The Acquisition of Locative Alternation: A Multiple Account

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how Vietnamese EFL learners acquire locative alternation, focusing on three types of verbs. It aims to identify which locative structures are challenging for these learners and the underlying reasons. The study involved 72 participants, divided into two groups: an experimental group of 36 Vietnamese learners of English and a control group of 36 native English speakers, used as a benchmark for cross-group comparisons. The learners were classified as upper-intermediate based on their Michigan test scores and had to pass a Word-Meaning Matching Task to participate. All stimulus sentences were rated on a five-point Likert scale. The findings suggest that learning locative structures is a complex developmental process influenced by various factors such as overgeneralisation, verb meanings, learners' English proficiency, and narrow-range verb classes. These insights have significant implications for both teaching methods and SLA.

Keywords: Locative alternation; second language acquisition; overgeneralisation; language transfer; Vietnamese

INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition (SLA) refers to the process and study of how people acquire a non-primary language beyond their native tongue, including third, fourth, or fifth languages (VanPatten & Williams, 2015a). This research examines the application of SLA principles to Vietnamese learners of English (VLEs) as a foreign language (EFL).

In linguistic typology, a locative construction is typically formed by a set of transitive verbs associated with three types of arguments: Agent, Figure, and Ground. These variants create a locative alternation (LA) when there is a swap of Figure and Ground in two syntactic patterns, resulting in a figure-object construction (FOC) and a ground-object construction (GOC), respectively (Levin & Hovav, 1991), as seen in example (1).

(1)   a. John loaded cargo onto the vessel. (FOC)
        b. John loaded the vessel with cargo. (GOC)

However, not all verbs can be used in both constructions. Verbs that are only mapped to FOCs are called figure-verbs, and verbs that are used exclusively in GOCs are called ground-verbs. Other locative verbs that are compatible with both variants are called alternating locative verbs. For example, *drip* is a figure verb, while *fill* is a ground verb, as exemplified in (2) and (3).

(2)   a. I dripped paint on the floor.
        b. *I dripped the floor with paint.

(3)   a. *She filled water in the bucket.
         b. She filled the bucket with water.

The research is driven by the prevalence of argument structure alternations in English, encompassing approximately fifty distinct syntactic frames (Yi & Koenig, 2016). Levin (1993) identifies over 40 types of syntactic alternations, including locative constructions with more than 200 verbs, which could pose significant challenges for Vietnamese learners of English due to syntactic mismatches between English and Vietnamese. Despite these challenges, there has been no prior research specifically investigating the acquisition of locative structures by VLEs in Vietnam. The current study thus aims to evaluate learners' performance on English locative structures and explore what factors influence their performance.

SLA THEORIES

In the context of SLA, language transfer (or crosslinguistic influence) is a crucial factor in the developmental path of acquiring an L2. Language transfer occurs when learners apply knowledge from their L1 to their performance in L2 (VanPatten & Williams, 2015b). Research shows that while L1 transfer does not drastically alter the overall trajectory of L2 acquisition, it does influence learners' progress (Ortega, 2014). This influence occurs regardless of whether the L1 and L2 are related (Schachter, 1992). Language transfer can lead to positive or negative consequences (or both at the same time). Positive transfer happens when L1 and L2 share similarities, facilitating learning. Conversely, negative transfer, or interference, occurs when differences between L1 and L2 cause errors or obstacles in learning (VanPatten & Benati, 2015; VanPatten & Williams, 2015b).

L2 acquisition involves both positive and negative evidence (DeKeyser, 1993). Negative evidence refers to input that informs learners about what is ungrammatical or unacceptable in a language. This can range from teacher feedback to casual rewording by a native-speaking conversational partner (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Positive evidence, on the other hand, involves exposure to comprehensible input, such as well-formed structures (Ellis & Robinson, 2008).

In linguistics, over-generalisation refers to the phenomenon where a grammatical rule is excessively applied to non-attested forms by learners (Ambridge et al., 2014; Braine & Brooks, 1995). This occurs when learners apply a restricted linguistic form to another context where it is incorrect. Overgeneralisation has been observed in both L1 and L2 acquisition (Ortega, 2014; VanPatten & Benati, 2015). For example, in acquiring the past tense in English, learners may overextend regular verb forms (e.g., asked, played, or used) to irregular verbs (e.g., goed, eated, or sleeped) (VanPatten & Benati, 2015, p. 120).

VIETNAMESE LOCATIVE ALTERNATION

The similarities or differences in locative structures between two languages are expected to impact the ease or difficulty of acquiring the target features. Therefore, this section scrutinises three types of English locative verbs and their counterparts in Vietnamese to identify whether there are any crosslinguistic differences in semantics or syntax. Regarding alternating verbs in English, some Vietnamese verbs whose counterparts alternate in English, such as *phết* 'spread' and *đóng gói* 'pack,' will first be examined, as illustrated in (4) and (5).

(4)   a. *Lan   đã   phết   bơ   lên/ lên-trên   bánh   mì.*
          Lan   PST[1]   spread   butter   on/onto   cake   bread
          'Lan spread butter on the bread.'

      b. *Lan   đã   phết   bánh   mì   với   bơ.*
          Lan   PST   spread   cake   bread   with   butter
          'Lan spread the bread with butter.'

(5)   a. *Lan   đóng-gói   quần   áo   vào   vali.*
          Lan   pack   trousers   shirts   into   suitcase
          'Lan packed clothes into the suitcase.'

      b. *Lan   đóng-gói   vali   với   quần   áo.*
          Lan   pack   suitcase   with   trousers   shirts
          'Lan packed the suitcase with clothes.'

As shown in (4) and (5), the first language (L1) patterns for *spread* and *pack* are alike, although the FOCs are more natural than the GOCs in L1. The same semantic and syntactic approach is applied to some other related-semantic verbs, such as *phết* 'plaster', *bôi* 'smear', *quét* 'brush', and *bọc* 'wrap'. Next, let us examine other verbs, such as *phun* 'spray' and *chất* 'load', as in (6) and (7).

(6)   *Thanh   đã   phun   sơn   lên/ lên-trên   cửa.*
          Thanh   PST   spray   paint   on/onto   door
          'Thanh sprayed paint on the door.'
          'Thanh sprayed the door with paint.'

(7)   *Linh   đã   chất   hàng   lên/ lên-trên   con   tàu.*
          Linh   PST   load   cargo   on/onto   CLA   vessel
          'Linh loaded cargo onto the vessel.'
          'Linh loaded the vessel with cargo.'

