

Comparing synonymous adjectives in Vietnamese and English

ARTICLE

Vo Tu Phuong¹ 

University of Khanh Hoa, província de Khanh Hoa, Vietnã

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Abstract

Vietnamese and English have many similarities and differences in using synonyms to express comparisons. The goal of the research is to analyze semantic similarities between Vietnamese and English. Researching this topic is done to clarify the expressions of the two languages to make the study of specialized terminology more convenient. The article will focus on clarifying theoretical basis issues, research methods, and research questions. It will also aim to elucidate the similarities in describing human qualities and the similarities and differences between synonyms of absolute characteristics between Vietnamese and English, drawing upon the corpus of idioms and proverbs in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Diana Lea.

Keywords: Compare. Synonym adjective. Similar. Distinctive.

Comparação de adjetivos sinônimos em vietnamita e inglês

Resumo

O vietnamita e o inglês têm muitas semelhanças e diferenças na utilização de sinônimos para exprimir comparações. O objetivo da investigação é analisar as semelhanças semânticas entre o vietnamita e o inglês. A investigação deste tópico é feita para clarificar as expressões das duas línguas e tornar o estudo da terminologia especializada mais conveniente. O artigo irá centrar-se na clarificação de questões de base teórica, métodos de investigação e questões de investigação. Pretende-se também elucidar as semelhanças na descrição das qualidades humanas e as semelhanças e diferenças entre sinônimos de características absolutas entre o vietnamita e o inglês, com base no corpus de expressões idiomáticas e provérbios do Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary de Diana Lea.

Palavras-chave: Comparar. Adjetivo sinônimo. Semelhante. Distinto.

1 Introduction

Research on the similarities and differences of synonymous adjectives in Vietnamese and English plays a very important role in fields such as comparative linguistics, translation, foreign language teaching and cultural studies. Adjectives are words

that account for a large number of real words (Lukin *et al.*, 2023). To fully describe the properties of an object or phenomenon, we cannot help but use adjectives (Brunner; Hurch, 2023). In general terms, both in Vietnamese and English, adjectives are a class of words that modify nouns and verbs and act as predicates in sentences. Adjectives are a class of words that make language more vivid. We cannot describe the properties and characteristics of an entity or a process without using them. The study of synonyms plays a very important role not only in research but also in social and cultural life. While we may pay little attention to synonym usage in daily communication, we pay more attention in writing activities. The use of synonyms to describe things and events shows the writer's sharpness and sophistication in using language. Besides, it also avoids duplication that leads to boredom for readers. Not only that, distinguishing synonyms from adjectives also brings great value to language teaching.

It can be affirmed that the study of the phenomenon of synonymy has received attention since ancient Greece (Parmeggiani, 2023). These concepts develop and perfect in the course of its historical development. However, being able to compare the similarities and differences between synonyms in Vietnamese and English has not received proper attention. In this article, the author conducts a division and survey by considering the range of combinations when replacing different adjectives in Vietnamese and English. This is to clarify the differences in semantics, applications, and origins so that we can compare similarities and differences.

Theoretical basis

The study of semantics has attracted the interest of many scientists with many different perspectives, so scientists have discussed this issue very enthusiastically. *Referential Theory of Meaning* (Percival, 2017; Hanushek, 2012; Kühne *et al.*, 2023; Marceta, 2023) is a perspective in the philosophy of language, especially as developed by the French philosopher of language, Gustave Guillaume. This theory believes that the meaning of an expression (word, phrase) is mainly the object that the expression points to.

