

Exploring Nativelikeness: A Study of English Past-Tense Morphology in Vietnamese-Speaking Adult Learners

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Abstract

The debate surrounding whether adult second language learners can achieve ultimate proficiency has long intrigued researchers in the field of second language acquisition. This study aimed to investigate the ability of Vietnamese-speaking learners of English to produce target-like past-tense verbal morphology. Specifically, it sought to (a) determine whether adult second language learners could demonstrate nativelike past verbal markings and (b) explore the factors contributing to non-target-like representation. Participants completed a background survey and a cloze task, followed by text and speech production tasks, and individual follow-up interview sessions. Results revealed that participants did not exhibit nativelike performance on past-tense verbal inflections, with the source of their non-target-like performance attributed to performance and processing demands rather than a systematic deficit. A significant effect was found between grouping and production scores, $F(1, 57) = 36.37, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .39$. The effect between the types of production task and its scores was also significant, $F(1, 57) = 5.76, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .09$, with a significant interaction between grouping and production type, $F(3, 56) = 17.12, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .48$. Additionally, a Pearson correlation test demonstrated a marginally significant correlation between the oral and written versions of the sample ($p = .051$). A paired sample t -test result showed that nonnative English participants significantly scored higher on text production ($M = 75.90, SD = 27.25$) compared to speech production ($M = 51.31, SD = 21.21$), $t(14) = -3.88, p = .002, 95\% \text{ CI } [-38.16, -11.01]$ (two-tailed), while no significant difference was found between text and speech production by English native participants ($p = .90$). These findings underscore the pivotal role of input in achieving ultimate proficiency in second language acquisition among adults. The discussion delves into the implications of the findings and the significance of input in adult second language acquisition.

Keywords: adult second language acquisition, English past-tense morphology, input, nativelikeness, performance and processing demands, Vietnamese learners

1. Introduction

A central question in second language acquisition research is whether the processes of first and second language acquisition are fundamentally the same or different. In essence, this question probes whether second language learners can achieve ultimate attainment—reaching a level of proficiency indistinguishable from that of native speakers. A common belief is that the answer is "no," as nonnative speakers are often perceived to retain a foreign accent or make grammatical errors, even at high levels of proficiency. This belief supports the notion that younger language learners are more likely to achieve native-like proficiency. While there is some truth to these assumptions, they do not encompass the entire landscape of second language learning.

For instance, consider immigrant employees working in English-speaking environments or nonnative speakers employed as English teachers at language institutes. Their recruitment for these roles indicates that their English competence is on par with that of native speakers. Their proficiency enables them to perform professionally and live in English-speaking countries with a level of fluency comparable to that of native speakers. This suggests that high levels of second language proficiency are attainable, challenging the notion that nonnative speakers cannot achieve native-like fluency.

Inflectional verbal morphology presents significant acquisition challenges for adult second language learners (Aderlaepe et al., 2023; Iwao et al., 2024; Parodi et al., 2004; Slabakova, 2013; Zobl & Liceras, 1994). The issue of English past-tense verbal marking persists even at advanced stages of acquisition (Lardiere, 1998a, 2000, 2003).

2. Research Aim

Past-tense verbal inflections were chosen for this study to investigate whether nonnative speakers could achieve native-like performance in this aspect of English morphology. The present study was designed with two primary research aims: (a) to determine whether second language learners can produce past-tense verb endings in obligatory contexts as proficiently as native English speakers, and (b) to examine the sources of non-native-like performance in past-tense verbal markings.

There are multiple perspectives on whether adult language learners can achieve native-like proficiency. One perspective suggests that the answer is "no" due to the age factor, indicating a relationship between the age at which individuals begin learning a language and their ultimate attainment. Another perspective argues "yes," as many nonnative speakers can function in foreign language environments with proficiency comparable to native speakers. A third perspective offers a more nuanced view: second language learners may achieve native-like proficiency in some domains of the target language while struggling in others. This study aims to explore these possibilities, particularly in the domain of past-tense verbal morphology.

3. Literature Review

The following section first defined the term “nativelikeness” and then described the grammar aspect of English past-tense morphology. Next, three nativelikeness possibilities will be explored in light of popular linguistic theories and prior research to provide a comprehensive understanding of the acquisition of English past-tense morphology by nonnative speakers.

3.1. Nativelikeness

Nativelikeness refers to the comprehensive, implicit mental representation of a language that a person acquires when raised in an environment where that language is spoken. This includes language properties such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Nativelike speakers possess an intuitive, unconscious knowledge of their language, allowing them to distinguish what is linguistically possible from what is not (VanPatten et al., 2020). For example, consider the following sentences:

- (1) a. Kate said Pete arrived.
b. Who did Kate say arrived?

