An Errors Analysis of Reported Speech Made by The First Year Students of English Major

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Abstract
This paper focuses on some particular aspects of reported speech and analyses the common mistakes in using Reported Speech by the first year students of English major at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University. The author aims to find out the common errors and then suggest some possible solutions to the problems. Error analysis has also provided insights about the second language acquisition process, which results in major changes in teaching practices. This leads to a greater understanding of the difficulties that Vietnamese students, who aim to study English as a second language face in learning English grammar.

Keywords: Errors, Reported Speech, Direct & Indirect Speech, Students, English

INTRODUCTION
Nowadays, English has become an international communication language to access to many fields of human life such as science, technology, trade, communication and research as well. In recent years, there is a considerable increase in Vietnamese learners’ need of learning English because they are aware of the importance of English to globalization in the WTO integration period. To the persons who possess, understand and make full use of English, it is considered as a multifunctional key to achieve success in life. Like many other languages, English language’s complexity really makes many Vietnamese students confused. Numerous errors are made during the process of learning the English language because of the differences between two cultures in terms of ways of thinking, literature and learning styles.

Principally, English teaching and learning process cannot be free from mistakes or errors, misinterpretation, misapplication about something that has been learnt (Brown. 1987: 9). As Spada and Lightbown (2002, p.167) stated that: “Errors are natural part of language
learning. The errors reveal the patterns of learners’ developing interlanguage systems—showing where they have over generalized a second language rules or where they have inappropriately transferred the first language rule into the second language.”

For second language learners in general and for the first year students at Ba Ria – Vung Tau, who are studying English in particular, or even the persons who acquired a high level of English proficiency also make mistakes in their production of the second language. The errors can be seen in different parts. For instance, in syntax, Vietnamese students made wrong use of prepositions, articles as in the following sentence “He is swimming on the ocean” or “I like the my house”. Another example is about wrong use of word order in the sentence “She very loves a pen blue” and so on.

Errors and error analysis have drawn attention of methodologists and linguists for a long time. However, in Vietnam, there are few researches done on the area of errors and error analysis; especially little attention on reported speech as well as difficulties and challenges students face. In learning English grammar, especially learning reported speech, Vietnamese students cannot avoid making mistakes and errors. Despite the fact that they have been taught and understood the rules of grammar clearly, they often make errors and some types of errors even become habitual. These errors can be seen in both learning process at school and the results at the end of every semester.

For the reasons mentioned above, the author would like to conduct a study dealing with an analysis of errors committed by the first year students of English major in terms of using reported speech, entitled “An Error Analysis of Reported Speech made by The First Year Students of English Major”

The aim of this paper is first to identify students’ errors and causes leadings to errors in using Reported Speech in English to help learners understand more about its usage. Finally, the paper also tries to find out the solutions to help improving the effects of teaching and learning English.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The study is carried out to achieve the following objectives:

➢ To identify students’ errors in using reported speech in English.
➢ To find out the causes leading to errors committed by students in using reported speech.
➢ To point out solutions to help students to avoid the errors.
To suggest implications for students and teachers during teaching and learning process.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is to answer the following questions:

1. What types of errors may high school students make in using reported speech?
2. What might be the causes leading to the errors?
3. What recommendations could be made so as to avoid the errors in using reported speech?

METHODS OF THE STUDY

The main method employed in this study is survey method. A group of 50 first year students of English major at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University are involved in the survey. The errors collected in written tasks, particularly five tasks done by the students within 50 minutes are analyzed, classified and counted to see how often they occur and look for their causes. The short interview is conducted right after the students hand in their papers. All data are analyzed and conducted under theoretical knowledge of errors and error analysis.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Direct Speech

Direct speech is used mainly in writing to report a person’s words exactly. It is found in conversations in books, in plays, and in quotations, and is often used in situations where accuracy is important, such as in areas relating to law and public media. The following examples highlight the form of direct speech.

She said, "Today's lesson is on presentations."
Or "Today's lesson is on presentations," she said.

The distinguishing features are the use of quotation marks to tell the reader that the words are the original words spoken by the speaker, and the reference to the speaker, which can be made before or after the quote, with the comma placed accordingly.

Reported Speech

In contrast to direct speech, reported speech is used mainly in conversation and is concerned more with communicating the exact meaning than the exact words. As such, the reported message may vary depending on the point of view of the speaker and the vocabulary selected:

She said/told him she would phone/call/ring him when/as soon as she (was) finished (at) work.
Shifting from Direct to Reported Speech

When shifting from direct to reported speech, grammatical changes may need to be made to the original text in order to account for the fact that “words spoken or thought in one place by one person [are or] may be reported in another place at a different time, and perhaps by a different person.” The changes include tense, time, pronouns, possessives, demonstratives changes and so on.

