COMMON ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION ERRORS AMONG VIETNAMESE FIRST-YEAR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS: A CONTRASTIVE PHONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

CÁC LỖI PHÁT ÂM TIẾNG ANH PHỔ BIẾN CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT KHỐI KHÔNG CHUYÊN NGỮ TẠI VIỆT NAM: PHÂN TÍCH ĐỐI CHIẾU ÂM VỊ HỌC

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ABSTRACT

This article reports common English pronunciation errors among 60 first-year non-English majors at the Academy of Journalism and Communication, with a focus on phonological interference from Vietnamese. Grounded in the contrastive analysis hypothesis and error analysis, the study examines both segmental and suprasegmental deviations in learners' speech. Data were collected through two tasks: a word list containing minimal pairs and a structured reading passage. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining auditory perceptual evaluation and acoustic analysis using Praat software. Inter-rater reliability was established using Cohen's Kappa ($\kappa = 0.82$), and statistical analysis was conducted to examine the distribution of error patterns. The findings indicate a high frequency of coda consonant deletion (75%) and substitution of dental fricatives /θ, ð/ (90%), largely reflecting L1 phonotactic constraints and gaps in the phonemic inventory. At the suprasegmental level, participants exhibited a predominantly syllable-timed rhythm, with limited vowel reduction and inconsistent stress placement, which may affect intelligibility. The study highlights the need for explicit pronunciation instruction and suggests integrating technology-enhanced tools, including AI-based feedback systems, to support individualized practice. These findings contribute to a better understanding of interlanguage phonology among Vietnamese EFL learners in non-specialist tertiary contexts.

Keywords: *Phonological interference, phonological error, English pronunciation, Vietnamese pronunciation, phonological transference.*

TÓM TẮT

Bài báo khảo sát các lỗi phát âm tiếng Anh phổ biến của 60 sinh viên năm nhất không chuyên tiếng Anh tại Học viện Báo chí và Tuyên truyền, tập trung vào hiện tượng can thiệp ngữ âm từ tiếng Việt. Dựa trên giả thuyết phân tích đối chiếu và phân tích lỗi, nghiên cứu xem xét các sai lệch ở cả cấp độ đoạn tính (segmental) và siêu đoạn tính (suprasegmental) trong lời nói của người học. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua hai nhiệm vụ: danh sách từ có chứa các cặp tối thiểu và một đoạn văn đọc có cấu trúc. Nghiên cứu áp dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp, kết hợp đánh giá cảm thụ thính giác và phân tích âm học bằng phần mềm Praat. Độ tin cậy giữa các giám khảo được xác định bằng hệ số Kappa của Cohen ($\kappa = 0,82$), đồng thời các phân tích thống kê được thực hiện để xem xét sự phân bố các kiểu lỗi. Kết quả cho thấy tần suất cao của hiện tượng lược bỏ phụ âm cuối (75%) và thay thế các âm xát răng /θ, ð/ (90%), chủ yếu phản ánh các ràng buộc âm vị học của tiếng mẹ đẻ và khoảng trống trong hệ thống âm vị. Ở cấp độ siêu đoạn tính, người học có xu hướng sử dụng nhịp điệu theo âm tiết, với mức độ giảm nguyên âm hạn chế và trọng âm chưa nhất quán; điều này có thể ảnh hưởng đến khả năng hiểu. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh sự cần thiết của việc giảng dạy phát âm rõ ràng, đồng thời đề xuất tích hợp các công cụ công nghệ, bao gồm hệ thống phản hồi phát âm dựa trên AI, nhằm hỗ trợ luyện tập cá nhân hóa. Những phát hiện này góp phần làm rõ hơn đặc điểm ngữ âm trung gian của người học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ trong bối cảnh giáo dục đại học khối không chuyên ngữ tại Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: *Can thiệp âm vị học, lỗi âm vị học, phát âm tiếng Anh, phát âm tiếng Việt, chuyển di âm vị học.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is widely recognized as a central component of communicative competence in second language acquisition (SLA), as it directly influences intelligibility and listener comprehension. Unlike grammatical or lexical errors, which may be subject to delayed processing or self-repair, phonological deviations occur in real time and can immediately disrupt communication. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, particularly in Vietnam, persistent pronunciation difficulties have been consistently reported despite extended periods of formal instruction.