- c. Kate wondered whether Pete arrived.
- d. *Who did Kate wonder whether arrived?

While sentences (1a), (1b), and (1c) may sound natural in English, sentence (1d) does not, despite its structural similarity to sentence (1b). This discrepancy arises because native speakers' mental representation of English does not accept the form used in sentence (1d). This is part of the adult steady-state mental language representation, which is a stable representation of language that no longer develops.

Second language learners who attain nativelikeness have an underlying and implicit mental representation of the language that aligns closely with that of adult native speakers. In the present study, the focus is on whether there is a divergence or congruence in past-tense morphology between nonnative and native speakers. Specifically, the study investigates whether speakers of a language without tense marking (e.g., Vietnamese) can acquire this linguistic property in English. Three possibilities are considered:

1. Speakers of a language without past-tense marking cannot become nativelike in the area of past-tense morphology of the second language.
2. Nativelikeness in the area of past-tense morphology of the second language is possible for speakers of a language without past-tense marking.
3. Speakers of a language without past-tense marking can become nativelike in some domains, but not others, in the area of past-tense morphology of the second language.

3.2. English Past-Tense Morphology

English past-tense verbal inflections are categorized into two types: "regular" and "irregular" forms (Brown, 1973). Regular inflections are formed by adding the suffix -ed to the base form of the verb, which manifests in three allomorphs (-t, -d, -id). Irregular inflections, however, follow diverse patterns: changing an internal vowel (e.g., sit – sat), changing the final consonant (e.g., send – sent), changing both vowel and consonant (e.g., catch – caught), completely changing (e.g., go – went), or retaining the same form (e.g., hurt – hurt).

English tense is represented in the deep structure by the features <-present> and <+present>, which are generated by segment structure rules acting on the auxiliary (Brown, 1973). In a sentence like "She added some eggs, flour, milk, sugar, and vanilla," the auxiliary segment is neither modal nor copular <+copula>, so the auxiliary is deleted by verbal agreement, and the feature <-present> is assigned to the verbal segment. When the verbal segment is marked <-present>, the features <+affix> and <-present> are copied to the verb's suffix. This affix is realized as the -ed lexeme, which then undergoes the appropriate allomorphic changes. For irregular verbs, suffix transformation is blocked by the <+irregular> feature, with specific allomorph rules applying to the various categories of irregular forms.

L2 learners face significant challenges with the linguistic features associated with past-tense morphemes (Lardiere, 1998a, 2000). After specifying the terminal T(ense) node as [+finite], L2 learners must determine whether the required finite form is [-past] or [+past]. If [+past] is selected, regular verbs take the -ed suffix, whereas irregular verbs employ suppletive forms.

Adult native speakers process and represent regular and irregular past-tense verb forms using two distinct cognitive systems: a declarative system that stores memorized verbs and a procedural system that governs morphological rules (Clahsen & Felser, 2006; Clahsen et al., 2010; Pinker & Ullman, 2002). For adult L2 learners, irregular past-tense inflections rely on the memory system, while the formation of regular past-tense forms varies with proficiency. Highly proficient learners use similar mechanisms to native speakers for processing morphology, with regular verb morphology being stored for beginners but "increasingly composed" for more advanced learners (Bowden et al., 2010, p. 5). For instance, when inflecting the verb "hold," both the declarative and procedural systems are engaged. If the inflected form "held" is found in memory, it is retrieved, inhibiting the addition of the -ed suffix. If the past-tense form is not found in memory, the procedural system generates the correct suffix for the verb stem, producing a regular form (Pinker & Ullman, 2002).

3.3. Second Language Acquisition

3.3.1. *Nativelikeness Is Impossible*

The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (FDH), proposed by Bley-Vroman (1989, 2009), posits that the processes of first and second language acquisition are fundamentally different due to observable differences between child first language (L1) acquisition and adult second language (L2) acquisition. Consequently, the outcomes of these processes are distinct: "normal children inevitably achieve perfect mastery of the language; adult foreign language learners do not" (Bley-Vroman, 1989, p. 43). From a generative standpoint, Bley-Vroman (1989, 2009) argued that child L1 acquisition is driven by Universal Grammar (UG) and domain-specific learning mechanisms—cognitive mechanisms that children use to create mental representations based on linguistic input. In contrast, adults rely on general learning mechanisms, which assist in acquiring new skills and knowledge but are not specific to any linguistic domain.

