

# EFFECTS OF TEXTUAL ENHANCEMENT ON VIETNAMESE EFL LEARNERS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE THIRD-PERSON SINGULAR -S

## TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA KỸ THUẬT LÀM NỔI BẬT VĂN BẢN ĐỐI VỚI SỰ PHÁT TRIỂN KIẾN THỨC VỀ HẬU TỔ -S Ở NGÔI THỨ BA SỐ ÍT CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ MỘT NGOẠI NGỮ TẠI VIỆT NAM

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**Abstract** - This study examined the extent to which textual enhancement (TE) promotes the development of both implicit and explicit knowledge of the third-person singular -s among 45 Vietnamese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Using a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design, a treatment group received reading tasks with TE while a control group did not. Implicit and explicit knowledge were assessed via timed grammaticality judgment and untimed grammar-translation tests, respectively. Results showed that TE promoted substantial improvement in explicit knowledge and no statistically significant difference in implicit knowledge, while the control group showed no gains. Post-intervention interviews revealed that TE facilitated learners' attention to verb morphology without hindering comprehension, albeit with varying degrees of accuracy. Pedagogical implications for grammar instruction in EFL contexts are discussed.

**Key words** - textual enhancement; third-person singular -s; EFL learners; implicit knowledge; explicit knowledge

### 1. Introduction

The acquisition of inflectional morphemes, such as the third-person singular -s, is arguably one of the most challenging linguistic features for L2 learners to acquire, even in immersive contexts. Indeed, Jia and Fuse [1] found that despite daily exposure, children learning English as a second language (ESL) may take over five years to increase accurate use of -s from 0% to 80%. For EFL learners, particularly those from languages like Vietnamese that lack inflectional morphology, the difficulty is even greater. Frequent omission and misuse of inflectional morphemes remain common in L2 output [2], [3], and many adult learners continue to struggle with consistent accuracy despite extensive instruction or exposure [4].

These challenges stem largely from structural differences. Vietnamese, an isolating language [5], encodes grammatical relations through word order and function words rather than inflection [6]. Verbs show no person or tense marking, contrasting sharply with English, which requires subject-verb agreement via morphemes like the third-person singular -s. This difference is exemplified by (1), (2), and (3) below.

**Tóm tắt** - Nghiên cứu này xem xét mức độ của kỹ thuật làm nổi bật văn bản (TE) thúc đẩy sự phát triển kiến thức tiềm ẩn và hiện hữu về hậu tố -s ngôi thứ ba số ít của 45 người Việt Nam học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ (EFL). Sử dụng thiết kế bán thực nghiệm phương pháp hỗn hợp, nhóm thực nghiệm thực hiện các bài đọc có TE trong khi nhóm đối chứng thì không. Kiến thức tiềm ẩn và hiện hữu lần lượt được đánh giá thông qua bài kiểm tra tính đúng ngữ pháp có giới hạn giờ và bài dịch ngữ pháp không tính giờ. Kết quả cho thấy TE cải thiện đáng kể kiến thức hiện hữu nhưng không tạo ra sự khác biệt có ý nghĩa thống kê về kiến thức tiềm ẩn, trong khi nhóm đối chứng không có tiến bộ. Phỏng vấn sau can thiệp cho thấy TE giúp người học chú ý đến hình thái động từ mà không cản trở hiểu nội dung, dù mức độ chính xác còn khác nhau. Các hàm ý sư phạm cho dạy ngữ pháp trong bối cảnh EFL được thảo luận.

**Từ khóa** - kỹ thuật làm nổi bật văn bản; hậu tố -s ngôi thứ ba số ít; người học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ; kiến thức tiềm ẩn; kiến thức hiện hữu

- (1) *Tôi chạy*  
I run  
'I run'
- (2) *Anh ta chạy*  
He runs  
'He runs'
- (3) *Chúng tôi chạy*  
We run  
'We run'

As illustrated, the Vietnamese verb form remains invariant (*chạy*) across all subjects, whereas English requires the morphological marker -s specifically to denote third-person singular subjects in the present tense. This typological mismatch means that English inflectional morphology lacks a structural counterpart in Vietnamese, posing challenges for accurate processing and production [7] - [10]. The morpheme's low salience, limited communicative value, and low contingency further impede its acquisition [11].

