a) to (7a) are used in their bare forms, representing the number-neutral category. This use of a number-neutral nouns is considered errors in English, and an '*-s/es*' must be added to the end of these nouns.

**Errors occurred due to differences between binary- and ternary-numeral categories**

The numeral categorization between in Vietnamese and in English is said to be dissimilar. English has a binary-numeral system with two opposing forms of singularity and plurality, whereas Vietnamese owns a ternary-numeral system regarding singularity, plurality and number-neutrality. While any noun is quantified in English, and there does not exist so called '*a bare noun*', the use of number-neutral nouns is common in Vietnamese. Therefore, when the Vietnamese speakers transfer this unquantified expression when using a noun in English, they may commit errors. Following are some of the examples extracted from the participants' writing:

- (8)\*'... *Attractive salary* with premium benefits have a great influence on workers' quality of life.'  
(ED51)
- (9)\* 'Audit is the examination or inspection of many books of accounts by an auditor followed by physical checking of *inventory* to make sure that all departments are following documented *system* of

recording transactions...’ ‘... Auditors check various books of accounts such as journal *ledger*, general *ledger*, ...’ (BZ16)

(10)\* ‘... factors that make a job more rewarding like promotion *opportunity*, salary *increase*,... changes in technology and *career*. Working *environment* and business culture are also important ones.’ (BK26)

(11)\* ‘... my job provides me .... improve myself on daily *basis*.’ ‘... for me, a job with friendly working *environment* ...’ (BK27)

(12)\* ‘...to train our employees fully understand *the hazard and risk* at *workplace*.’ (OT47)

Nouns in sentences (8) to (12) are quantified but fail to meet grammatical rules, which results from the use of number-neutral nouns in Vietnamese. The nouns in sentences (8) to (12) are number-neutral nouns which are used without a quantifier, and they have a full meaning in Vietnamese. This is perfectly fine in Vietnamese. However, this use of the nouns is regarded as errors in English that requires a quantifier to be added or a plural form inflected.

In a nutshell, these nouns, therefore, should be added with articles or changed to their plural forms accordingly. To prevent this type of error from happening, the Vietnamese EFL speakers are advised to change from the ternary-numeral category in Vietnamese to the binary-numeral one in English in order for the learners to eliminate the use of number-neutral nouns when using English nouns.

#### **Errors occurred because of the asymmetry of pairs of specific count/uncount nouns**

The result also showed that Vietnamese EFL speakers had difficulty quantifying nouns in English.

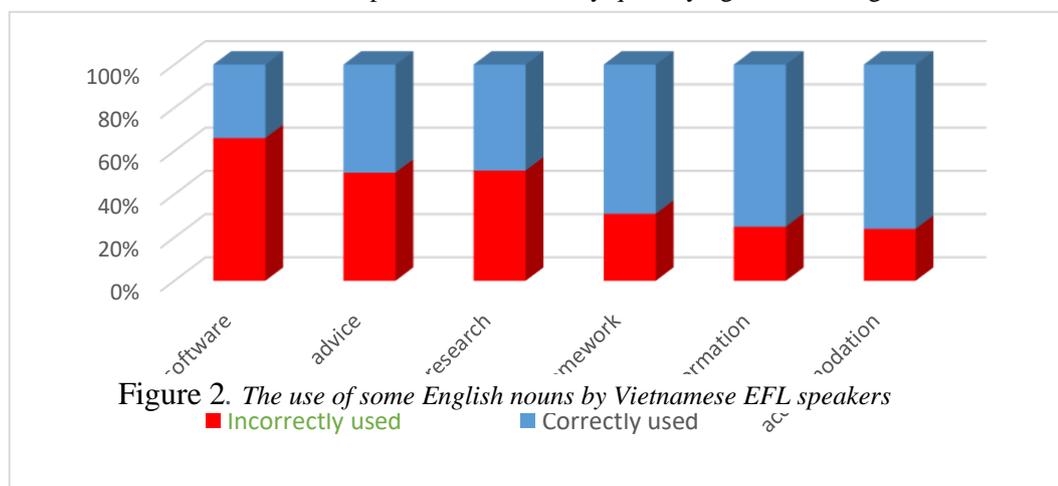


Figure 2. The use of some English nouns by Vietnamese EFL speakers  
■ Incorrectly used ■ Correctly used

Figure 2 demonstrates that Vietnamese EFL speakers failed to use some English uncountable nouns correctly. This can be explained by the fact that some abstract nouns (in normal situations) are uncountable in English, but they are mostly countable in Vietnamese, making the Vietnamese confused in quantifying them. Such nouns as *software*, *advice*, *research* were highly misused (above 50%). This error type was also seen in the participants’ writing extracted as follows:

(13)\* ‘... I am also empowered to run and develop company’s business such as a few systems, modify some *softwares*, ...’ (BZ36)

(14)\* ‘... financial statements that provide a *useful information* for users’ (BZ16)

(15)\* ‘... I provide solutions and give *advices* to clients...’ (ED51)

Such nouns as *software*, *information* and *advice* in (13), (14) and (15) respectively are incorrectly used. Because they are uncountable, no article or ‘-s/es’ should be added.