In conventional semantics, there are two main concepts of meaning: expressive meaning (i.e. how language describes some aspect of the world) and contextual meaning (i.e. how context and grammar determine the meaning of the expression). This means that when we use a word, its meaning not only reflects an abstract or conceptual meaning but also relates to a specific object in the real world. *Conceptual Theory of Meaning* (Khamroeva, 2023) believes that the meaning of an expression lies at the level of ideas or concepts that the person using that expression attaches to it during the thinking process. *Behaviorist theory* (Latifa *et al.*, 2023; Shandiz, 2023; Yulianti, 2023; Ishomudin *et al.*, 2023) is specifically interested in the external manifestations of behavior rather than the underlying psychology or thinking. In this context, the meaning of an expression (i.e. a gesture, an action) is explained according to two main aspects, namely *Stimulus-Response Association* (Rac-Lubashevsky, *et al.*, 2023; Gharesi, *et al.*, 2023) and *Situation-Specific Speech Acts* (Takahashi, 2023). It is clear that behaviorist theory, consciousness and psychology are not considered important active factors in explaining behavior. Instead, they focus on studying the relationships between psychic events and actual behavior, and how they impact each other. *Verification theory* (Hillman; Fowlie; MacDonald, 2023; Chen; Wei, 2023) holds that an expression has meaning if and only if that meaning can be determined through evidence from sentences or clauses containing the expression. *Verification theory* mainly focuses on determining the meaning of expressions through verifiability. *Truth-conditional theory* (Dupre, 2023; Hamawand, 2023; Pigden, 2023; Oprea, 2023) believes that the meaning of an expression lies in its contribution to the truth conditions of the sentence containing it. This means that the meaning of an expression lies not in itself but in the way it contributes to determining whether the sentence containing it is true or false in a particular context. From the issues listed, the author finds that the theories presented above cannot fully convey semantic issues.

Non-descriptive (Balmuth, 1956; Wu; Clause, 2020) within the scope of stylistics and pragmatics share the same purpose. Non-descriptive includes affective meaning, attitudinal meaning and expressive meaning. These meanings create the expressive potential of language. If non-descriptive mainly considers statements, then description

(Rouigny *et al.*, 2019; Brafman *et al.*, 2023; Zhang *et al.*, 2020) focuses on written language, for written language must be done according to the regulations given by the communities.

Synonym (Gu *et al.*, 2023; Zhu, 2021) has appeared in the calendar for quite a long time, but until now there has been no consensus on the concept. This inconsistency comes from providing criteria for selecting synonyms. Researchers believe that synonyms have a very diverse and complex semantic structure of words that are considered synonymous in a group (Abdalla *et al.*, 2021; Stringer, 2019). When a word has multiple meanings, its meanings meet different usage needs. Therefore, researchers do not accept the limitation of the scope of words considered synonymous.

Near-synonyms (Phoocharoensil, 2021; Phoocharoensil, 2020; Phoocharoensil; Kanokpermpoon, 2021) are expressions that have relatively similar meanings but are not synonymous. The author agrees with this point of view and believes that it is necessary to separate close-synonymous expressions from groups of synonyms. *Partial synonyms* (Bednárová-Gibová, 2019; Doncheva *et al.*, 2020; Zhukova *et al.*, 2023) are words that have the same meaning but still differ somewhat in attitude, emotion or way of action.

An *adjective* (Mamatov, 2020; Su; Hunston, 2019; Fyshe *et al.*, 2019) is a word that describes people or things. It can combine with other adjectives to form compound adjectives, combine with adverbs, modify nouns and some verbs. This term was born very early, but in terms of origin, it has many different views. Although adjectives in Vietnamese and English have similarities in function and combination, they still have very clear differences in position. Synonymous adjectives are T-units.

2 Methodology

To carry out the topic of comparing synonyms in Vietnamese and English, the author uses the following methods:

The author used the corpus filtering method to filter Vietnamese vocabulary through idioms, proverbs and English sources from the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Diana Lea, (Lea; Bradbery, 2020). This method allows the author to collect a large amount

of data from the aforementioned sources to have complete and diverse data to analyze and draw conclusions. To carry out this method, I gathered the texts into a corpus and marked and labeled them in category as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. This work was conducted by the author from May 2022 to January 2023. After labeling, the author proceeded to separate words and search for synonyms in Vietnamese and English. Through this, the author identifies synonyms in different contexts and gathers them into groups.

The method of substituting synonymous adjectives in the same group to identify their degree of synonymy is of considerable importance in linguistic and text research. By substituting synonymous adjectives within the same group, the researcher can recognize similarities and differences in their nuances of meaning. The substitution method helps determine the degree of substitution possible between synonymous adjectives. Some words can be used interchangeably relatively freely, while other words can provide more specific precision and nuance of meaning. Substituting adjectives for each other helps to look for similarities and differences in language used to aid in analyzing the diversity and flexibility of language, as well as better understand vocabulary choices. The method of substituting synonyms within the same group is a useful tool to better understand the degree of synonymy and linguistic variation in different texts.