To address these attentional challenges, TE, a pedagogical technique that visually manipulates input (e.g., bolding or underlining) to make target forms more

salient, has been shown to be promising [12]-[14]. Grounded in the noticing hypothesis, TE assumes that directing learners' attention to linguistic forms facilitates acquisition [15], [16]. Although meta-analyses report small to moderate positive effects of TE on L2 grammar learning [17], [18], other studies have found inconsistent results, possibly owing to differences in design and measurement [19], [20].

Confounding the issues surrounding TE research is the fact that much of the current literature has assessed either explicit or implicit knowledge in isolation, and often, incorporated TE within broader task-based interventions rather than as an independent variable. Moreover, most studies have relied on single-session treatments, which are generally too brief to yield substantial gains, particularly for implicit techniques like TE that require repeated exposure to enhanced input [21].

Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates how TE affects both explicit and implicit knowledge of the English third-person singular -s among Vietnamese EFL learners. An extended TE treatment was implemented to examine the effects of repeated exposure, with post-intervention interviews providing insights into learners' perceptions and cognitive engagement.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Input and EFL learners

Linguistic input is fundamental to acquisition, yet EFL learners often face input poverty, where exposure is restricted to classroom settings [22]. While L2 reading can mitigate this [9], [23], comprehension alone is often insufficient for the acquisition of low-salience grammatical forms, such as the third-person singular -s. Because learners prioritise semantic processing over formal features [24], focus-on-form techniques are essential [14]. Among these, TE is a prominent intervention designed to increase the perceptual salience of target forms, thereby facilitating noticing and subsequent form-meaning mapping [25], [26].

### 2.2. Textual enhancement

Originally conceptualised by Sharwood Smith [12], [13], TE involves the visual manipulation of text (e.g., boldfacing, underlining) to direct learner attention toward specific features without explicit rule explanation [27]. Theoretically, TE is rooted in the Noticing Hypothesis [15], which posits that conscious registration of a form is a prerequisite for its conversion from input into intake. By artificially increasing salience, TE helps bypass the learner's limited cognitive capacity, ensuring that grammatical structures, which might otherwise be ignored during meaningful communication, are processed and integrated into the interlanguage system [16].

### 2.3. The explicit-implicit knowledge interface

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research distinguishes between explicit knowledge (conscious, declarative rules) [28] and implicit knowledge (intuitive, procedural systems that drive fluent production) [29]. The extent to which pedagogical interventions like TE can bridge these two systems remains a central debate. While

non-interface models [30] suggest they are distinct, weak- and strong-interface views [31], [32] suggest that explicit noticing can eventually lead to implicit acquisition. While TE is widely recognised for fostering explicit knowledge, its capacity to generate automatic, implicit knowledge remains empirically uncertain, particularly in short-term interventions.

### 2.4. Previous research

Previous research on TE has yielded mixed results, often characterised by small effect sizes [19], [20]. In EFL contexts, studies targeting the third-person singular -s have shown modest gains in explicit knowledge [33], [34], but these findings are often constrained by methodological limitations [35]. For instance, Lee [33] noted positive gains but did not measure implicit knowledge, while Cintrón-Valentín and García-Amaya [36] relied exclusively on Grammar-Translation Tests (GTT), which favor explicit retrieval.

Crucially, there is a lack of research utilising sensitive real-time measures, such as timed Grammaticality Judgment Tests (GJT), to assess whether TE-induced noticing actually translates into changes in implicit knowledge within the Vietnamese EFL context. Against this backdrop, the current study aimed to examine the differential effects of TE on both explicit and implicit outcomes using an extended treatment design, with a focus on Vietnamese EFL learners. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) To what extent does TE facilitate the development of implicit knowledge of the third-person singular -s among Vietnamese EFL learners?
- (2) To what extent does TE facilitate the development of explicit knowledge of the third-person singular -s among Vietnamese EFL learners?
- (3) How do learners perceive and cognitively engage with TE?