As shown in (6) and (7), there are differences in syntactic realisation between the two languages. While *spray* and *load* can undergo LA in English, their counterparts only appear in Vietnamese FOCs. This cross-syntactic incongruence can also be observed in other *spray*-type verbs (e.g., *bắn tung tóe* 'spatter', *rải* 'sprinkle') and load-type verbs (e.g., *chất* 'load', *đóng gói* 'pack', *cung cấp* 'stock'). Similarly, verbs such as *trồng* 'plant' and *treo* 'hang' can be used interchangeably in two different ways, as illustrated in (8) and (9).

(8)   a. *Cô   ấy   đã   trồng   nhiều   hoa   trong   vườn.*
          she   that   PST   plant   many   flower   in   garden
          'She planted many flowers in the garden.'

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[1] In Vietnamese examples, abbreviations are employed for glossing. CLA refers to the classifier, while PST stands for past.

b. *Cô   ấy   đã   trồng   trong   vườn   nhiều   hoa.*
she   that   PST   plant   in   garden   many   flower
'She planted the garden with many flowers.'

(9)   a. *Nga   đã   treo   những   bức   ảnh   lên   tường.*
Nga   PST   hang   some   CLA   picture on   wall
'Nga hung the pictures on a wall.'

b. *Nga   đã   treo   lên   tường những   bức   ảnh.*
Nga   PST   hang   on   wall   some   CLA   picture
'Nga hung a wall with pictures.'

Now, let's examine some sets of nonalternating verbs. For English figure verbs, let us consider examples with *sắp xếp* 'arrange', *nhấc* 'lift', *đổ* 'pour' and *làm tràn* 'spill', as shown in examples (10) through (13).

(10)   *Hòa   đã   sắp-xếp   đồ-đạc   trong   phòng   khách.*
Hoa   PST   arrange   furniture in   room   guest
'Hoa arranged the furniture in the living room.'

(11)   *Thanh   đã   nhấc   cái   ghế   trong   phòng   ngủ.*
Thanh   PST   lift   CLA   chair in   room   sleep.
'Thanh lifted the chair in the bedroom.'

(12)   *Nga   đã   đổ   nước   vào/vào-trong   chai.*
Nga   PST   pour water   in/into   bottle
'Nga poured water into the bottle.'

(13)   *Phong   đã   làm-tràn   sữa   lên/lên-trên   sàn.*
Phong   PST   spill   milk   on/onto   floor
'Phong spilled milk on the floor.'

As can be observed in (10) to (13), English figure verbs (i.e., *arrange, lift, pour*, *spill*) do have their equivalent verbs in Vietnamese. In these examples, the Vietnamese locative has its counterpart in English. Other verbs in the *pour*-type class (e.g., *nhỏ giọt* 'drip', *đổ* 'pour') or *put*-verb class *(đặt* 'put' , *để* 'lay')* can also be approached in a similar manner. Nevertheless, the crosslinguistic congruence of this verb type is not always guaranteed, as illustrated by (14) with the verb *cài đặt* 'install'.

(14)   a. *Chinh   đã   cài-đặt   máy-in   vào   máy-tính.*
Chinh   PST   install   printer on   computer
'Chinh installed a printer on the computer.'

b. *Chinh   đã   cài-đặt   máy-tính   với   máy-in.*
Chinh   PST   install   computer   with   printer
'*Chinh installed the computer with a printer.'

In (14), it is observed that while the verb *install* in English cannot alternate, its counterpart in L1 Vietnamese can. This learnability problem can cause difficulties for EFL learners due to the syntactic incongruence between the two languages. Now, let us shift our focus to how English ground verbs are expressed in Vietnamese.

(15)　a. *Anh　　ấy　đã　phủ　　bạt　　lên　　ô-tô.*
　　　　he　　　that　PST　cover　canvas　onto　　car
　　　　'*He covered a canvas onto the car.'

　　　b. *Anh　　ấy　đã　phủ　　ô-tô　với　　bạt.*
　　　　he　　　that　PST　cover　car　　with　canvas
　　　　'He covered the car with a canvas.'

(16)　a. *Chinh　đã　trang-trí　nhiều　ngôi　　sao lên/lên trên　trần-nhà.*
　　　　Chinh　PST　decorate　many　CLA　　star on/onto　　　ceiling
　　　　'*Chinh decorated many stars onto the ceiling.'

　　　b. *Chinh　đã　trang-trí　trần-nhà　với　nhiều　ngôi　　sao.*
　　　　Chinh　PST　decorate　ceiling　　with　many　CLA　　star
　　　　'Chinh decorated the ceiling with many stars.'

As can be seen in examples (15) to (16), verbs such as *phủ* 'cover' and *trang trí* 'decorate' are alternating verbs in Vietnamese, which is contrary to their English counterparts that are only licit in GOCs. This crosslinguistic difference in syntax may pose some learnability obstacles, including negative transfer, for language learners. Similarly, other ground verbs such as *đổ đầy* 'fill' and *bao quanh* 'surround' exhibit the same crosslinguistic mismatch. Consider other ground verbs such as *làm ngập* 'flood' and *làm ô nhiễm* 'pollute/ contaminate' as shown in examples (17) and (18).

(17)　*Anh　　ấy　đã　làm-ngập　khu　　vườn　　với　　rác-thải.*
　　　　he　　　that　PST　flood　　CLA　　garden　with　　rubbish
　　　　'He flooded the garden with rubbish.'

(18)　*Họ　　đã　làm　ô-nhiễm　con　sông　với　　rác-thải.*
　　　　they　PST　make　polluted　CLA　river　with　　rubbish
　　　　'They polluted/contaminated the river with rubbish.'

In (17) and (18), Vietnamese GOCs are claimed to have a similar underlying structure to English GOCs with regard to *flood*, *pollute* and *contaminate*.

To summarise, as can be inferred from the aforementioned examples, the syntax-semantics mappings of locative verbs reveal a significant incongruence across the three verb types in the two languages. While some English alternators such as *brush*, *pack*, *spread*, or *wrap* have their counterparts in Vietnamese, others such as *hang*, *load*, *plant*, and *spray* are figure verbs in Vietnamese. Additionally, English figure verbs such as *install* and English ground verbs such as *cover*, *decorate*, *fill*, *soak*, and *surround* are alternators in Vietnamese. All in all, Vietnamese is more productive in figure verbs since most English verbs that occur in FOCs are likely to have

their counterparts in Vietnamese, but the opposite is not necessarily true for Vietnamese verbs, such as *phủ* 'cover', *trang trí* 'decorate', *đổ đầy* 'fill', *ngâm* 'soak', and *bao quanh* 'surround'.