In essence, Bley-Vroman (1989, 2009) suggests that child L1 acquisition results from the combination of input, domain-specific learning mechanisms, and UG, whereas adult L2 acquisition depends on input, general learning mechanisms, and the native language. FDH predicts that adult L2 acquisition differs from L1 acquisition in terms of mechanisms and outcomes, with L2 acquisition outcomes being qualitatively different from L1 outcomes. A relevant observation from FDH is the fossilization process in adult L2 acquisition, where learners partially acquire a structure or form that does not become target-like over time, despite "serious conscious efforts" (Bley-Vroman, 1989, p. 47). For instance, an L2 learner who fossilizes in the area of English past-tense morphology will consistently fail to provide the correct form in obligatory contexts. In contrast, if a native speaker makes an error, it is typically a performance issue rather than a deficit in mental representation.

The belief that people can achieve fluency in a second language if they begin learning it as children is supported by the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (Lenneberg, 1967). CPH asserts that full language acquisition occurs only before a certain age; if linguistic stimuli are not received within this period, language development is "seriously and irreversibly distorted" (Lenneberg, 1967, p. 373). The term "critical period" originates from biology, referring to specific biological development phases, such as imprinting in ducklings or vision development in kittens. Lenneberg (1967) observed that child language acquisition coincides with significant neurological activity essential for language development and noted that feral or linguistically deprived children do not successfully acquire L1 if they are not exposed to the language by around age five.

Regarding L2 acquisition, Lenneberg (1967) suggested that although a person of average intelligence can learn a second language after puberty, they will increasingly face "language-learning blocks" over time. However, there is evidence that adult nonnative speakers can attain native-like L2 proficiency. Ioup et al. (1994) presented counter-evidence to CPH with the case of two English-speaking women who acquired Egyptian Arabic as adults. One participant, Julie, who was, 21 when first exposed to Arabic, learned the language solely through interaction with native speakers in Egypt. The other participant, Laura, had some formal Arabic instruction starting in her senior undergraduate year before moving to Egypt. Native speakers rated the speech samples of both participants as indistinguishable from those of native speakers, and the majority of their syntactic judgment task results were consistent with native speaker judgments.

3.3.2. *Nativelikeness Is Possible but Not Guaranteed for All L2 Learners*

The Full Transfer/Full Access (FT/FA) hypothesis, proposed by Schwartz & Sprouse (1996), suggests that L1 influences L2 learners' mental representation, especially in the early stages of L2 acquisition. However, L2 learners are capable of moving away from their native language's influence, and both L1 and L2 acquisition share the poverty of the stimulus effects. According to FT/FA, an L2 learner initially starts with their L1 mental representation (excluding phonetics) to process L2 input and subsequently builds up the L2 linguistic system. For example, Vietnamese learners of English begin with

a mental representation for English in which temporal morphology is not situated. Initially, Vietnamese learners fully transfer all L1 properties and features, leading to insensitivity towards and the production of English sentences lacking the obligatory tense morphology. As learners encounter more English input, they restructure their L2 mental representation when their initial system proves inadequate for processing L2 data.

The term "full access" in FT/FA refers to the proposal that L2 learners' acquisition is guided by the constraints and principles of Universal Grammar (UG). To achieve nativelikeness, learners need sufficient relevant input in addition to other factors. L2 learners' developing mental representation system remains influenced by their mother tongue, and this influence may persist over time. Essentially, FT/FA hypothesizes that the L2 mental system represents a combination of UG and received input at all stages of acquisition. However, FT/FA does not apply to language aspects not regulated by UG (e.g., regular vs. irregular verbs). It is important to note that L2 learners may have L2 representations similar to those of native speakers, but these might not be reflected in their production due to performance and processing demands (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996).

In a longitudinal study, Lardiere (1998b) provided evidence that her L1 Chinese participant, Patty, acquired all English temporal syntactic features for tenses and finiteness but did not consistently provide past-tense verbal inflection due to a dissociation between the development of inflectional morphology and the knowledge of syntactic features. Similarly, Roberts et al. (2008) found that second language learners, regardless of their first languages, exhibited a general processing disadvantage when confronted with optional conditions in online L2 processing, whereas native speakers showed a processing advantage.

Overall, while the FT/FA hypothesis allows for the possibility of attaining nativelikeness, it also acknowledges that not all L2 learners will reach this level of proficiency. Factors such as the influence of the native language, the adequacy of input, and processing demands play crucial roles in determining the extent to which an L2 learner can achieve native-like performance.