Tertium comparationis (Cyras; Lachmayer, 2023; Cornille, 2023) is used by the author to understand the similarities and differences between these two languages. Each language often brings different values, perspectives, and approaches to concepts. It provides an overview of how language conveys meaning and nuance in different contexts. By mastering the similarities and differences between synonymous adjectives in both languages, the translator can choose the most appropriate word to preserve the meaning and context of the text. Adjectives can be used differently to express an equivalent meaning in Vietnamese and English texts. The results from the comparison create a large database of word usage in both languages, helping linguistic research and language analysis.

Research questions

To research this topic, the author poses the following three research questions: (1) In what issues is the comparison of synonyms in Vietnamese and English expressed? (2) What is the significance of this comparison for science and education? (3) What purpose will the discussion be aimed at?

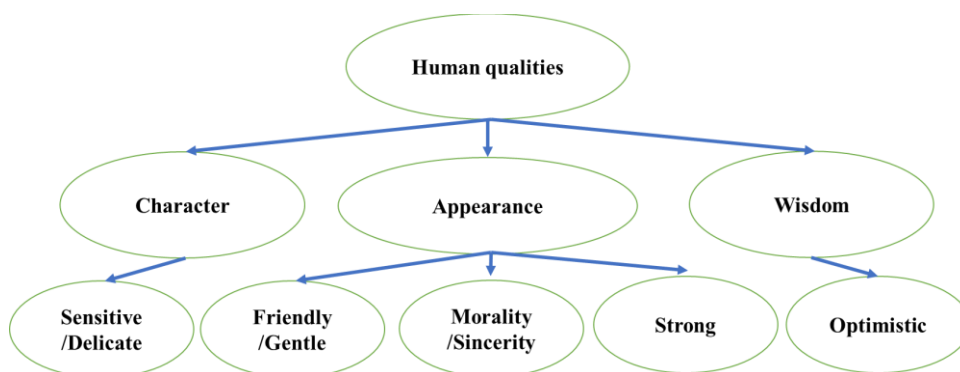
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3 Results and Discussion

Through studying the sources, the author found 196 adjectives in Vietnamese and 840 adjectives in English. From this result, the author has conducted a classification to compare the similarities and differences of synonyms, as follows:

Synonyms of human qualities are groups of words that have the function of describing the characteristics, characteristics or qualities of a person.

Figure 1: Human qualities



Source: Elaborated by the author.

Synonymous adjectives describe personality such as good, gentle, friendly, gentle, responsible, sensitive. *Synonymous adjectives* describe appearance such as beautiful, elegant, youthful, charming, attractive. *Synonymous adjectives* describe intelligence such as intelligence, creativity, understanding, sophistication, astuteness, talent. *Synonymous adjectives* describe morality such as sincerity, honesty, fairness. *Synonymous adjectives* describe strength and resilience such as perseverance, strength, endurance, courage, patience. *Synonymous adjectives* describe optimism and positivity such as upbeat, active,

positive, life-loving, uplifting. *Synonymous adjectives* describe sensitivity and sophistication such as sensitive, delicate, considerate, thoughtful, gentle, emotionally intelligent. *Synonymous adjectives* describe friendliness and gentleness such as gentle, friendly, approachable, extroverted, sociable, laid-back. These synonyms are used to create a detailed and accurate picture of an individual's qualities, characteristics or personality. They often appear in writing and description to enrich language and create a deeper understanding of the object being described.

By filtering and comparing, the author believes that adjectives in Vietnamese and adjectives in English are similar in substitution, without determining the scale. The similarity between adjectives in Vietnamese and English when they substitute with words in the same group and accept semantics may be due to some linguistic principles and common features in the way languages build structures and sentences, and express meaning. Both Vietnamese and English use adjectives to describe and add meaning to nouns. Sentence structure may require correspondence between adjectives and nouns to create complete and understandable sentences. Some vocabulary in Vietnamese and English have common roots in Latin and Prussian languages, and therefore, they may have common features in the way they use adjectives. Both languages have common linguistic rules about how adjectives are used, such as the order of adjectives in sentences, the variation of adjectives according to number.