## 3. Research methodology

### 3.1. Design and participants

This study employed a quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest design. Participants were 45 second-year non-English majors (N=45) at a Vietnamese university, from two intact classes: Treatment (n=25, +TE) and Control (n=20, -TE). Participants were told the study aimed to improve general reading skills and remained unaware of the specific grammatical focus (third-person singular -s). All participants had 9 years of EFL instruction and were at the A2-B1 CEFR level determined by in-house tests.

### 3.2. Target linguistic construction and materials

The English third-person singular -s was selected due to the absence of a Vietnamese subject-verb agreement equivalent [37], [38], its low perceptual salience [39], and communicative redundancy [40], [41]. Materials consisted of two A2-level graded readers (774 and 905 words with 21 and 34 instances of the third-person singular -s, respectively) adapted from the British Council. The +TE group received texts where target verbs were bolded and underscored appropriately (e.g., *he*

works), while the -TE group received unenhanced versions (e.g., *he works*).

### 3.3. Assessment

Two instruments measured different knowledge types. A timed GJT measured implicit knowledge, featuring 48 items (16 target, 32 distractors) presented at 7-second intervals [42]. A GTT assessed explicit production through L1-to-L2 translation of eight sentences [36], [43]. Both instruments demonstrated acceptable to excellent internal consistency (GJT:  $\alpha = .68-.77$ ; GTT:  $\alpha = .85-.92$ ). Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore cognitive engagement and noticing.

### 3.4. Procedure and data collection

The study followed a three-week sequential design. In Week 1, participants completed Pre-tests (GJT then GTT to minimise priming), followed by the first graded reader and a comprehension quiz. In Week 2, participants read the second graded reader and completed the second comprehension quiz, followed by immediate Post-tests. In Week 3, semi-structured interviews were conducted. From the pool of participants, eight from the treatment group and five from the control group were selected for post-intervention interviews based on voluntary participants and availability. Full assessment instruments and enhanced reading materials are available from the author upon request.

### 3.5. Statistical analysis

Quantitative data were analysed via independent-samples t-tests, Mann-Whitney U (for non-normal data), and mixed-model ANOVA. Effect sizes were interpreted using benchmarks by Plonsky and Oswald [44] ( $d$ ,  $r$ ) and Norouzzian and Plonsky [45] ( $\eta^2$ ). Qualitative interview data underwent deductive thematic analysis to identify patterns in learner perception and noticing [46], [47].

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Reading comprehension scores

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for reading comprehension scores. The results indicate that participants from both groups (+TE and -TE) demonstrated very similar understanding of the graded readers, despite the difference in typographic cues.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for reading comprehension scores by condition

Condition	n	Mean	Median	SD	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
+TE	25	10.48	11	1.71	9.77	11.18
-TE	20	10.80	11	1.00	10.32	11.27

This similarity was confirmed statistically by a Mann-Whitney U test, which showed no significant difference between groups ( $U = 240.00$ ,  $z = -.23$ ,  $p = .81$ ). Furthermore, the effect size was minimal ( $r = .04$ ), indicating that TE had no meaningful effect on participants' comprehension scores.

### 4.2. Grammaticality Judgement Test scores

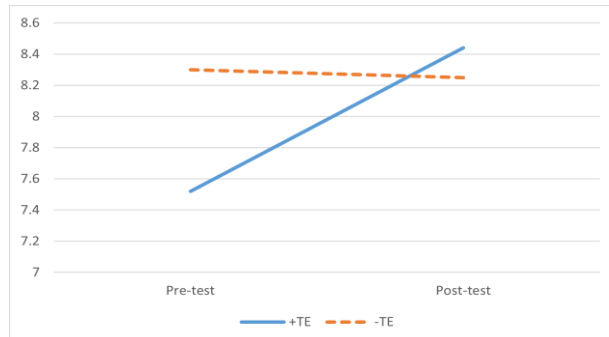
Descriptive statistics for the timed GJT pre-test (Table 2 below) show comparable scores between the +TE and -TE groups, indicating similar baseline implicit knowledge

of the third-person singular -s morpheme prior to the intervention. An independent samples t-test confirmed no significant pre-test difference ( $t(43) = -.741$ ,  $p = .46$ ,  $d = .23$ ).