3.3.3. Nativelikeness Is Possible in Some Domains, but No Others

The Representational Deficit Hypotheses (RDH) proposed by VanPatten et al. (2020) suggest that adult second language learners often fail to demonstrate native-like representation due to systematic deficits in their L2 mental representation. This representation includes sounds, semantics, grammatical information, and syntax. When a language feature receives overt markedness through a word or a bound morpheme, it must be reflected in the syntactic structures. Functional features, such as gender agreement, person marking, and tense marking, result in overt morphology.

Observing the differences between L1 and L2 acquisition, children generally do not experience difficulty acquiring morphology, while adults often struggle with L2 past-tense morphology despite receiving formal instruction. Even when adult learners receive extensive attention to precise morphology (e.g., past-tense marking), they frequently fail to produce inflected verbs correctly in obligatory contexts. The RDH posits that this is because adult L2 learners cannot or do not accurately incorporate new functional features into their mental representation systems. According to RDH, adult L2 learners can only acquire abstract functional features that exist in their L1 system. Therefore, L1 Vietnamese learners are unlikely to demonstrate target-like representation of English past-tense morphology because this feature is not present in Vietnamese.

Both FDH and RDH agree that adult L2 learners lack the morphological capabilities of L1 speakers. However, RDH is more specific than FDH, as it solely accounts for grammatical non-nativelikeness. This means that while adult L2 learners may achieve native-like proficiency in some domains, they will likely face persistent challenges in others, particularly those involving new functional features absent from their L1.

In summary, while adult L2 learners can achieve nativelikeness in some areas of language, such as phonetics or certain semantic aspects, they often struggle with grammatical features that are not present

in their native language. This is due to the representational deficits in their mental systems, which prevent them from fully acquiring and accurately using new functional features required by the L2.

3.4. The present study

A plethora of research has tested the RDH by investigating whether L2 learners can produce target-like morphology or whether they are sensitive to violations of L2 agreement relationships, such as subject-verb agreement in English present tenses and gender agreement (Collins, 2004; Ellis & Sagarra, 2010; Leiser, 2008). To evaluate the hypotheses generated by the RDH, it is essential to measure the L2 mental representation of the target functional feature specifically, not others. However, in most research in this area, participants have been provided with researcher-made or standardized test materials that may assess learners' knowledge of not only the intended features but also of lexical knowledge (VanPatten et al., 2020).

For example, in tasks testing subject-verb agreement, the verbs must exist in the L2 speakers' mental representation system. Similarly, for noun-adjective agreement, both nouns and adjectives must be present in the learners' system. If the lexical items used in the task are not in the learners' mental dictionary, retrieval may take longer, making it unclear whether non-nativeness on these tasks results from representational deficits as predicted by the RDH or from vocabulary issues. Another potential source of non-nativeness is the processing and performance demands caused by cognitive load and spontaneous speech (Lardiere, 1998b; Prévost & White, 2000; Roberts et al., 2008).

The current study attempts to answer whether adult speakers of a language that does not select for case or tense (i.e., Vietnamese) can produce nativeness past-tense verbal markings and to identify the sources of non-nativeness verb inflections. L2 learners' speech and text samples were examined to see if L2 tense marking deviated from that of native speakers. The task and materials were designed to allow adult L2 speakers to produce speech and texts without lexical constraints. The research questions are as follows:

1. Do L1 Vietnamese participants provide nativeness forms of English past-tense morphology in their speech and text production?
2. Is non-nativeness performance on past-tense morphology the result of a systematic deficit as predicted by the RDH, or is it due to performance and processing demands as suggested by the FT/FA?

4. Research Methods

4.1. Participants

Undergraduate students, graduate students, and professionals ($n = 33$) at a public university in the Southeastern United States provided their informed consent prior to voluntarily participating in the study. Participants were divided into two groups based on their native language. The experimental group (English L2 or L2 group) included Vietnamese native speakers who learned English as a second language. Their ages ranged from 21 to 39 years ($M = 25.6$, $SD = 5.21$). This group included international students or professionals, with the majority (60%) being graduate students at the time of the study. The duration of their residence, study, and/or work in an English-speaking environment ranged from two months to five years. The L2 group's English proficiency was sufficient for passing university entrance English exams, completing their academic programs, and/or working with native speakers. As seen in Table 1, the L2 group's performance scores on the cloze task ($n = 15$) were close to those of native speakers.