The combined scope of the synonym class of adjectives denoting qualities in Vietnamese and the corresponding class of adjectives in English is that they can be used with nouns, adverbs, and modifiers for verbs. Adjectives are often used to describe and modify nouns, helping to enrich the meaning and image of the object the noun is referring to (e.g., a good person). Adjectives can also be used to modify verbs, describing the degree or quality of an action (e.g., speak softly). Adjectives can be combined with adverbs to express more detailed meanings (e.g., run quickly). In some cases, adjectives can be used to describe the properties of gentle actions.

The structure of the synonym class of adjectives describing qualities in Vietnamese often uses compound adjectives, a phenomenon that can be explained by some linguistic

features and vocabulary formation in Vietnamese. In the synonym class of adjectives, there is usually a central word that has a precise meaning, and compound adjectives are created from changing the meaning of that central word. This helps create new adjectives to describe specific, subtle details about qualities that central words cannot fully express. The use of compound adjectives helps enrich the language and gives a more detailed description of the qualities. Instead of using a single word, compound adjectives provide the ability to describe the complexity and multidimensionality of a certain trait. Flexibility in creating compound adjectives allows language to adapt to developments in society, technology, and the need to describe the world around us in *increasing detail* (quickly, agile, speedy). This compound adjective helps describe specific aspects of "fast," providing more variety and precision in expressing meaning. This difference often lies in compound adjectives, which are the transference of a central word in the same group. The transferred adjectives to some extent still have part of the meaning of other words and expressions in the group, it is this factor that makes them grouped together as synonyms. However, the replacement rate of such words and expressions is often very low, because the supposedly synonymous meaning of the central word is gradually lost. In most cases, they can be considered close in meaning. Synonymous adjectives in English have meanings corresponding to quality adjectives in Vietnamese. Once synonymous, there is no phenomenon of meaning transfer like in Vietnamese. Thanks to the way they are formed from different words, synonyms in English create convenience for users, meaning that in the same context in English, there are many synonyms that can replace each other.

How to replace synonyms in English and Vietnamese? In theory, synonyms are interchangeable. However, there are differences in terms of semantic acceptability. If in Vietnamese, synonymous adjectives denoting qualities in the language can almost be substituted for each other on the condition that they are synonymous, then in English synonymous adjectives often cannot be substituted for each other.

The similarities and differences between synonyms are only absolute characteristics between Vietnamese and English. Both Vietnamese and English agree that synonyms are only absolutely characteristic, describing a characteristic or condition very clearly and

without many variations such as perfect, wonderful, top-notch, supreme, private, common, public, main, secondary, unique, military, state-owned, etc.

The similarity between Vietnamese and English adjectives is that they often do not combine naturally with words such as "very," "quite," "very much," "somewhat," etc. In many cases, English adjectives often have a descriptive level so they do not need the support of words like "very" or "quite" like in Vietnamese. The description of degree is built into the adjective itself. English and Vietnamese have different grammar rules and expressions and this can lead to differences in the use of level descriptors. In English, some adjectives do not combine naturally with "very" or "quite". Words that describe levels often depend on the specific context and language. Some adjectives can be used with words like "very" or "quite" but others cannot.

The difference between adjectives in English and Vietnamese when using relative and absolute comparisons is related to the way the two languages express degrees and grammatical rules. Adjectives in English often have relative comparative forms such as "bigger", "smaller", and "faster", used to compare two or more things, people or meanings (e.g., this car is faster than that one). Adjectives can also be used to form absolute comparisons, not comparing with someone or something else but simply describing the absolute degree of a characteristic (e.g., this cake is delicious). In Vietnamese, relative comparisons are often expressed by using the words "more than" or "less than" along with the words "than" or "also". In Vietnamese, adjectives are often not naturally used to express absolute comparisons but often need the support of phrases such as "very" or "too" to describe the absolute degree. English has a grammatical structure that allows adjectives to be used directly in absolute comparisons, while Vietnamese often requires the support of other words. The specific grammar and language rules of each language can lead to differences in the way adjectives are used when comparing. Despite this difference, both languages provide flexible ways to express relative and absolute comparisons in different contexts.

Similarities and differences between adjectives indicate imitative characteristics between Vietnamese and English. Adjectives that describe imitative characteristics in

Vietnamese and English are often used to describe and visualize realistically and vividly an object, emotion, or situation.