At the tertiary level, this issue becomes especially salient among first-year non-English majors, who often demonstrate a noticeable discrepancy between their grammatical knowledge and phonological performance. This imbalance can be attributed, in part, to the traditional emphasis on form-focused instruction in Vietnamese EFL classrooms, where pronunciation is frequently treated as a peripheral skill. Consequently, learners tend to develop entrenched pronunciation patterns that are resistant to modification, a phenomenon commonly referred to as phonological fossilization.

From a typological perspective, the structural differences between Vietnamese and English phonological systems present substantial challenges for learners. Vietnamese is a tonal language characterized by relatively simple syllable structures and restricted consonant clusters, whereas English is a stress-timed language that permits complex syllable codas and relies heavily on vowel reduction and stress placement for meaning differentiation. These contrasts create favorable conditions for negative transfer, whereby learners systematically map unfamiliar English phonological features onto their existing L1 phonetic framework.

Although a considerable body of research has examined pronunciation errors among Vietnamese learners of English, several limitations remain. First, many studies adopt predominantly descriptive approaches without incorporating acoustic analysis to provide empirical phonetic evidence. Second, existing research has largely focused on English majors, leaving non-English majors underexplored despite their substantial presence in tertiary education. Third, relatively few studies have examined both segmental and suprasegmental features within a unified analytical framework. These gaps suggest the need for a more comprehensive investigation that integrates perceptual and acoustic perspectives in specific educational contexts.

In response to these limitations, the present study investigates pronunciation errors among first-year non-English majors at the Academy of Journalism and Communication (AJC). Drawing on the contrastive analysis hypothesis and error analysis, the study aims to: (1) Identify common segmental and suprasegmental errors in learners' spoken English; (2) Analyze these errors through a contrastive phonological framework to determine the extent of L1 influence. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

(1) What are the most frequent segmental and suprasegmental errors produced by the participants?

(2) To what extent can these errors be explained by structural differences between Vietnamese and English?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical framework: The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

The foundational theoretical framework of this study is the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), originally proposed by Lado [7]. CAH posits that the primary source of difficulty in second language acquisition arises from structural differences between the learner's first language (L1) and the target language (TL). According to Lado [7], linguistic elements that are similar to the L1 tend to be acquired with relative ease, whereas those that differ significantly are more likely to result in learning difficulties and errors.

In the Vietnamese context, Le [8] further emphasizes that contrastive linguistics serves as a predictive tool for identifying potential areas of interlanguage development. This is particularly relevant when considering the typological contrast between Vietnamese and English. Vietnamese, as a tonal and predominantly monosyllabic language, differs fundamentally from English, which is characterized by stress-timed rhythm and complex syllable structures. As a result, learners often simplify English phonotactic patterns to conform to the Consonant-Vowel (CV) structure typical of Vietnamese, leading to systematic instances of negative transfer [8].

However, while CAH provides a useful predictive framework, it has been criticized for its limited ability to account for all learner errors. Not all deviations can be directly attributed to L1 interference, suggesting the

need for complementary approaches that examine actual learner performance.

2.2. Error analysis and interlanguage phonology

To address the limitations of CAH, Error Analysis (EA), as proposed by Corder [4], offers a more empirical approach by systematically investigating learner output. Rather than relying solely on predictions, EA examines the nature and distribution of errors to better understand the underlying processes of second language acquisition. Within this framework, learner pronunciation is viewed as part of an evolving interlanguage system, which reflects both L1 influence and developmental processes. As noted by Corder [4], distinguishing between interlingual errors (resulting from L1 transfer) and intralingual errors (arising from overgeneralization of target language (TL) rules is essential for accurate diagnosis.

In the context of Vietnamese EFL learners, this distinction is particularly significant. While many pronunciation errors can be traced to phonological differences between Vietnamese and English, others may reflect universal learning strategies rather than direct L1 interference. Therefore, a combined CAH-EA approach enables a more comprehensive analysis by integrating both predictive and descriptive perspectives.