PREVIOUS SLA APPROACHES TO LOCATIVE STRUCTURES

Over the past three decades, a number of studies on L2 locative structures have received attention in SLA. The most focused areas amongst these studies were the learnability of the L2 learners when acquiring narrow-range rules and holism effect (Bley-Vroman & Joo, 2001; Choi & Lakshmanan, 2002; Joo, 2003; Lee, 2009; Rezai & Avand, 2011), language transfer (Juffs, 1996; Yakhabi et al., 2018), and locative verb classes (Alotaibi, 2016; Bullock, 2004; Park, 2016).

Juffs (1996) investigated Chinese learners' knowledge of syntax and semantics for three types of locative verbs (alternating, ground, and figure verbs). Five groups of Chinese ESL learners at different proficiency levels and a control group of 22 monolingual Chinese subjects completed a grammaticality judgment task (GJT) in Chinese. Another control group of 19 native English speakers from a Canadian university also completed the task. The results showed that while Chinese learners and native controls performed similarly on alternating verbs, the learners favoured FOCs. Low-level and intermediate learners differed from the NSs on ground verbs due to more productive Chinese grammar. Advanced learners, despite achieving native-like performance in production tasks, differed significantly in their acceptability judgments. The study found evidence of L1 transfer of parameter settings.

Similarly, Alotaibi (2016) investigated the acquisition of locative structures by 100 advanced Kuwaiti learners of English. To this end, a GJT was used to examine whether the learners could distinguish between alternating locative verbs and non-alternating locative verbs used in FOCs and GOCs. The research materials consisted of alternating and non-alternating verbs. The outcomes showed that the participants encountered problems with both non-alternating and alternating verbs. However, their performance on alternating verbs was better than on non-alternating verbs due to positive transfer for alternating verbs and negative transfer for non-alternating verbs.

Yakhabi et al. (2018) extended this line of research by studying the acquisition of English locative constructions by 90 Iranian EFL learners, divided into three proficiency levels (low, mid, and high). The study examined whether proficiency affected the acquisition of English locative argument structures and the impact of L1 (Persian) transfer. Two tasks were used: a production task, where learners described 48 pictures using 38 verbs, and a GJT with 30 verbs rated on a Likert scale. Results showed that high-proficiency learners performed best, particularly with alternating verbs. Intermediate learners outperformed beginners but struggled with alternating and ground verbs. Advanced learners showed significant proficiency effects. The GJT results indicated proficiency differences, with figure verbs and alternating ground verbs receiving more correct responses due to L1 transfer. For example, some locative verbs alternate in English but not in Persian, or *pour* is considered a ground verb in Persian. In this regard, the researchers assumed that the licit structures seemed to be less marked than the illicit ones.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH GAP

Reviewing the related literature has made it clear that there is a current lack of interest in the topic of locative structures that needs to be filled by research, as follows:

Firstly, the lack of attention paid to the acquisition of the LA by VLEs provides a good rationale for this investigation. Although there is a body of SLA studies using EFL/ESL learners from different languages (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Persian, and Kuwaiti), to the best of my knowledge, there have not been any SLA studies devoted to the acquisition of the LA by VLEs. One more reason to conduct this experiment in the Vietnamese context is that the Vietnamese LA and its counterparts in other languages are not the same, as in Table 1 (Kim (1999, p. 21).

TABLE 1. Distinctions of Locative Structures across some Languages

Languages	Locative alternators	FOCs	GOCs
Vietnamese	English figure verbs (*install*) and English ground verbs (*cover*, *decorate*, *fill*, *soak*, *surround*) are alternators in Vietnamese.	Vietnamese figure verbs are more productive. Some English alternators (e.g., *hang*, *load*, *plant*, *spray*) are figure verbs in Vietnamese.	Vietnamese ground verbs are less productive
Arabic	Verbs like *fill*, *dip*, *insert*, *quirt*, and *stuff* are alternating verbs.	*Pile, plaster, and spread* are only compatible with the FOC in Arabic.	
Korean	There are only ground alternating verbs. Most change-of-state verbs like *fill, cover,* and *decorate* are Korean alternators.	English alternating verbs (e.g., *load*, *pile*, *spray*) are figure verbs in Korean.	There are no ground verbs
Persian	There are no alternating verbs	*Paint*, *spray* are figure verbs	*Load*, *pile*, *plaster*, or *pour* are ground verbs in Persian

Secondly, in Choi and Lakshmanan's (2002) study, Korean participants were asked to complete a GJT of LA with two answer options (i.e., *acceptable* and *unacceptable*) as a proficiency test. However, this type of test has posed some problems, as Joo (2003) suggests that binary choice questions may have forced learners to guess the answers. Additionally, it was quite strange to employ a GJT as a placement test. Furthermore, although considerable attention from previous studies has been paid to knowledge of constructional locative alternations by EFL learners (Alotaibi, 2016; Bullock, 2004; Juffs, 1996; Yakhabi et al., 2018), this only applied to a small range of verbs. In the present research, a wider range of 24 locative verbs of three verb classes will be investigated.

Lastly, one plausible shortcoming from some previous studies (e.g., Alotaibi, 2016; Yakhabi et al., 2018) is that the experimenters did not administer a vocabulary test to make sure that all participants knew these words before doing the experimental tasks. Although the authors mention that the materials were selected based on the frequency of the participants having advanced levels based on the placement test (Alotaibi, 2016), this obviously did not guarantee that learners knew all the target verbs.

METHODOLOGY

There were two cohorts of participants: 36 VLEs (age mean: 21.92) and 36 native English speakers (age mean: 27.75), and they all were given money as incentives for their involvement in this project. All the participants in the study, who were either students or graduates from a university in Vietnam, had English as their major, and the native controls were students from a university in Australia. All learners were required to have an upper-intermediate level of English, as determined by the results of a Michigan test (Moutsou, 2008). The test primarily focuses on grammar and vocabulary since grammar proficiency is essential for all language learners (Shojamanesh et al., 2018), and there is a positive correlation between vocabulary and learners' English proficiency (San Phoon & Abdullah, 2014). All prospective learners who had passed the Michigan test (Appendix B) were then required to complete a word-meaning matching task (Appendix C). In this task, they had to match test verbs in one column with their most suitable Vietnamese meanings in another column in order to qualify for the experiment. This assessment was administered to ensure that they were familiar with all verbs used in the experiment, as verbs play a key role in determining argument realisation options (Hovav & Levin, 2008; Jackendoff, 2002). There is a fact that if learners encounter unfamiliar verbs, their syntactic behaviour cannot be acquired, no matter how proficient they are in English (Bley-Vroman & Yoshinaga, 1992; Juffs, 1996). The test results showed that three Vietnamese participants could not pass the Word-Meaning Matching Task.