Adjective similarity is a characteristic of imitation in Vietnamese and English in which there is the ability to combine with adverbs. Both Vietnamese and English have flexible adjectives, capable of describing and simulating the characteristics of objects in detail. This flexibility makes it easy for adjectives to combine with adverbs to add more level, depth, and simile. Both languages tend to use imitative adjectives to create vivid images, helping the listener or reader to experience a more realistic and deeper feeling about the object being described.

In Vietnamese, there are a number of sequences of adjectives that cannot be combined, mainly absolute characteristic adjectives. Some non-combining adjective sequences are essentially adjectives of absolute character, meaning they describe a characteristic without comparison to another person or thing. Adjectives such as "beautiful", "perfect", and "poetic" often fall into this category. Some adjectives of absolute character do not form opposite pairs, meaning they do not have a clear opposite. Instead, they focus on describing a specific characteristic without requiring comparison to another state. For example, "perfect" and "wonderful" often have no direct opposite. Some of the adjectives in these adjective ranges may be mimetic adjectives, used to vividly and realistically describe a certain state or characteristic. Adjectives such as "peaceful" and "fresh" may fall into this category. These series of adjectives are often used to describe in detail and specifically a certain characteristic, often related to culture, mood, or surroundings.

Adjectives in Vietnamese and English often have similarities when they have the ability to combine with nouns and verbs due to some common characteristics in language expression. Both Vietnamese and English use similar linguistic structures when combining adjectives with nouns and verbs. This creates similarities in sentence construction and grammatical descriptions. Adjectives are potentially versatile and can be used to describe or add meaning to both nouns and verbs. This helps adjectives become an important part of expressing detailed and rich meanings. Adjectives have the ability to describe characteristics of nouns (e.g., "beautiful girl") as well as describe how the verb performs

the action (e.g., "to speak softly"). This diversity makes the language rich and flexible. Both Vietnamese and English require linguistic components to describe the world around them and express the meaning of the speaker or writer. Adjectives play an important role in performing this function. The similarity between adjectives in both languages is mainly due to the fact that they both reflect characteristics and actions in the surrounding world in a flexible and diverse way.

The difference in using adjectives for relative and absolute comparisons between English and Vietnamese may stem from the linguistic characteristics and grammatical structures of each language. Below are some reasons that adjectives in Vietnamese cannot be used to express relative degrees of comparison. English has more flexible grammatical structures, allowing adjectives to be combined with comparative words such as "more" or "less" to express relative comparisons. Meanwhile, Vietnamese often does not use such grammatical structures but instead uses modifiers and words like "more than" and "less than". Comparative expressions can reflect specific cultural and linguistic concepts. In some cases, Vietnamese tends to use modifiers and phrases to express degree instead of using relative comparative adjectives. In Vietnamese, some adjectives can describe degrees without using relative comparisons. Using the words "very," "somewhat," "too" with adjectives is often enough to express degree without requiring exact comparison with a specific infinitive.

The difference in the way adjectives combine with adverbs between Vietnamese and English reflects some linguistic characteristics and grammatical structures of each language. In Vietnamese, adjectives have more flexibility when combined with adverbs. Adjectives can come both before and after adverbs, helping to create many different grammatical structures to express meaning. In English, adverbs often combine with adjectives in front to describe degree, while adjectives often come after the infinitive. This structure creates stability in the use of adjectives and adverbs.

For example:

"Quickly arrive" instead of "Arrive quickly".

"Beautifully strange" instead of "Strange beautifully".

The specific grammatical and linguistic structures of each language influence how adjectives combine with adverbs. Vietnamese has more flexibility in grammatical structure, allowing adjectives to stand in many different positions. Flexibility in adjective placement can reflect each language's way of expressing meaning and cultural style. Adjectives can be placed before or after to enhance meaning in a subtle and flexible way. Obviously, when combined with adverbs, adjectives in Vietnamese have the ability to combine before and after, thanks to which users can express their thoughts in a subtle way. While in English, it is only possible to combine adjectives with adverbs in front.