Table 1
Participant Profiles

	L1 group		L2 group	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	42.27	15.09	25.60	5.21
Age of first exposure to English	0	0	9.80	4.13
Length of residence in an English-speaking environment (in months)	508.20	180.76	30.20	20.65
Self-reported English proficiency (%)	90.22	8.94	75.11	14.25
Cloze task score (%)	95.00	4.82	81.17	9.99

The control group (English L1 or L1 group) consisted of native English speakers. These participants were either English-speaking students or professionals whose ages ranged from, 21 to 65 years ($M = 42.27$, $SD = 15.09$). These native speakers spent most of their time residing in an English-speaking country.

4.2. Materials

The study protocol involved participants completing three main components. First, they filled in a questionnaire about personal background and language learning experience. Second, a cloze task with multiple choices was given to gather information about participants' English proficiency level. Third, in the production task, participants were asked to tell oral and written stories based on two separate sets of picture cards.

4.2.1. Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire

The Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q) used in the study was adapted from Marian et al. (2007) and provided in Microsoft Word format. The LEAP-Q is a reliable instrument for assessing language profiles, particularly among multilingual adults. Factor analyses revealed that most factors had high eigenvalues, and together these factors accounted for 73.5% of variance. Cronbach's alpha for each factor yielded values from .31 to .92 (Marian et al., 2007). It consists of two main sections: General linguistic background and specific language profiles. Participants provided information about their language exposure, proficiency, age of acquisition, contributing factors to language learning, and more. Responses were rated on a scale from zero to ten, reflecting proficiency levels ranging from "none" to "perfect."

4.2.2. Cloze Passage Task

The cloze passage task included forty multiple-choice items and aimed to measure participants' English proficiency in both meaning and form. The passage, taken from "American Kernel Lessons: Advanced - Student Book" (Cornelius et al., 1989), contained blanks where participants were required to select the most suitable option from three choices. The Cronbach α reported for this cloze test was .82 (Ionin et al., 2013). This task targeted both content words (nouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs) and function words (prepositions, pronouns, auxiliary verbs, conjunctions, articles) to assess participants' comprehension and grammatical knowledge.

4.2.3. Production Task

Participants completed two major production tasks: oral and written storytelling based on provided sets of picture cards (Sardinha, 2011). Each set included five cards depicting a character and sequential actions. Participants were instructed to construct a story about what happened to the character last week. The visual cues from the picture cards aimed to facilitate spontaneous and natural storytelling. The stories were either orally narrated and audio-recorded or written on a computer, depending on the assigned task order.

4.3. Procedure

After completing the consent form, participants first completed the questionnaire on a computer, providing information about their language background and proficiency. The questionnaire covered various aspects of language learning and took approximately, 15 minutes to complete.

Next, participants completed the paper-and-pencil cloze passage test, consisting of forty multiple-choice items. They selected the most suitable option for each blank in the passage. On average, participants spent around ten minutes on this task.

Finally, participants engaged in two storytelling tasks based on provided sets of picture cards. They were randomly assigned to either oral or written storytelling first. For oral storytelling, participants narrated their stories based on picture cards, which were audio-recorded. For written storytelling, participants typed their stories on a computer. Each task allowed participants to arrange the cards in their preferred order before storytelling. The majority of participants completed all the aforementioned tasks in one session, which took approximately forty-five minutes.

4.4. Scoring and Analysis

Responses from the LEAP-Q were tabulated and analyzed to extract relevant language learning information, such as proficiency levels, contributing factors, and exposure contexts. Regarding the cloze passage task, participants' scores on this test were compared with their self-reported proficiency levels from the LEAP-Q. Additionally, the cloze results were compared between native English speakers and L2 learners.

Subsequently, audio recordings of oral storytelling and written stories were transcribed and analyzed. Each morpheme, particularly past-tense verb morphology, was reviewed and scored based on obligatory contexts and ad hoc decisions (Brown, 1973). The overall ratio of correct verb inflection suppliance to obligatory cases was calculated for each participant's speech and text sample. This ratio was compared between the experimental (L2) group and the control (L1) group to assess the use of past-tense morphemes.

5. Results

Participants' responses from the LEAP-Q, cloze passage task scores, ratio between correct past-tense morphology suppliance and obligatory contexts from the text production and sample speech were entered onto SPSS to perform statistical analyses. Results showed that L1 Vietnamese participants did not provide nativelike forms of English past-tense morphology in their speech and text production. In addition, L2 group's performance on text production task was significantly different from their performance on speech sample.