The research included a total of 24 locative verbs, which were divided equally into three types of verbs: alternating verbs, figure verbs, and ground verbs, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Types of Locative Verbs

Type 1 Alternating verbs	Type 2 Figure verbs	Type 3 Ground verbs
brush	arrange	contaminate
load	drip	cover
hang	install	decorate
pack	lay	fill
plant	lift	flood
spray	pour	pollute
spread	put	soak
wrap	spill	surround

In this research, one untimed GJT, elsewhere called acceptability judgment task, was designed by using an online survey tool (https://surveys.usq.edu.au). In the control group, the GJT was an unsupervised task, and the NSs needed to do it in a private location where they were not disturbed (e.g., in a room in their home or at the university). By contrast, VLEs did the task with the presence of a co-investigator. All stimulus sentences were judged over five-point Likert scales (1='definitely unacceptable', 2='unacceptable', 3='neither unacceptable nor acceptable', 4='acceptable' and 5='definitely acceptable').

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The current research is guided by two research questions, as follows:

(1) Do learners attain native-like competence in English locative structures?
(2) Are learners sensitive to differences in locative structures?

As discussed earlier, the two languages exhibit both syntactic congruence and incongruence regarding locative structures. Consequently, L1 is hypothesised to both hinder and facilitate learners' acquisition. Therefore, this study is founded on the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Native-like competence
(1a) Concerning Type 1 FOCs, Type 2 FOCs, and Type 3 GOCs, VLEs will rate the FOCs in L2 at the same levels of acceptability as NSs.
(1b) Concerning Type 1 GOCs, Type 2 GOCs, and Type 3 FOCs, VLEs will rate the GOCs in L2 at lower levels of acceptability than NSs.

Hypothesis 2: Structural conditions
(2) The learners will not distinguish the locative structures across verb types.

RESULTS

The hierarchical data in this study is suitable for a multilevel model (MLM). The datasets were arranged in a tall format, where one row represents one observation and multiple rows represent one subject. Each verb type was analysed independently with MLM to test the native-like competence proposed in (1a) and (1b), using *the group* as the fixed effect and the *item* as the random effect. The dependent variable was *rating*. To test this hypothesis, cross-group multiple comparisons using MLMs were conducted to compare the ratings of the two groups within each structure. The results of Hypothesis 1 are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Between-Group Comparisons of Ratings for Locative Structures

Parameter	Estimate	Sig.	95% CI	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Type 1 FOCs				
Intercept	4.573	.000	4.436	4.710
VLEs	-.285	.004	-.478	-.092
Type 1 GOCs				
Intercept	3.875	.000	3.711	4.039
VLEs	-.372	.002	-.604	-.139
Type 2 FOCs				
Intercept	4.510	.000	4.379	4.642
VLEs	-.149	.113	-.335	.036
Type 2 GOCs				
Intercept	4.045	.000	3.872	4.218
VLEs	-.806	.000	-1.050	-.561
Type 3 FOCs				
Intercept	3.799	.000	3.585	4.012
VLEs	-1.167	.000	-1.469	-.865
Type 3 GOCs				
Intercept	4.222	.000	4.062	4.382
VLEs	.000	1.000	-.227	.227

In Table 3, regarding verbs of Type 1, there was an increase in the FOCs ratings from the VLEs' group to the NSs' group, a rating increase of 0.285, 95% *CI* [-0.478, -0.092], which was statistically significant (*p*=.004). In respect of the GOCs, a rating increase from the VLEs' group to the NSs' group (0.372, 95% *CI* [-0.604, -0.139]) was statistically significant (*p*=.002). This result means that Hypothesis 1a was rejected for Type 1 FOCs, but Hypothesis 1b was not rejected for Type 1 GOCs. Similarly, with respect to verbs of Type 2, there was an increase of ratings from the VLEs' group to the NSs' group, a rating increase of 0.149, 95% *CI* [-0.335, 0.036] In the FOCs, which was not statistically significant (*p*=.113). Moving Type 2 GOCs, the learners had fewer correct responses than the NSs, a rating increase of 0.806, 95% *CI* [-1.050, -0.561]), and this was statistically significant (*p*=.000). The significant main effect for *the group* reveals that the learners attained the native-like competence regarding the FOCs, but not the GOCs. Hence, regarding verbs of Type 2, Hypotheses 1a-b were not rejected. In relation to verbs of Type 3, VLEs obtained fewer correct responses than the NSs for the FOCs, a rating contrast of 1.167, 95% CI [-1.469, -0.865], and this was statistically significant (*p*=.000). For Type 3 GOCs, two groups of participants had equivalent performance (rating difference of 0.000, 95% CI [-0.227, 0.227]), and this was not statistically significant (*p*=1.000). Interestingly, the main effect in the GOCs gives the fact that the learners' ratings were almost the same to those of the NSs. Hypotheses 1a-b were thus not rejected for both structures of Type 3. Overall, the results suggest that the VLEs group performed worse than the NSs in all cases, except for Type 3 GOCs, where there was no significant difference between the two groups.

The second hypothesis evaluates whether learners can identify the structural conditions across different verb types. Hypothesis 2 included fixed effects for *structure* (FOCs or GOCs), and random effects for *item*, with the *rating* of each structure being categorised as the dependent variable. Firstly, a comparison was made within each verb type, which is shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4. FOC-GOC Comparisons in Each Verb Type

Parameter	Estimate	Sig.	95% CI	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Type 1				
Intercept	3.503	.000	3.357	3.650
FOCs	.785	.000	.605	.964
Type 2				
Intercept	3.240	.000	3.091	3.388
FOCs	1.122	.000	.941	1.302
Type 3				
Intercept	4.222	.000	4.061	4.383
FOCs	-1.590	.000	-1.771	-1.409

Table 4 demonstrates that the rating of the FOCs had an effect on each verb type (*p*=.000 for three types). Specifically, VLEs rated the FOCs significantly higher than the GOCs in verb types 1 and 2, with a predicted rating difference of approximately 0.785 and 1.122, respectively. In contrast, for verb type 3, the GOCs were rated approximately 1.590 higher. These results suggest that the learners provided more correct responses for FOCs than GOCs for verb types 1 and 2. However, for type 3 sentences, GOCs received more correct ratings than FOCs. Overall, the learners did not fully comprehend the syntactic mapping for each verb class.