A glance of Table 3 and Figure 1 suggests minor gains in implicit knowledge for the +TE group compared to the control group. However, as depicted in Table 5, the mixed-design ANOVA revealed no significant main effect of time,  $F(1, 43) = 1.17$ ,  $p = .28$ ,  $\eta^2 = .027$ , and crucially, no Time  $\times$  Group interaction,  $F(1, 43) = 1.46$ ,  $p = .23$ ,  $\eta^2 = .033$ . This indicates that TE did not yield any substantial improvements in implicit knowledge of third-person singular -s.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for Grammaticality Judgement Test scores by condition

Condition	n	Mean	SD	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
+Textual enhancement					
Pre-test	25	7.52	2.75	6.38	8.65
Post-test	25	8.44	3.26	7.09	9.78
Gain	25	0.92	2.49	-0.11	1.95
-Textual enhancement					
Pre-test	20	8.30	4.01	6.42	10.17
Post-test	20	8.25	4.47	6.15	10.34
Gain	20	-0.05	2.87	-1.39	1.29



**Figure 1.** Pre-test and post-test Grammaticality Judgement Test scores for the +TE and -TE groups

**Table 3.** Results for mixed-model ANOVA comparing implicit gains between pre-test and post-test by condition

Effect	df	F	p	$\eta^2$
Time	1	1.17	.28	.027
Time $\times$ Group	1	1.46	.23	.033

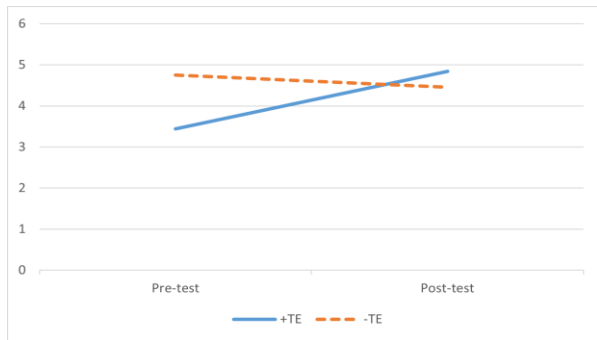
### 4.3. Grammar-Translation Test scores

Similar to analysis from the GJT pre-test scores, Table 4 below illustrated that participants demonstrated no statistically significant difference in knowledge of the third-person singular -s on the GTT at the beginning of the study,  $t(43) = -1.57$ ,  $p = .12$ ,  $d = 0.47$ .

On the other hand, Figure 2 and Table 5 reveal substantially greater improvement in the +TE group relative to the -TE group. The mixed-model ANOVA corroborated this pattern through a significant Time  $\times$  Group interaction,  $F(1, 43) = 7.11$ ,  $p = .011$ ,  $\eta^2 = .142$ , indicating that TE markedly facilitated development in participants' explicit knowledge of the third-person singular -s.

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics for Grammar-Translation Test scores by condition

Condition	n	Mean	SD	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
+Textual enhancement					
Pre-test	25	3.44	2.50	2.40	4.47
Post-test	25	4.84	3.11	3.55	6.12
Gain	25	1.4	1.63	0.72	2.07
-Textual enhancement					
Pre-test	20	4.75	3.07	3.31	6.18
Post-test	20	4.45	3.33	2.89	6.00
Gain	20	-0.3	2.61	-1.52	0.92

**Figure 2.** Pre-test and post-test Grammar-Translation Test scores for the +TE and -TE groups**Table 5.** Results for mixed-model ANOVA comparing explicit gains between pre-test and post-test by condition

Effect	df	F	p	$\eta^2$
Time	1	2.98	.092	.065
Time $\times$ Group	1	7.11	.011	.142

#### 4.4. Post-study interviews

Interviews with the treatment group (n=8) revealed two primary themes regarding the cognitive impact of TE.