Discussion

Some scholars suggest that research on the issue of comparing synonyms between two different languages can focus on many different aspects of language and semantics (Vivas *et al.*, 2020; Barbara, 2021). They argue that each word in a language is not simply a linguistic unit, but also carries a specific semantic and usage range (Mao *et al.*, 2024). Studies highlight that comparing the semantics of synonyms in two languages can help better understand how concepts are expressed and understood in different language communities. I believe that the above statements are not completely accurate because comparative adjectives are used to express relative and absolute comparisons in both Vietnamese and English. Research can help understand the grammatical structure of adjectives in expressing comparisons. This includes the way adjectives combine with other adjectives and adverbs to create relative and absolute comparisons. We analyze the flexibility of adjectives in combining with other words, including the ability to place adjectives before and after adverbs, as well as the ability to choose adverbs to express degrees of comparison. In addition, we compare how adjectives are used to express comparisons in Vietnamese and English. This helps to understand the common features and differences between the two languages, evaluating how the grammatical structure and use of words in comparative adjectives has practical applications in texts, everyday communication, and linguistic culture. The research could have implications for developing natural language,

processing systems or translation tools to gain a deeper understanding of how language represents comparison. Also, create useful materials for teaching Vietnamese and English, helping learners and teachers clearly understand how to use adjectives in comparison. Thus, the purpose of this study focuses on exploring and understanding specific aspects of how adjectives are used to express comparisons in language.

Studies emphasize that the use of words such as "more," "less," "as," "very," "extremely" to express the degree of comparison in language is related to language structure, comparative syntax, and the way language expresses meaning (Pullum, 2020); (Raviv *et al.*, 2022). With this understanding, words like "more," "less," "as," "very," "extremely" are often used as adverbs to accompany adjectives or adverbs to express the degree of comparative degree (Szczygłowska, 2023; Davies *et al.*, 2023). The linguistic structure and syntax of comparison regulate how these words are used and placed in sentences to express the meaning of the degree of comparison.

The author believes that the above research is not convincing because words like "more" and "less" are used to increase or decrease the level, helping listeners or readers better understand the comparison between objects. In this study, the word "as" is often used to compare equality, especially when comparing equality in degree. For example: "as tall as" and "as smart as". Words like "very" and "extremely" are used to indicate a high degree, sometimes expressing extreme or exceptional. For example: "very fast" and "extremely talented". The use of these words can be a way to expand the language style, creating variety and richness in expressing the meaning of degree of comparison. Words like "very" and "extremely" can also be used to reflect the speaker's or writer's semantics and feelings about the comparison. They can express satisfaction, surprise, or high expectations. Obviously, there are some similar meanings between Vietnamese and English adjectives because both are influenced by Latin words. However, it also has a certain clear difference. This research can be applied to teaching and learning effectively.

4 Conclusion

Based on the survey of synonymous adjectives in Vietnamese and English in the corpus system, the author has found that there are some similarities and differences between the two languages. English adjectives have more vocabulary than Vietnamese adjectives. The grammatical system of English can facilitate the creation of many new vocabulary. Grammatical structure can promote flexibility and creativity in creating new words. The way to form synonyms in Vietnamese is not as varied as in English, including the combination of prefixes and suffixes. If the formation of synonyms in English consists of a set of different adjectives, in Vietnamese they are words that change the meaning of a central synonym in the sequence. Therefore, the level of synonymy of adjectives in Vietnamese is often lower than the level of synonymy in English.

From the comparison of synonyms in each language, we see that using synonyms in each language face certain difficulties. To solve that, it is necessary to discover and learn new vocabulary to replace synonyms. This helps expand vocabulary and create diversity in expressing meaning. Instead of relying on synonyms, consider using more complex grammatical structures to express comparative meanings. Consider using other expressions such as comparisons using words of degree such as "very", "quite", and "very much", to express differences without having to rely on personality synonym. Instead of focusing on finding synonyms, you can change the sentence structure to express your meaning more clearly. Using subordinate clauses or changing the position of sentence elements can help create variety in expression. The study of semantics and how words are used in specific contexts. A better understanding of the subtleties in using words will help you choose words that fit the context and desired meaning. It is necessary to consider how linguistic culture influences the use of comparative words and expressions. Mastering the language culture will help you use words flexibly and effectively. Practice using words and grammatical structures in your writing, speaking, or everyday conversations to improve your expression skills and make the learning process more natural.

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ⁱ Vo Tu Phuong, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0480-1387>

University of Khanh Hoa

PHD, University of Khanh Hoa, 01 Nguyen Chanh Street, Loc Tho Ward, Nha Trang City, Khanh Hoa Province, Vietnam

Authorship contribution: full drafting of the text

E-mail: votuphuong@ukh.edu.vn

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