2.3. Structural contrasts and empirical evidence

A substantial body of research has identified several recurring areas of difficulty for Vietnamese learners of English, which can be broadly categorized into three major domains: syllable structure, segmental inventory, and prosody.

2.3.1. Syllabic structure and codas

Vietnamese phonotactics impose strict constraints on syllable structure, particularly in the syllable-final position. As described by Doan [6], Vietnamese syllables typically allow only a limited set of unreleased consonants in the coda position. In contrast, English permits complex consonant clusters (e.g., /-st/, /-mps/), which pose significant challenges for Vietnamese learners. Empirical studies by Tran and Nguyen [12] confirm that learners frequently resort to strategies such as coda deletion or epenthesis to accommodate these structures. Similarly, Roach [13] identifies consonant clusters as a major source of difficulty for learners whose L1 lacks such complexity, a finding further supported by Bui [2] in the Vietnamese tertiary context. However, much of the existing research in this area relies primarily on perceptual observation, with limited use of acoustic analysis to empirically validate these phonological patterns.

2.3.2. Segmental inventory

Another well-documented source of difficulty lies in the differences between the segmental inventories of Vietnamese and English. Nguyen [9] and Cao [3] highlight the absence of certain phonemes in Vietnamese, particularly interdental fricatives (/θ, ð/) and tense–lax vowel distinctions. As a result, learners often substitute these sounds with the closest equivalents available in their L1. Nguyen [10] further demonstrates that the acoustic space of Vietnamese vowels differs significantly from that of English, which contributes to persistent vowel substitution errors. Bui [2] also observes that even at the university level, learners struggle to maintain phonemic distinctions, suggesting that these errors are not easily resolved through exposure alone. Despite these insights, there remains a relative lack of studies that systematically combine perceptual and acoustic analyses to examine segmental deviations in Vietnamese EFL contexts.

2.3.3. Prosody and rhythm

Suprasegmental features represent an additional layer of complexity. Vietnamese, as a tonal language, relies on pitch variations at the syllable level to convey lexical meaning, whereas English utilizes stress and rhythm at the phrasal level. Thompson [15] and Doan [6] emphasize that this fundamental difference often leads to the transfer of syllable-timed rhythm into English, resulting in what is commonly described as "flat intonation" [15]. Furthermore, Nguyen and Newton [11] report that pronunciation instruction in Vietnam tends to prioritize segmental features while giving relatively limited attention to prosody. This imbalance contributes to a gap between learners' formal knowledge and their communicative performance. Nevertheless, empirical investigations into suprasegmental features remain comparatively underdeveloped, particularly in quantitative and acoustic analyses.

2.4. Modern trends: Intelligibility, ELF, and AI integration

In recent years, pronunciation research has increasingly shifted from a focus on native-like accuracy to intelligibility. Derwing and Munro [5] and Saito and Plonsky [14] argue that the primary goal of pronunciation instruction should be functional intelligibility rather than the elimination of a foreign accent. This perspective is

further supported by Walker [16], whose Lingua Franca Core framework prioritizes phonological features that are essential for effective international communication.

Alongside this shift, technological advancements have introduced new possibilities for pronunciation training. Avrianti et al. [17] highlight the growing role of artificial intelligence, particularly through automated speech recognition and large language models, in providing real-time, individualized feedback. Such tools have the potential to address limitations in traditional classroom instruction by enabling high-frequency, self-directed practice.

Despite these developments, research integrating these modern perspectives into specific educational and professional contexts in Vietnam remains lacking. In particular, non-English majors in fields such as journalism and communication have received relatively little attention, despite the importance of clear, intelligible speech for their future careers.

2.5. Research gap and justification

Taken together, the existing literature reveals several important gaps. First, many studies on Vietnamese EFL pronunciation remain predominantly descriptive and lack acoustic validation. Second, research has largely focused on English majors, leaving non-English majors underexplored. Third, there is limited integration of segmental and suprasegmental analysis within a unified framework. Finally, the application of emerging technologies, such as AI-based pronunciation tools, has not been sufficiently examined in context-specific settings.