##### 4.4.1. TE and reading comprehension

Participants reported that the bolded -s endings did not disrupt their understanding of the reading passages, a claim largely supported by their stable comprehension scores (averaging 5/6 across treatment sessions). Student 1, whose comprehension remained high (Treatment 1: 6/6; Treatment 2: 5/6), noted: "I saw the bolded words, but it didn't affect my comprehension." Similarly, Student 4, who showed a significant comprehension gain from 3 to 5, added: "I looked at the bolded words first, but I could still understand the sentences." Even for learners like Student 3, who maintained a consistent 5/6 across both treatments, the noticing triggered by the bolded text appeared to coexist with, rather than distract from, meaning-focused processing.

##### 4.4.2. TE serves as a checkpoint, but results in inconsistent form-meaning mapping

While participants perceived TE as a useful visual checkpoint, their test data reveals that this awareness did not always translate into accurate grammatical acquisition. In some cases, the noticing resulted in significant gains in explicit knowledge (GTT) without a corresponding shift in implicit knowledge (timed GJT).

For instance, Student 3 reported, "Previously, I never added -s to verbs. Now, I pay much closer attention." This increased attention is reflected in their substantial gains

across both measures (timed GJT: 8 to 12; GTT: 4 to 8). However, the interviews also highlighted why some students showed noticing without intake.

Student 2 provides a critical example of misinterpreted salience. They remarked: "I added -s because it means he eats many kinds of vegetables." While this student's explicit knowledge (GTT) jumped from 3 to 7, their timed GJT only showed a marginal increase (7 to 9), and their comprehension score actually dropped (3 to 2). This suggests that the student noticed the form but mapped it to the wrong semantic function (plurality rather than third-person singular agreement), leading to a breakdown in meaning-form mapping.

Similarly, Student 8 demonstrated a partial noticing of the target linguistic features. Despite reporting an increased awareness of the suffix, their timed GJT score remained low (4 to 5), although their GTT improved (6 to 8). Their interview explanation, "I add -s when actions are repeated or involve many things", confirms that TE successfully drew their attention to the form, but the learner lacked the cognitive resources to correctly integrate its grammatical function.

Finally, the data highlights the noticing-production gap. Student 7, who admitted, "I added -s when the subject is singular, but I often forget in practice," showed zero improvement in their timed GJT (5 to 5) and a slight decline in GTT (1 to 0). This objective data confirms that their self-reported rule awareness remained largely theoretical and had not yet begun the process of internalisation.

## 5. Discussion

This study demonstrates that while TE significantly enhances explicit knowledge of the third-person singular -s, its impact on implicit knowledge remains limited within a three-week timeframe. These findings align with research suggesting TE effectively directs attention to low-salience forms [17], [24], [48], likely due to the participants' baseline declarative knowledge [7], [49] and the use of comprehensible graded readers [50].

A critical finding is the gap between noticing and intake. Qualitative data confirmed that TE successfully triggered noticing, but learners often misinterpreted the functional meaning of the highlighted -s (e.g., as a marker of plurality or habituality). This represents a breakdown in form-meaning mapping. Particularly, physical salience was achieved, but cognitive resources were insufficient to map the form to its correct grammatical function. This explains why scores improved in the untimed GTT (monitored production) but not the timed GJT [51], [52].

The lack of implicit gains suggests that the transition from explicit awareness to automaticity is a slow, non-linear process [31]. For learners from non-inflectional L1 backgrounds like Vietnamese, the -s morpheme carries low communicative load and is highly resistant to automatization [11], [53]. Consequently, a short-term intervention may capture the noticing phase but stop short of internalisation. TE provides a necessary scaffold for monitored production, but spontaneous fluency requires more prolonged, meaningful exposure.

## 6. Conclusion and implications

This study confirms that TE is a successful scaffold for initial noticing, significantly boosting explicit grammatical awareness of the third-person singular *-s*. However, visual salience does not guarantee accurate form-meaning mapping, as evidenced by learners' functional misinterpretations. Pedagogically, TE is a viable tool that can be employed to promote accuracy in controlled output; to resolve functional ambiguity, practitioners should complement TE with brief explicit explanations.

The primary limitations include the small sample size (N=45) and the short duration, which is likely insufficient to observe the conversion of explicit noticing into implicit knowledge [31]. Future research should utilise longitudinal designs, include delayed post-tests to measure retention, and explore TE's efficacy across different grammatical features in the Vietnamese EFL context.

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