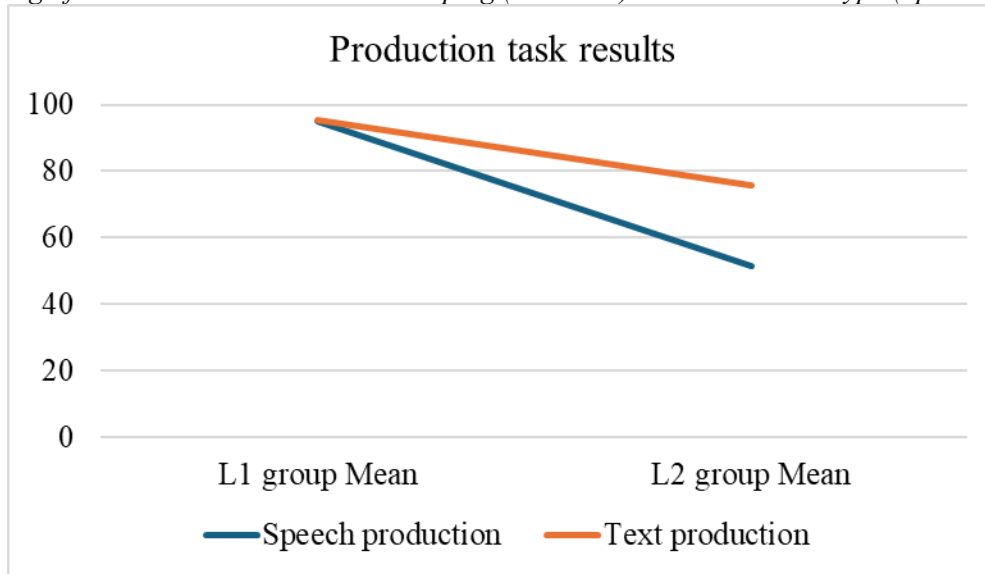
5.1. Non-Nativelike Forms of English Past-Tense Morphology

To answer the first research question, a two-way independent analysis of variance was conducted to examine the effect of grouping (i.e., English as first language versus English as a second language) and production type (i.e., speech production versus text production) on production scores. The results revealed that L1 Vietnamese participants did not provide nativelike forms of English past-tense morphology in their speech and text production. A significant effect was found between grouping and production scores, $F(1, 57) = 36.37, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .39$. The effect between the types of production task and its scores was significant, $F(1, 57) = 5.76, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .09$, and there was a significant interaction between grouping and production type, $F(3, 56) = 17.12, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .48$ (See Table 2 and Figure 1).

Table 2
Production Task Results

	L1 group		L2 group	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Speech production	94.89	13.5	51.31	21.21
Text production	95.41	11.86	75.9	27.25

Figure 1
Significant Interaction between Grouping (L1 vs. L2) and Production Type (Speech vs. Text)



5.2. Significant Differences between Speech and Text Production Task Results

The second research question asked whether the non-nativeness performance on past-tense morphology was the result of systematic deficit as predicted by the RDH or performance and processing demands as suggested by the FT/FA. To determine the answer to this question, the Pearson correlation test was performed, and the results demonstrated a marginally significant correlation between the oral and written versions of the sample ($p = .051$). Similarly, a paired sample t -test result showed that English nonnative participants significantly scored higher on text production ($M = 75.90$, $SD = 27.25$) in comparison with speech production ($M = 51.31$, $SD = 21.21$), $t(14) = -3.88$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [-38.16, -11.01] (two-tailed), while no significant difference was found between text and speech production by English native participants ($p = .90$). These results indicate that the non-target-like performance of Vietnamese-speaking participants was due to performance and processing demands rather than a systematic deficit.

6. Discussion

The study aimed to investigate the nativeness of English past-tense morphology production among L1 Vietnamese speakers in both speech and text contexts. The results indicated that L1 Vietnamese participants did not demonstrate nativeness performance in either oral or written forms of production ($p < .001$). This confirms the nonnative past-tense morphology performance of L1 Vietnamese speakers shown in the independent sample t -test comparing self-rated proficiency between L1 and L2 groups ($p = .002$) and the independent sample t -tests comparing the cloze task scores of the two groups ($p < .001$). This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the challenges faced by intermediate-to-advanced adult second language learners, particularly concerning past-tense verbal

marking (Lardiere, 1998a, 2000, 2003; Parodi et al., 2004; Slabakova, 2013; Zobl & Liceras, 1994). Despite spending many years in English-speaking environments, the participants did not achieve the L2 end state, underscoring the motivation, time, effort, and supportive language-learning environment required for such attainment (Marinova-Todd et al., 2000).