Moving on to the next analysis, whether learners can distinguish between verb classes is investigated by comparing the FOCs and GOCs within each class to their counterparts in other classes.

TABLE 5. Cross-Verb Type Comparisons of FOC Ratings

Parameter	Estimate	Sig.	95% CI	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Verb Types 1 and 2				
Intercept	4.361	.000	4.254	4.469
Type 1 FOCs	-.073	.347	-.225	.079
Verb Types 1 and 3				
Intercept	2.632	.000	2.501	2.762
Type 1 FOCs	1.656	.000	1.472	1.841
Verb Types 2 and 3				
Intercept	2.632	.000	2.502	2.762
Type 2 FOCs	1.729	.000	1.546	1.912

Table 5 shows that the FOCs in Type 1 were rated 0.073 lower than those in Type 2, although this difference was not significant (p=0.347). In addition, both FOCs in verb types 1 and 2 were rated higher than those in verb type 3, with predicted rating differences of approximately 1.656 and 1.729, respectively, and these differences were significant (p=.000). Overall, the hierarchical ratings of FOCs across verb types are as follows: Type 2 > Type 1 > Type 3. Similarly, Table 6 displays the cross-type comparisons of the GOCs ratings.

TABLE 6. Cross-Verb Type Comparisons of GOC Ratings

Parameter	Estimate	Sig.	95% CI	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Verb Types 1 and 2				
Intercept	3.240	.000	3.091	3.388
Type 1 GOCs	.264	.014	.054	.474
Verb Types 1 and 3				
Intercept	4.222	.000	4.092	4.353
Type 1 GOCs	-.719	.000	-.904	-.534
Verb Types 2 and 3				
Intercept	4.222	.000	4.090	4.355
Type 2 GOCs	-.983	.000	-1.170	-.795

Table 6 indicates that the different ratings of the GOCs across three types were statistically significant. Specifically, the GOCs in Type 1 received higher ratings than those in Type 2, with a predicted rating difference of approximately 0.264, and this difference was significant (p=0.014). Similarly, the GOCs in verb types 1 and 2 were rated lower than those in verb type 3, with predicted rating differences of approximately 0.719 and 0.983, respectively, and these differences were significant (p=.000 for both comparisons). The hierarchical ratings of GOCs across verb types are as follows: Type 3 > Type 1 > Type 2.

The findings of Tables 5 and 6 provide evidence that learners could only distinguish between alternating verbs and figure verbs in the FOCs. In other cases, they failed to discern the difference in the usage of locative verbs. In other words, they could not distinguish between the three classes of verbs that are attached to different syntactic realisations. Hence, Hypothesis 2 was not rejected.

DISCUSSION

Hypothesis 1 focused on comparing the performance of VLEs and NSs in terms of acceptability ratings of three types of locative verbs. It was hypothesised that learners would perform similarly to NSs in Type 1 FOCs, Type 2 structures, and Type 3 GOCs due to positive language transfer while producing more errors in other structures due to negative transfer. However, the outcomes were inconsistent across verb classes. The learners demonstrated native-like performance only in Type 2 FOCs and Type 3 GOCs, as there were no significant rating differences between the two groups for these structures. For other structures (i.e., Type 1 structures, Type 2 GOCs, and Type 3 FOCs), NSs had more correct acceptability ratings than VLEs. In other words, the learners were able to produce figure verbs and ground verbs used in the licit FOCs and the licit GOCs, respectively, without difficulty.

Regarding Hypothesis 2, the study aimed to determine if the learners could effectively use different verb classes with varying syntactic realisations. The results suggest that the learners were still in the process of acquiring the LA. As shown in Table 3, the FOCs were rated significantly higher than the GOCs for Type 1 verbs. Moreover, the learners made numerous errors for GOCs in Types 1 and 2, as well as FOCs in Type 3. Therefore, the learners might not have acquired the semantic constraints of narrow conflation classes proposed by Pinker (2013). Based on the structure hierarchy (from low to high) in the acquisition of the locative, as shown in Tables 5 and 6, it can be summarised as follows:

(i) Type 2 FOCs → Type 1 FOCs → Type 3 FOCs
(ii) Type 3 GOCs →Type 1 GOCs → Type 2 GOCs

Alternatively, the above results can be summarised in Figure 1.
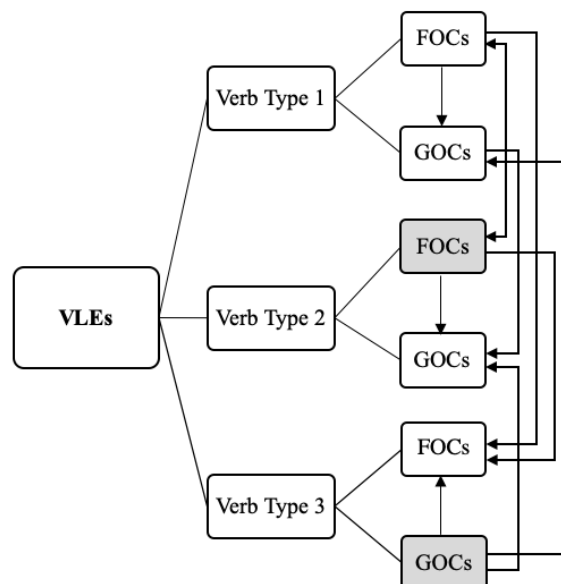
Note. The shaded boxes stand for the learners' native-like competence
A ——▶ B: A was rated at higher levels of acceptability than B
A ◀—— B: A was rated at lower levels of acceptability than B
A ◀—▶ B: A was rated at similar levels of acceptability as B