Thus, the differences in pairs of count/uncount nouns in Vietnamese and English have caused Vietnamese EFL speakers to commit errors in nominal quantification. What can be done about this problem? First and foremost, learners need to be aware of differences in pairs of abstract nouns and concrete, object nouns. In English, abstract nouns are uncountable and concrete, object nouns are countable. On the other hand, in Vietnamese, abstract nouns are countable and concrete, object nouns are uncountable in most situations.

#### **Errors occurred due to discordances in plasticity of pairs of count/uncount nouns**

Vietnamese EFL speakers made nominal quantification errors when the plasticity of pairs of count/uncount nouns in Vietnamese and that in English are distinctive. This disparity led Vietnamese EFL

speakers to making errors subdivided into three groups. The first group of errors includes the pairs of count/uncount nouns having their meaning constrained due to a change its countability, as illustrated below:

- (16)\* ‘...The young really care and step up to some level of *changes*’ (ED04)  
(17)\* ‘...I have strong *passion* about that...’ (BZ07; ED37)

In Sentence (16), the plural noun *changes* referring to *changes in particular* should be altered to the uncount noun *change*, indicating *a change in general*. In (17), the uncount noun *passion* indicating *a general emotion* should be changed to *a passion* with the use of an article when *an emotion is qualified*, Swan, 2005: 149.4).

The second group of errors involves the pairs of count/uncount noun with the plasticity of countability change creating their derivative meanings.

- (18)\* We can gain a lot of *experiences* from students. (ED02)  
(19)\* Employees receive useful training and get worthy *benefit*. (BZ07)  
(20)\* ... requires different *supports*...and provide on-time *supports*.(BZ09)  
(21)\* ... winning many awards and *recognition* (ED37)

The plural count noun *experiences* referring to *events* in Sentence (18) should be changed to an uncount noun *experience* describing *knowledge or familiarity over time*. In (19), the noun *benefit* is used incorrectly, and its plural form *benefits* is required to mean *perks*. The plural count noun *supports* in (20) concerning *physical like pillars* need to be changed to a uncount noun *support*, referring to general help. Likewise, the uncount noun *recognition* in (21) is suggested changing to the count noun with its plural form, meaning favorable notice like an achievement.

The final error type resulting from plasticity of pairs of of count/uncount nouns is concerned with a new meaning established along with a change in nominal countability, as sentences (22) to (26)<sup>4</sup>extracted from the proficiency test:

- (22)\* I tend to write *in a pencil*. I like the softness of the lead.  
(23)\* I wrote that *with pencil* because that’s all there was to hand.  
(24)\* My dad gets *paper* every day on his way to work.  
(25)\* Of course you can have some milk. Get *glass* out of the cupboard.  
(26)\* Catalysts made from *a gold* can be applied in the chemical industry.

The noun *pencil* in sentences (22) and (23) shows a plasticity between countability and uncountability and has its meaning changed accordingly. In (22), an uncountable noun *pencil* referring to a substance is needed, but the survey result shows that one-third of the participants failed to answer this question. In contrast, a countable noun *pencil* indicating a concrete, object noun is required in sentence (23), but still one-ninth of the participants did not answer the question correctly. Likewise, the nouns *paper*, *glass*, and *gold* in Sentences (24), (25) and (26) show the plasticity of these pairs of count/uncount nouns. While the concrete, object nouns *paper* and *glass* with their countability are needed in (24) and (25) respectively, some Vietnamese EFL speakers have used the uncountability form of these nouns with a ‘substance’ meaning. Surprisingly, over half of the respondents chose an uncountable noun *paper* instead of a countable noun referring to a newspaper in Sentence (24). In (26), an uncountable noun referring to a substance is needed, but one-fifth of the Vietnamese EFL speakers used a countable noun *gold* for this sentence, leading to errors in quantifying count/uncount nouns.

Notice that while English count/uncount nouns as in (22) to (26) and some others have a wide range of plasticity with pairs of count/uncount nouns, the majority of Vietnamese count/uncount nouns is asymptotically approaching the inflexibility as explained in (18a) and (18c). Therefore, it can be seen that differences in plasticity of nouns in the two languages have caused difficulties for Vietnamese speakers of English.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The study of nominal quantification errors by Vietnamese EFL speakers has provided useful insights on reasons why Vietnamese EFL learners make errors in English nominal quantification. While the numeral meaning of a noun is syntactically important in English, it is not syntactically, but lexically relevant in Vietnamese. It is more widespread for the Vietnamese to use a bare noun or number-neutral noun from the Vietnamese ternary-numeral system, while a binary-numeral system is in use in English. Also, the respective count/uncount pairs of noun in the two languages show an asymmetry that abstract nouns are mostly countable in Vietnamese, but they are uncountable in English; and while concrete, object nouns are countable in English, they are not countable in Vietnamese. In addition, the plasticity of a count/uncount noun on the continuum in the

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<sup>4</sup>Sentences (22), (23), (24), (25) and (26) are extracted from the proficiency test Questions 2 and 3 of Part 1, Questions 7, 9 and 10 of Part II, respectively.

two languages is different. In English, a wide range of plasticity of pairs of count/uncount nouns is seen, while pairs of count/uncount nouns in Vietnamese move toward the inflexibility. These linguistic and cognitive differences make Vietnamese speakers commit errors in nominal quantification when they use English. Pedagogical implications are provided for EFL learners to raise their awareness of the differences in quantifying nouns. Also, a transfer from a ternary numeral system in Vietnamese to a binary numeral one in English should be made so that number-neutral nouns can be avoided.

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