Regarding the second research question, the findings indicated that performance and processing demands play a significant role in shaping L2 learners' proficiency in past-tense morphology. First, L1 Vietnamese learners performed better in written form than in oral production, suggesting that cognitive loads and communicative pressures influence their performance (Lardiere, 1998b; Prévost & White, 2000; Roberts et al., 2008). Second, instances of self-correction among participants indicate their awareness of tense marking errors (e.g., "...David didn't think that is a good idea, so he decided to just go away, and *doesn't let* her, *didn't let* her mom know what did he do"), challenging assumptions of morpheme fossilization (Bley-Vroman, 1989, 1990). Such non-target-like performance immediately followed by self-correction of some Vietnamese participants with high scores in the cloze task might be caused by the demanding processing and communicative pressure of the speech production task (i.e., producing spontaneous speech). Third, several advanced learners scored above 70 percent in speech task and up to 100 percent in text production task. Compared with the L1 group, there were two native speakers scored 50 percent and 57.9 percent in speech production and text production tasks respectively. Both native and nonnative speakers may make performance mistakes even after they acquired the language. Taken altogether, it is indicated that advanced L2 speakers in this study did acquire English past-tense verbal inflections; however, the cognitive loads on processing and performing L2 speech caused their inconsistent nativelike performance.

The incorrect suppliance of verbal inflections in obligatory contexts might be due to the complication of mapping underlying abstract features with the surface inflectional forms. This is even more difficult for L2 participants to use final consonant clusters (i.e., [kt] as in *worked*) or recall a past verbal form (e.g., *went* as for *go*), which is not instantiated in their L1. In the case of Patty – the L1 Chinese participant in Lardiere (1998a, 1998b, 2000), the use of finites did not mean the participant did not have an underlying representation for overt past-tense morphology. Patty's consistent low rate of temporal suppliance in obligatory contexts – 34 percent – was explained by the problem of mapping the fully specified syntactic features and the surface morpho-phonology in spontaneous speech. As noted by Sorace (2011), L2 learners might underspecify the finiteness and employ non-finite forms as their default grammar. In other words, L1 Vietnamese speakers were incapable of performing a one-to-one mapping for past-tense verbal forms because English past tenses have more complex syntax-pragmatics interface conditions than Vietnamese past tenses. This aligns with Aderlaepe et al.'s (2023) concept of "interference" (p. 2919). However, several L2 learners successfully self-corrected during the speech production task, so they were considered to be in full-specification of the English past-tense form because they could map the past-tense verbal form with the appropriate linguistic context. Again, communication pressure and processing demands may come into play in the bilinguals' less-than optimal capacity to consistently and proficiently integrate different kinds of linguistic information.

In alignment with Ioup et al. (1994), some advanced L2 speakers demonstrated nativelike performance in terms of past-tense morphology, which rules out the effect of age on L2 ultimate attainment as claimed by CPH (Lenneberg, 1967). According to Marinova-Todd et al. (2000) and Iwao et al. (2024), rather than onset age or learning capacity, it was the different language-learning environments that set up the observed differences in child and adult second language acquisition. Living and interacting with native speakers tend to yield positive results for adult L2 learners.

7. Conclusion and Suggestions for Practical Use

The study contributes to understanding the challenges faced by L1 Vietnamese learners in acquiring nativelike proficiency in English past-tense morphology. It emphasizes the role of performance

and processing demands, rather than systematic deficits, in shaping L2 learners' production. The study underscores the need for high-quality input, emphasizing meaningful exposure and interaction with the language in diverse contexts, for L2 learners to achieve nativelike competence. Limitations of the study include a focus solely on syntactic deficits in past-tense marking (Prévost & White, 2000) and the need for further research on perceptual aspects of morphology acquisition. Future studies should explore non-syntactic deficits, phonological challenges (Wolfram, 1989), and the role of L1 grammar in L2 morphology acquisition (Lardiere, 2003) among L1 Vietnamese learners. Additionally, investigations into the effects of input exposure and instructional approaches are warranted to enhance L2 learners' linguistic competence.

7.1. Suggestions for Practical Use

To effectively address the challenges in L2 acquisition, particularly discrepancies between speech and text production, it is essential to enhance both the quality and quantity of input exposure. The study highlights the importance of meaningful interactions in an English-speaking environment, which significantly boosts learners' success in attaining nativelike proficiency. The following practical suggestions offer strategies for teachers and learners to apply these findings effectively.