FIGURE 1. Results of VLEs' acquisition of locative structures

The hierarchy in (i) and (ii) indicates that the learners had the least difficulty with the FOCs in Type 2 and the GOCs in Type 3 and the most challenges with the FOCs in Type 3 and the GOCs in Type 2. These findings were not surprising since the learners had achieved native-like categories for the FOCs in Type 2 and the GOCs in Type 3, as tested in Hypothesis 1. Among the target structures, learners only attained a similar performance when producing the alternating and figure verbs in the FOCs (the FOCs of Type 2 were rated 0.073 higher than those of Type 1, but the difference was statistically insignificant). Moreover, they failed to distinguish three types of verbs that are attached to different syntactic realisations. These results did not support the findings in Bullock's (2004) study, in which Korean learners made a distinction between alternating and non-alternating locative verbs. This difference could be due to the higher level of English of the Korean learners (with TOEFL scores ranging from 600 to 650). However, these results support previous studies that the learners were not ready to acquire the narrow-range rules that define specific classes of locative verbs occurring in a specific construction (Alotaibi, 2016; Bley-Vroman & Joo, 2001; Joo, 2003; Yakhabi et al., 2018). For example, *spill* is a figure verb used to indicate a mass caused by gravitational force, while *soak* is a ground verb used when "a mass is caused to be coextensive with a solid or layer-like medium" (Pinker, 2013, pp. 148-149). In other words, the learners were not sensitive to the different types of verbs used in varied syntactic realisation, as narrow-range verb classes are not supported by L1 Vietnamese correspondences.

A closer examination of the data (see Appendix A) revealed that learners relied heavily on semantic processing to determine syntactic mappings. For example, verbs, like *lay* and *put*, are very similar in meaning, which explains why 69.44% of learners gave correct responses in GOCs. Similarly, *contaminate* and *pollute* were correctly rated by 52.78% of the sample in FOCs. This indicates that learners tend to rate synonymous verbs similarly, even at the upper-intermediate level. However, further explanation is needed for verbs like *load* and *spray* in GOCs, which received highly correct answers despite their syntactic incongruence between the two languages. Additionally, some verbs like *drip*, *lift*, *spill*, *flood*, and *soak* were expected to receive high correct responses due to positive transfer, but this did not occur. In the first case, positive evidence may have helped learners overcome negative transfer. This recovery from negative L1 transfer effects could be linked to their proficiency in English, as upper-intermediate learners were exposed to many instances of these verbs in the test structures. For the second case, an input-based explanation suggests that learners rarely encounter some figure verbs (*drip*, *lift*, *spill*) in GOCs and some ground verbs (*flood*, *soak*) in FOCs.

Another likely explanation for the varied acquisitional trajectories in (i) and (ii) could be based on the assumption that there was structural over-generalisation of licit FOCs to illicit FOCs as in (19), or licit GOCs in Type 3 to illicit GOCs in (20).

(19)   a. She poured water into the glasses.
         b. *She filled sand into the buckets.

(20)   a. He soaked his trousers with soap.
         b. *She dripped the floor with oil.

Note that all learners were expected to know the meaning of all target verbs since all of them passed a vocabulary test to take part in this research. However, this does not guarantee that they will know all syntactic realisations in which these verbs can be used. For example, ill-formed sentences like (19b) or (20b) have never occurred in the learners' input. Therefore, only 16.67%

and 41.67% of learners judged (19b) and (20b) as ungrammatical, respectively. My speculation is that the (b)-forms were overgeneralised and could not be unlearned.

The last plausible explanation for VLEs' acquisition of the LA could be markedness. Although there is much empirical evidence of marked or unmarked forms for the dative and benefactive structures, a grey area still exists for markedness in terms of locative structures (Goldberg, 1995; Laffut & Davidse, 2002). My postulation is that the unmarked FOCs formed with alternating or figure verbs are components of core grammar and, thus, less difficult for the learners to acquire than the GOCs. Conversely, the FOCs used with ground verbs are more marked as they create more challenges for learners to acquire. This proposal lends support to data from advanced learners in previous studies (Bullock, 2004; Juffs, 1996).

CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that learners do not fully comprehend the syntactic mapping for each verb class or distinguish between the three classes of verbs associated with different syntactic realisations. Specifically, Vietnamese L1 learners achieved native-like performance on Type 2 FOCs and Type 3 GOCs, indicating difficulty with illicit structures in Types 2 and 3. Overgeneralization, the meaning of verbs, learners' English language proficiency, and narrow-range verb classes all contributed to these issues. Furthermore, this study proposes a new understanding of markedness in locative variants: FOCs are unmarked with alternating and figure verbs but marked with ground verbs.

This research has provided insights that are relevant to teaching practices. The outcomes can help teachers develop better teaching materials and methods that can facilitate Vietnamese L1 learners' acquisition of English locative alternations. For instance, the findings suggest that teachers should give more attention to the instruction of GOCs with ground verbs, which are more marked and, hence, more difficult to acquire. Moreover, teachers should be aware of the learners' over-generalisation and understanding of narrow-range rules and be able to provide adequate corrective feedback to learners.

Also, both learners and teachers should understand that mastering a non-primary language requires more than just learning forms, rules, and vocabulary. While these aspects are important, they are insufficient in achieving native-like grammar. Exposure to sufficient input in different contexts is essential for learners to acquire the language naturally, as rules and forms can be automatically obtained through interaction. In this regard, it is beneficial to focus on marked forms through increased interactions, as this can help learners acquire the target structure more effectively. Task-based language teaching combined with authentic texts is a suggested solution to enhance learners' interaction competence (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2011). In summary, this research contributes to the theoretical and practical aspects of the field of SLA, including pedagogy and curriculum design.

Besides their contributions to the field, the current study could have been improved by including intransitive locative verbs, as illustrated in (21). These verbs might pose challenges for several Vietnamese learners.

(21) a. The locusts are swarming in the backyard.
  b. The backyard is swarming with locusts.