For example:

1. “Tom, you should listen to me.” Jane said.
   + Jane self-reports her words:
     I told Tom that he should listen to me.
   + Other person reports Jane’s saying:
     Jane told Tom that he should listen to her
   + Others report to Tom:
     Jane told you that he should listen to her.
   + Tom reports Jane’s words:
     Jane told me that I should listen to her.

2. “Do you know if he’s finished his report yet?”
   ✌️ He asked (me) if he had finished his report yet.
   2. He asked, “Where’s Peter?”
      ✌️ He asked where Peter was.

3. Direct: Will you help me, please?
   Indirect: He asked me to help him.

Errors in language learning process

Errors play an important role in English learning process because committing and analyzing errors will help learners realize and try to avoid them better.

According to Corder (1975), an error is referred to as a linguistic form that is either superficially deviant or inappropriate in terms of the target language.

In “Errors in Language Teaching and Use” (1980), Carl James defined errors as “being an instance of language that is intentionally deviant and not self-corrigible by its authors.”

Leon has defined error as “a linguistic form...which, in the same context...would in all likelihood not be produced by the learners’ native speaker counterparts” (1991, p.182).

According to “Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics” by Richard et al, error is considered as “the uses of a linguistic item (e.g. a word, a grammatical
item, a speech act, etc.) in a way in which a fluent or native speaker of language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning”.

A lot of definitions of errors have been given due to various standards. From those, the writer may suggest another definition “errors are what the second language learners’ produce, which are unacceptable, unnatural and faulty to native speaker in the particular context”.

**Error analysis**

Error analysis has served as foundation for language learning and teaching approaches. Error analysis has been taken into considerations by linguists and methodologists. By the late 1960s, it had become a favorable paradigm for studying second language acquisition, an acceptable alternative to behaviorism.

According to Chomsky, language acquisition was not a product of habit formation, but rather one of rule formation learners are exposed to the rules of the target language from hypothesis about them, and apply them to produce a target language utterance. In this process, learners would commit errors and they would modify their hypotheses so that their utterances would increasingly conform to the target language. Definitions of error analysis have been presented by a lot of linguists and grammarians.

Corder (1974) has defined error analysis as “by describing and classifying his errors in language terms we build up a picture of language, which are causing him learning problems”. He also states five steps of error analysis including identification of errors; classification of errors; explanation of errors; valuation of errors and correction of errors. James (1998) notes that “Error analysis is the process of determining the incidence, nature causes and consequences of unsuccessful languages”.

Cook (1993) also argues that error analysis is “a methodology of dealing with data rather than a theory of acquisition”.

**RESULTS**

**Multiple-choice Questions**

In Task 1, five questions are given and students can get one point for one correct answer. Wrong choice or no choice is not marked. On the parameter of 5 points, student’s task is considered “pass” if it has 3 points and upwards. 13 out of 50 students pass with the score ranging from 3 to 4 points, making up 26%. No students get full 5 points or zero.
The point of non-pass ranges from 1 to 2 points, taking account of 74%. It is obvious that the first year students at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University fail to use reported speech in different contexts. The result is presented in the following table:

Table 1: Students’ performance in doing task 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point(s)</th>
<th>Non-pass</th>
<th>Pass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quan.&amp; %</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>19 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37 (74%)</td>
<td>13 (26%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rearrangement Task

Task 2 is a kind of reordering exercises. Four jumbled sentences are given to check how students use different structures with reported speech and their possible positions. One point is scored for each correct answer. No points are given to the students with no response or incomplete sentences. A student’s task is considered “pass” if it can reach a half of correct sentences and upwards. On the parameter of four points, 48 out of 50 students (96%) pass the test with the score ranging from three to four points. No students get zero and one point. Most of the students (41) achieve the full point of four. Only two students fail to do this task with two points. The table below described the result:

Table 2: Students’ performance in doing task 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point(s)</th>
<th>Non-pass</th>
<th>Pass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quan.&amp; %</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>48 (96%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Paraphrasing Task