7.1.1. Diversifying Instructional Approaches

The current study demonstrates that many learners, despite years of exposure to English, primarily focused on passing standardized exams. Vu's emphasis on daily grammar and vocabulary drills, and Phuong's experience of English classes as memorization exercises for test preparation, reflect this issue. Moreover, Quoc reported only minimal speaking practice (30 minutes weekly), which resulted in insufficient depth and diversity in language exposure (Iwao et al., 2024). Traditional methods, relying heavily on explicit grammatical instruction and repetitive exercises, often leads to oversimplified rules and hinder practical language use (Rothman, 2008), which limits proficiency and reduces enjoyment (VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993). To shift toward more effective learning, communicative and inductive approaches should be adopted.

For example, teachers can apply implicit-inductive methods (Godfroid, 2016), where learners infer grammatical rules through abundant exposure to language examples. This can be done by introducing an input flood—where students are exposed to multiple examples of specific grammatical structures, such as past-tense marking, allowing them to notice patterns without explicit instruction. Additionally, task-based learning activities such as ordering food or booking tickets can provide real-world application, addressing the challenges Phuong faced when using English for practical tasks after living in the U.S. for a year.

7.1.2. Increasing the Quality and Quantity of Meaningful Input

The overemphasis on vocabulary, grammar, and reading in traditional curricula, particularly due to national English exams, often leads to an imbalance in language skills development. It is essential to create a balanced syllabus that integrates reading, writing, speaking, listening, and other language skills into the weekly schedule. For instance, to enhance listening skills, teachers can expose learners to a wide range of authentic media such as English articles, best-selling books, TV shows, music, news channels like CNN or BBC, podcasts, and celebrity interviews (e.g., Mark Zuckerberg, Taylor Swift, Barack Obama, etc.). Engaging with content that aligns with students' personal interests will improve listening comprehension and expose them to diverse accents and dialects.

To reinforce these skills, teachers can use role-playing exercises, peer conversations, and debates based on the topics covered in the media. This allows for meaningful communication and practical language use. In addition, authentic materials should be incorporated into lessons, reflecting real-life tasks such as grocery shopping, job interviews, or giving directions. While preparing for standardized tests (IELTS, TOEFL), speaking and listening components should be integrated into the practice. For example, pairing grammar exercises with speaking tasks where learners explain grammatical rules or apply them in conversation can link test preparation to real-world communication. Collaborating with local native

speakers to set up language exchange events will further enhance speaking opportunities, compensating for the lack of interaction outside school.

In all these activities, it is essential for teachers to provide constructive feedback that focuses on meaning and communication, rather than solely on grammatical accuracy. This will foster a more natural use of the language, encouraging learners to express themselves freely without fear of making minor grammatical errors. In doing so, learners will build greater confidence in their ability to use English in practical, real-world situations.

7.1.3. Creating Immersive Learning Environments for Language Output

The quality of input, particularly in social settings, is crucial for language acquisition. The study highlights that before arriving in the U.S., L1 Vietnamese participants primarily experienced exam-focused instruction with limited opportunities for natural language use (e.g., grammar rules, memorized structures or forms, low-level reading practice according to Bloom's (1956) taxonomy), in contrast to L1 English speakers who benefited from diverse linguistic interactions (VanPatten et al., 2020). To bridge this gap, learners should be provided with ample opportunities to engage with real-time, qualified input and practice language output.

Since the correlation between L1 Vietnamese participants' length of residence in an English-speaking country and task performance was found to be non-significant (cloze task, $p = .74$, two-tailed; speech production, $p = .07$, two-tailed; text production, $p = .78$, two-tailed), learners must continue practicing English outside formal environments. Self-directed learners can immerse themselves in English by consuming news articles, podcasts, and YouTube videos, and setting homework tasks such as summarizing or recording speeches based on what they read or watched. Learners can also challenge themselves to speak only in English for a set amount of time each day, use language-learning apps like Duolingo, ELSA Speak, or Babbel, or engage with virtual language partners through platforms like HelloTalk. Joining English-speaking communities or clubs will further provide learners with opportunities to converse regularly and improve their language skills.

In conclusion, teachers and learners must place a stronger emphasis on diversifying instructional approaches, increasing the quality and quantity of meaningful input, and creating immersive learning environments that encourage real-world language use. By shifting away from rote memorization and prioritizing communicative, interactive methods, learners will obtain sufficient input and ample opportunities to “process [qualified] input in real time” (VanPatten et al., 2020, p. 174) to attain natively-like proficiency.

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