Furthermore, since language proficiency significantly influences the occurrence of transfer (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008), future studies should compare how Vietnamese learners at different levels of English proficiency (elementary, intermediate, and advanced) acquire locative structures. Finally, the collected demographic data showed that a few VLEs had elementary or intermediate proficiency in other languages, such as Japanese, French, and Korean. Therefore, it would be intriguing to explore whether Vietnamese learners' proficiency in a third or fourth language influences their acquisition of locative structures in future studies.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE 1. Percentage of VLEs obtaining correct responses for each verb

Verb type	Percentage of VLEs	
Verb Type 1 (alternating verbs)	**FOCs**	**GOCs**
brush	86.11	63.89
hang	94.44	36.11
load	86.11	69.44
pack	63.89	55.56
plant	100.00	47.22
spray	94.44	72.22
spread	94.44	55.56
wrap	88.89	94.44
Verb Type 2 (figure verbs)	**FOCs**	**GOCs**
arrange	97.22	66.67
drip	91.67	41.67
install	61.11	30.56
lay	97.22	69.44
lift	88.89	41.67
pour	94.44	55.56
put	100.00	69.44
spill	91.67	38.89
Verb Type 3 (ground verbs)	**FOCs**	**GOCs**
contaminate	52.78	80.56
cover	30.56	91.67
decorate	11.11	100.00
fill	16.67	94.44
flood	27.78	58.33
pollute	52.78	94.44
soak	16.67	86.11
surround	36.11	72.22

Note. The shaded figures indicate that the given verbs do not have their counterparts in L1 Vietnamese.

APPENDIX B

MICHIGAN TEST

Choose ONE correct answer for each of the following questions. Write your answers in the answer sheet.

1. "I didn't know Michael and Stephanie are married."
"They _____ married six months ago"
A. have gotten   B. got   C. will have gotten   D. had gotten

2. According to the TV guide, the movie _____ at ten.
A. will start   B. is starting   C. starts   D. will be starting

3. "Jim _____ his clothes on the floor! I can't take it anymore!"
"I think you should have a word with him!"
A. had always been leaving   B. was always leaving
C. is always leaving   D. has always left

4. She is the most beautiful girl I _____.
A. ever saw   B. have never seen   C. have ever seen   D. had ever seen

5. "This time next week we _____ our final exams!"
"Must you remind me?"
A. are taking   B. will be taking
C. will have taken   D. will have been taking

6. When we finally got to the theater, the play _____.
A. already started   B. started already
C. had already started   D. has already started

7. "When will you have the report ready?"
"I _____ it by the end of the week."
A. am finishing   B. will have finished
C. will be finishing   D. will have been finishing

8. "What's the problem, honey?"
"I can't open this jar. _____ you help me?"
A. Must   B. Should   C. Can   D. Shall

9. "What would you like to do tonight?"
"We _____ go to the movies."
A. would   B. ought   C. need   D. could

10. "So, are you going to take the job or not?"
"It's difficult for me _____ right now. I need more time to think about it."
A. decide   B. deciding   C. to decide   D. to deciding

11. Laura speaks Spanish really _____.
A. well   B. good   C. better   D. best

12. There is _____ cake left but not enough for everyone.
A. few   B. little   C. a few   D. a little

13. _____ the bus was late, I got to work on time.
A. Despite   B. Despite of   C. However   D. Even though

14. Barbara was _____ tired that she went straight to bed after she got back from work.
A. too   B. such   C. very   D. so

15. "He was right!"
"Oh, I know! I really wish I _____ his advice!"

A. took   B. have taken   C. had taken   D. would take

16. "I'm exhausted."

"So _____ I. Let's stop for a rest."

A. do   B. was   C. did   D. am

17. Mom bought me _____ scarf for my birthday.

A. a beautiful, Italian, silk   B. a beautiful, silk, Italian

C. an Italian, beautiful, silk   D. a silk, beautiful, Italian

18. "Thanks for your help, Jim!"

"Don't mention it. After all, I'm your best friend, _____"

A. amn't I?   B. don't I?   C. aren't I?   D. am I?

19. "Mmm... _____ delicious!"

"I'm glad you like my cake!"

A. how   B. what   C. that   D. such

20. They live _____ 25 Mulberry Street.

A. on   B. in   C. to   D. at

21. I couldn't fall asleep last night, so I tried _____ to music but that didn't help either.

A. listening   B. to listen   C. listen   D. to have listened

22. "What do you think I should do?"

"If I _____ you, I'd call him right now."

A. am   B. were   C. will be   D. have been

23. This exercise isn't as easy _____ it may seem.

A. so   B. than   C. from   D. as

24. "My hair has grown really long, don't you think?"

"It's time you _____ a haircut!"

A. would get   B. got   C. will get   D. get

25. "Did you do anything special on the weekend?"

"We visited the town _____ our grandfather was born."

A. where   B. that   C. which   D. when

26. I'll lend you my CD player _____ you promise to take good care of it.

A. unless   B. although   C. so as   D. as long as

27. Never before _____ so embarrassed!

A. had I felt   B. I had felt   C. I felt   D. I feel

28. I've worked _____ all my life to save this money and I'm not going to throw it away like that.

A. hardly   B. hard   C. harder   D. hardest

29. Neither Tim _____ Rob are coming with us tonight because they have a lot of work to do.

A. and   B. or   C. nor   D. not

30. Do you prefer coffee _____ tea?

A. from   B. than   C. for   D. to

31. "I'm afraid we have to set off early in the morning. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Not at all. You see, I am used _____ up early every morning."

A. get   B. to get   C. getting   D. to getting

32. We always go to school _____.

A. by feet   B. with foot   C. on feet   D. on foot

33. Give me a call when you _____ back.

A. are getting   B. get   C. will get   D. will have gotten

34. "Shall we go out tonight?"
"Well, I'm a bit tired so I'd rather _____ in."
A. stay   B. to stay   C. staying   D. to staying

35. "How was the lecture?"
"Oh, it was so _____ that I fell asleep."
A. boredom   B. bored   C. bore   D. boring

36. The kid _____ breaking the vase.
A. refused   B. apologised   C. denied   D. said

37. The Titanic sank on its first _____ across the Atlantic.
A. voyage   B. excavation   C. excursion   D. trip

38. Does the job _____ a lot of traveling?
A. embody   B. include   C. consist   D. involve

39. While I was cleaning the attic, I _____ some old pictures.
A. found out   B. came across   C. ran into   D. gave up

40. Please _____ me to call him later.
A. remember   B. reminisce   C. remind   D. recollect

41. I can't see them anywhere. They're _____ late.
A. obviously   B. seriously   C. furiously   D. particularly

42. Michael is responsible and _____ at his job, which makes him a real asset to the company.
A. deficient   B. sufficient   C. effective   D. efficient

43. My brother is so good at chess that I've never managed to _____ him.
A. earn   B. pass   C. beat   D. gain

44. It's been months since they last _____ me a visit.
A. gave   B. paid   C. went   D. took

45. He is in _____ to the bank.
A. loan   B. debt   C. rent   D. grant

46. May I have your _____, please? I have an announcement to make.
A. warning   B. notice   C. caution   D. attention

47. The college _____ contains useful information about the courses it offers.
A. chart   B. handbook   C. notebook   D. catalog