Task 3 is much more challenging for the students in comparison with task 1 and task 2. The students are asked to rewrite the sentences with given words and phrases in certain contexts. This task includes 5 English sentences; in which if the students produce one meaningful sentence, they will have one point. They can pass the test if they get 3 marks and upwards. No point is given to any wrong sentences or no answer. As can be seen from the table below, nearly a half of students (48%) are scored “pass”. No students reach the maximum score of five points. 52% of the students are considered “non-pass” with the score ranging from zero to two points. It is clear that students have a lot of difficulties in

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transferring the sentences into reported speech and get trouble in collocation patterns. The result is illustrated in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point(s)</th>
<th>Non-pass</th>
<th>Pass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>26 (52%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>13 (26%)</td>
<td>21 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9 (18%)</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: Students’ performance in doing task 3**

**Translation Task**

Task 4 is merely a Vietnamese English translation exercise, which really challenges high school students because they have to be aware of not only reported speech use in English but also corresponding phrases in Vietnamese.

This task consists of 5 questions for translation; each correct answer is scored one point. The difficulty of the task is shown by the modest number of passed students. On the parameter of 6 points, only 5 out of 50 students pass with the score of 3 points and upwards, occupying 10%. No students could reach the full score of 5 points. The majority of the students fail in their translation. 45 out of 50 students (90%) are evaluated “non-pass” with their score varied from zero to 2 points. Details are demonstrated in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point(s)</th>
<th>Non-pass</th>
<th>Pass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>45 (90%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15 (30%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10 (20%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4: Students’ performance in doing task 4**

**Error Judgment and Correction Task**

This task is a kind of production exercise. Students are required to recognize errors in using reported speech in particular contexts and then suggest appropriate substitutions. The task includes 5 sentences, each correct judgment is scored 1 point. No point is marked for any wrong judgments and incorrect substitutions. This task is rather challenging. 52% of the students with the score of 3 points and upwards pass. Four of them get full score of 5 points (taken up to 8%). No students get zero and non-pass students from 1 to 2 points reach 24 (48%). Table 5 displays the details.
Table 5: Students’ performance in doing task 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-pass</th>
<th>Pass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Point(s)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quan.&amp; %</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>9 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24 (48%)</td>
<td>26 (52%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Errors and their causes

After collecting the results, errors are explained and evaluated with finding out their causes, which lead students to fail in using reported speech during the process of learning.

Type 1: Interlingual errors

As can be seen clearly in the task “Translation Task”, many students cannot do it correctly because of the interference of the mother tongue.

For example: The students translate the sentence “Tôi qua, cô ấy đã nói yêu tôi” as follows:

→ She said love me last night.

No students write as: She said she loved me the night before.

Type 2: Over-generalization

Errors occur when the students creates a deviant structure on the basis of their experience of previously-learnt one in the target language.

For instance:

→ He said me if he could bring me far away. (He asked me if he could bring me far away.)

Type 3: Ignorance of rule restrictions

This phenomenon belongs to over-generalization, and it happens when the learners fail to observe the restrictions.

For example:

He said to me that he would lend me a red pen the next day (1)

He told to me that he would lend me a red pen the next day (2)

The learners think that the second sentence has the same structure to the first sentence, so he/she applies the rule of the first sentence to the second one: “said to” - “told to”

When reporting the commands, most of the students typically make mistakes with the form of both tell and say as follows:

Peter said me to sit down.

Or Peter told to me to sit down.
Type 4: Incomplete application of rules

There are too many rules in reporting others’ utterances or words. Therefore, all the students cannot avoid making errors when they apply their theoretical knowledge to deal with the tasks. A lot of students have difficulty with the inverted word order and the use of *if / whether* for yes/no questions:

“Can I start early tomorrow? He said.

⇒ He asked could he start work the following day.

They also commonly make errors when reporting questions with *do, did* and *does* in the following example:

“Did you have a good day?” She asked.

⇒ She asked me if I did have a good day.

⇒ She asked to me if I did have a good day.

Or “When did you arrive?” Lan asked.

⇒ Lan asked when did you arrive.

(Lan asked me *when I arrived.*)

Most of the students violate the back-shifting the tenses because of there is a variety of English tenses with the back-shifting rules for each tense, which makes the students confused and fail in their application. In addition, they don’t use the past form correctly, especially in the negative and in regard to auxiliary verbs and often confuse the past simple and past perfect. As a result, they are wrong when reporting the present verbs into the past-simple verbs and even reporting the past-simple verbs into the past participles.

For instance:

“Did you have a nice weekend together last week?” She asked.

⇒ She asked if we did had a nice weekend together the week before.