48. Steve's parents give him a weekly _____, which he can use any way he likes.
A. income   B. salary   C. allowance   D. payment

49. Don't _____ at people like that! It's really rude!
A. observe   B. stare   C. watch   D. notice

50. Mr. Maynard won't be coming in today. He has a high temperature and _____ throat.
A. an ache   B. a painful   C. a sore   D. a hurt

51. I never have three _____ a day; I usually skip lunch.
A. dishes   B. meals   C. takeouts   D. plates

52. Two armed men _____ the bank on Wooster Street this morning.
A. withheld   B. stole   C. burgled   D. robbed

53. When it comes to crime, _____ is better than cure.
A. avoidance   B. ban   C. prevention   D. infection

54. I think I'm lost. Could you tell me the _____ to the subway station, please?
A. instruction   B. path   C. route   D. way

55. I'm sorry, sir, but I think you're _____ me for someone else.
A. misplacing   B. mistaking   C. misusing   D. mistreating

56. The teacher _____ the pupils for being noisy.
A. told off   B. called off   C. put off   D. took off

57. See you at ten _____.
A. just   B. exactly   C. accurately   D. sharp

58. I'm a big fan of her work but I didn't really like her _____ movie.
A. lately   B. later   C. latest   D. late

59. He's lazy. As a matter of _____, he's never worked a day in his life.
A. truth   B. fact   C. issue   D. reality

60. My dad works for a law firm which has a lot of business people as _____.
A. clients   B. customers   C. colleagues   D. consumers

61. It is said that it won't be long before teachers are _____ by robots.
A. changed   B. exchanged   C. extracted   D. replaced

62. My sneakers are too small and don't _____ me anymore.
A. fit   B. match   C. suit   D. associate

63. She called out his name but he didn't even _____ turn round to look at her.
A. exert   B. disturb   C. bother   D. interrupt

64. _____ by the reviews, it must be an interesting book.
A. Telling   B. Saying   C. Deciding   D. Judging

65. He isn't _____ to pass the test.
A. possibly   B. likely   C. probably   D. definitely

66. Before you decide, I think you should _____ their offer more carefully.
A. claim   B. think   C. conceive   D. consider

67. I don't have to drive to work because buses run _____.
A. punctually   B. regularly   C. occasionally   D. comfortably

68. Can you _____ a secret? Louise is organising a surprise party for Matt's birthday!
A. hold   B. take   C. catch   D. keep

69. Let's clean this room for the _____ being and do the rest of the house later.
A. moment   B. minute   C. time   D. present

70. After retiring, Steven _____ bowling to keep himself occupied.
A. took up   B. put on   C. got over   D. gave away

APPENDIX C

WORD-MEANING MATCHING TASK

This test consists of three parts. In each part, match one verb in the first column with its best meaning in the second column. Write your answers in the third column. Note that there are some verbs which are not used. The first verb has been done as an example.

Part 1:

Verbs	Meanings	Answer
1. Select	A. Thu thập	**1 - T**
2. Build	B. Đưa	2 -
3. Collect	C. Bao phủ, trải (mền, ga giường)	3 -
4. Contaminate	D. Gửi (thư, tin nhắn)	4 -
5. Cover	E. Làm ngập lụt	5 -
6. Decorate	F. Rót đầy, làm đầy	6 -
7. Express	G. Kể (chuyện), nói ra	7 -
8. Fill	H. Hợp tác	8 -
9. Flood	I. Vận chuyển	9 -
10. Gain	J. Đổ (nước)	10 -
11. Give	K. Gặp gỡ	11 -
12. Install	L. Trang trí	12 -
13. Lift	M. Nâng lên	13 -
14. Pour	N. Làm ô nhiễm	14 -
15. Purchase	O. Cài đặt (phần mềm)	15 -
16. Put	P. Xây dựng	16 -
17. Send	Q. Giành được, kiếm được	17 -
18. Tell	R. Mua	18 -
19. Transport	S. Để, đặt	19 -
	T. Chọn lựa	
	U. Bày tỏ, diễn đạt	

Part 2:

Verbs	Meanings	Answers
20. Arrange	A. Nhận được, lấy được	20 -
21. Brush	B. Làm tràn	21 -
22. Carry	C. Làm	22 -
23. Construct	D. Chiến thắng, giành được	23 -
24. Drip	E. Viết	24 -
25. Get	F. Xây dựng	25 -
26. Hang	G. Bơm, phun (thuốc, sơn)	26 -
27. Illustrate	H. Minh hoạ, làm rõ	27 -
28. Load	I. Ngâm, nhúng	28 -
29. Make	J. Ném đi	29 -
30. Plant	K. Gửi (hàng hoá)	30 -
31. Recover	L. Phục hồi, thu được	31 -
32. Ship	M. Gói, bao bọc, quấn	32 -
33. Soak	N. Mua	33 -
34. Spill	O. Chải, quét	34 -
35. Spray	P. Chất (hàng)	35 -
36. Win	Q. Treo (áo, quần)	36 -
37. Wrap	R. Trồng (cây, hoa)	37 -
38. Write	S. Làm nhỏ giọt	38 -
	T. Sắp xếp	
	U. Mang, vác	

Part 3:

Verbs	Meanings	Answers
39. Buy	A. Trải ra, căng ra	39 -
40. Compose	B. Kiếm được (tiền)	40 -
41. Create	C. Đóng gói, đóng kiện	41 -
42. Deliver	D. Mua	42 -
43. Donate	E. Để, đặt, đẻ	43 -
44. Earn	F. Đạt được	44 -
45. Explain	G. Soạn (nhạc)	45 -
46. Lay	H. Thu xếp	46 -
47. Obtain	I. Chuyển nhượng	47 -
48. Pack	J. Bao quanh, bao vây	48 -
49. Pass	K. Làm ô nhiễm	49 -
50. Pollute	L. Cho xem, cho thấy	50 -
51. Receive	M. Nhận được	51 -
52. Show	N. Trì hoãn	52 -
53. Spread	O. Giải thích	53 -
54. Submit	P. Đệ trình, đưa ra (ý kiến)	54 -
55. Surround	Q. Thi đỗ, chuyền qua	55 -
56. Teach	R. Hiến tặng, quyên góp	56 -
57. Transfer	S. Giảng dạy	57 -
	T. Giao (hàng)	
	U. Tạo ra	