“You don’t tell me the truth.” I said to him

⇒ I told him that he didn’t told me the truth.

Type 5: Hypercorrection

This kind of errors is caused by both over-application of the general rule of tense change in reported speech and by lack of awareness of the exceptions to the rule. The general rule is that what would be present tense in direct speech becomes past tense in reported speech.

For example:

She said, “I LIKE the weather.”

⇒ She said that she LIKED the weather.
However, there are exceptions to the rule. For instance, when an action is constant, expresses an eternal truth, or refers to religious verities, the verb isn’t inflected for tense in reported speech. For example, it is perfectly legitimate to write:

*He said their son LIVES in London* (if he still lives there)

*She said they HAVE WRITTEN to her many times* (if it’s possible that they will continue to write).

However, most of the students tend to be misguided by insufficient familiarity with the complexity of grammatical rules. When they deal with the task, they often commit errors like this:

*He said he believed God existed.*

It should be written as *He said he believes God exists* because for religious people, God can’t or won’t die and the man still believes in God.

Another example is that many students write: *He said the sun rose in the East.* As far as we know, the sun rises in the East is an eternal, unchangeable truth. Therefore, the sentence should be *He said the sun rises in the East.*

Another exception to the rule is that the original tense in direct speech is often retained if an action has not yet occurred at the time of reporting it, as in "*she said the national debt WILL [not WOULD] be eliminated in 2015.*"

In addition, if the reporting verbs are put in present tenses, we do not change the verb tense in the indirect speech. In reality, some of the students rarely remember this note and they are easy to consider every sentence as the same.

For instance:

*“We are coming here next week”, he says.*

⇒ *He says that they were coming there the following week.*

(He said that they are coming there the following week.)

**Type 6: Misanalysis**

It is the common kind of errors that the students are easy to commit. These errors results from the wrong process of analyzing the information and understand the whole sentence. As a result, they changed the pronouns, possessives, object pronouns in the direct speech into those in reported speech inappropriately.

For example:

+ “What are you doing, John?” She asked.

⇒ *She asked John what you were doing.*

+ “My brother has written 5 letters this week.” He said to me.
He told me that my brother had written 5 letters that week.
+ “We didn’t tell you the truth”, said they.
They said they hadn’t told you the truth.

Type 7: Wrong use of reporting verbs

There are too many other verbs we can use apart from said, told and asked. The choice of reporting verbs depends on the whole meaning of the sentence. The students have to understand the speaker’s implicature before reporting the speech. For example, the sentence may imply an invitation, an advice, a command, a suggestion, an exclamation, an apology, a warning, an offer or a promise, etc. Therefore, the students are often confused and fail to use an appropriate reporting verb for each particular situation and context.

For example:
☞ “Don’t forget to post the letter” my mother told me.
☞ My mother told me not to forget to post the letter.
This sentence is not wrong but it should be written as follows:
☞ *My mother reminded me to post the letter.*

Type 8: Wrong use of collocation patterns

Most of the students get trouble in using the structures of the reporting verb collocations because they have to remember and learn by heart a variety of structures in various categories. Moreover, some reporting verbs may appear in more than one of the following groups.

For instance:
☞ “Why don’t you write a letter to them?” he said.
☞ *He suggested me to write a letter to them.*
(It must be: *He suggested that I should write a letter to them.*)
☞ “I will never be here any more” she said.
☞ *She promised not be there any more.*
(It should be: *She promised not to be there any more.*)

MAJOR FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Major findings

As mentioned above, after students’ errors are counted, classified with their possible causes, the following findings have been made:

Students taking part in the survey test commit a great number of errors. With classification of actual errors, the total errors found in students’ task performance reach 710 errors belonging to both semantic and morpho-syntactic categories. In reality, students fail to
use reported speech in different situations and contexts, which is illustrated by a large number of errors in paraphrasing and translation tasks.

Among 8 types of errors explored from the real data covering both semantic and morpho-syntactic categories, type 4, type 6 and type 8 are counted with highest frequency, details are presented as follows:

1. Type 4: Incomplete application of rules with 227 errors found makes up 32%.
2. Type 6: Misanalysis with 172 errors takes up to 24%.
3. Type 8: Wrong use of collocation patterns with 92 errors taking account of 13%.

Other types are also committed but with lower frequency: the lowest frequency found in type 3: Hypercorrection with only 13 errors occupies 6%.

In terms of the causes, the following findings have been pointed that after the necessary analysis of error causes, basing on theoretical background and the results of the short interview, it can be seen clearly that both interlingual and intralingual causes lead students to a great deal of error commitment, incomplete application of rules, misanalysis and students’ poor language knowledge are main sources. In addition, responsibility for students’ errors is attached to other causes such as ignorance of rule restrictions, hypercorrection, overgeneralization, etc.

In summary, Vietnamese students face lots of problems and challenges using reported speech and commit a variety of errors. These errors mainly result from their poor knowledge of English language or their confusion about various uses and structures.

**Implications for teaching and learning reported speech in English**

Generally, second language English learners have considerable trouble learning to use reported speech due to the number of grammatical elements that need to be taken into account. It is important therefore to present reported speech in a clear and effective context. This may not be easy in a classroom of adult students from a variety of different backgrounds, with different personal and professional interests, and different motivations for learning English. Furthermore, reported speech is something that is usually only used once or twice in any given situation and so finding a context to work on reported speech in depth is difficult and does not reflect the way language is used outside the classroom. Therefore, it may prove more effective to present reported speech in a variety of situations, rather than in a single context.

Matching the teaching style to learning style preferences present in the class may also be a problem. It would be best to match content and teaching style to the particular learning
style and needs of each student, as students are better able to learn if teaching methods match their preferred learning styles. However, in classroom situations it will be necessary to adopt a wide variety of approaches, incorporating different cognitive learning strategies, to accommodate individual learning styles.

The class texts are also a problem. In most cases, class texts focus predominantly on the main reporting verbs say, tell, and ask. There is a shortage of material focusing on the wide variety of reporting verbs used in English. Therefore, finding interesting material and activities that relate to the learners language needs and interests is a real challenge.

What’s more, because there are so many areas that can potentially cause the learners problems, it is not always easy to manage a classroom. Therefore, teaching reported speech can turn into an exercise in classroom management skills.

The following points are therefore only general guidelines applicable to a range of contexts:

**Engage the students, provide a context, and identify a genuine need.**
Firstly, it is important to start any grammar lesson in the right way, which means avoiding openings such as, “Today we are going to study the use of reported speech.”, or “Please open your books to page ...” Instead, a far more useful approach is to establish a clear context that the students can relate to, which highlights a genuine need for the new grammar. In general, any context that provides the students with an opportunity to talk about their lives is sure to work well. A context I have used successfully is that of organizing a night out or a class holiday.

**Involve the Students**
Secondly, try to involve the students as much as possible throughout the learning process to keep interest and motivation high: elicit the target language, ask questions, and have students write on the board. In this way the teacher is talking with the students, rather than to them, and is a part of the learning process rather than the focus. Adopting a participative, student-centered approach to learning promotes learner autonomy, which is a necessary ingredient in the language learning process.

**Provide plenty of examples rather than a rule**
Thirdly, provide plenty of examples as it will be easier for the students to see the pattern. In this way, the students will be better able to learn inductively through the process of discovery, which requires a deeper level of cognitive processing, and therefore aids the learning process.
Provide plenty of opportunity to practice

Fourthly, it is important to provide plenty of opportunity for practice and to accommodate the different learning styles with a balance of activities that focus on the form, function, and meaning of the different reporting verbs, as well as the different skills; there should also be a gradual shift from passive to productive skills in the classroom as passive skills can be focused on by the students for homework.

CONCLUSION

The study is a full treatment of problems in using English reported speech. Errors are collected from written task performance of students on theoretical foundation of an interview on English reported speech to test what types of errors students may commit with assistance of predictable errors. During the time of conducting the study, the author follows all necessary procedures. First, errors are collected, counted, and then they are categorized into different types and analyzed to find out the causes. The findings of the study have pointed out that students really have a lot of difficulties in using reported speech in English and commit nearly most of the errors predicted in previous sections.

With regard to error causes, it has been found incomplete application of rules, misanalysis and wrong use of collocation patterns are the main sources. From the major findings, implications for teaching and learning English reported speech have been provided to help students for better learning and avoiding errors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In fact, the study cannot cover all aspects of errors in using English reported speech and all their usages. The research actually has focused on errors in using reported speech in English in written tasks without regarding to errors in speaking and other skills.

In terms of participants, the number of subject group is just 50 first year students of English major and the survey is locally conducted at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University. It is promised to have more precise results if the survey is participated by greater number of students and is carried out at different universities.

For what mentioned above, the author hopes that it is beneficial for those who concern in this area of English language and wish to go further on reported speech.
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