In response to these limitations, the present study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of pronunciation errors among first-year non-English majors at the Academy of Journalism and Communication (AJC). By combining contrastive analysis, error analysis, and acoustic measurement, the study seeks to offer a more empirically grounded understanding of interlanguage phonology in this context, while also contributing to current discussions on intelligibility and technology-enhanced language learning.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a mixed-methods descriptive-analytic design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate pronunciation errors among Vietnamese EFL learners. Quantitative analysis focuses on the frequency and distribution of phonological errors, while qualitative analysis provides phonological explanations based on cross-linguistic contrasts between Vietnamese and English. The study is grounded in a combined theoretical framework of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and Error Analysis (EA), enabling both prediction and empirical verification of learner errors.

3.2. Participants

The participants consisted of 60 first-year non-English majors at the Academy of Journalism and Communication (AJC), selected through purposive sampling. All participants were native speakers of Vietnamese and had received at least 7 years of formal English instruction. Their proficiency level was estimated to range from A2 to B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). None of the participants had received formal training in phonetics or phonology at the tertiary level prior to the study, ensuring that their pronunciation reflected typical EFL learning conditions in Vietnam.

3.3. Research instruments

Two elicitation tasks were employed to collect both controlled and contextualized speech data:

(1) Word list task (controlled production): A list of 50 lexical items was constructed to target high-interference phonological features, including dental fricatives (/θ, ð/), liquid consonants (/l, r/), and tense-lax vowel contrasts (/iː, ɪ/). Minimal pairs were included to assess learners' ability to maintain phonemic distinctions.

(2) Reading passage (contextualized production): A 150-word passage entitled "The Academic Journey" was designed to elicit connected speech. The passage systematically incorporated complex consonant clusters (e.g., strength, asks, months) and inflectional endings (e.g., past tense -ed, plural -s) to examine pronunciation in a more naturalistic context.

3.4. Data collection procedure

Data were collected through individual audio recordings conducted in a quiet, controlled environment to ensure optimal sound quality. A high-quality digital recorder was used to capture participants' speech. Each participant completed both tasks in a single session. Prior to recording, participants were given a brief familiarization period to reduce hesitation and minimize reading-related disfluencies. All recordings were anonymized and coded for subsequent analysis.

3.5. Data analysis

The collected speech data were analyzed using a combination of perceptual and acoustic methods to ensure both analytical depth and methodological reliability.

3.5.1. Perceptual analysis

Two trained phonetics raters independently evaluated the recordings using a standardized coding scheme to identify and categorize segmental and suprasegmental errors. The analysis focused on error types such as coda deletion, consonant substitution, vowel neutralization, and stress misplacement.

Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, yielding a coefficient of $\kappa = 0.82$, which indicates a high level of agreement between the raters. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion to ensure consistency in the final dataset.

3.5.2. Acoustic analysis

To complement the perceptual findings, acoustic analysis was conducted using Praat software. A subset of representative tokens was selected for detailed measurement. The analysis focused on the following parameters: (i) Vowel duration (milliseconds): measured at the temporal midpoint of each vowel; (ii) Pitch contours (Hz): Extracted using the autocorrelation method to examine intonation patterns. These acoustic measurements provided empirical evidence for identifying deviations in vowel quality and prosodic features, particularly in relation to stress and rhythm.

3.5.3. Statistical analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were first used to calculate the frequency and percentage of each error type. To examine whether the observed error patterns were statistically significant, chi-square tests were conducted, with the level of significance set at $p < 0.05$. This enabled a more robust interpretation of the distribution of pronunciation errors across phonological categories.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Phonotactic constraints: The persistence of coda deletion

The analysis revealed that coda consonant production constitutes the most pervasive area of difficulty across both controlled and contextualized tasks. Approximately 75% of participants exhibited systematic deletion or incomplete realization of final consonants, particularly in plural markers and third-person singular verb forms. For instance, lexical items such as dreams were frequently produced as [driːm], indicating the omission of the final /z/. Chi-square analysis confirmed that the frequency of coda-related errors was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that this pattern is not incidental but reflects a consistent phonological tendency among the participants.

The high incidence of coda deletion can be primarily attributed to L1 phonotactic constraints. As described by Doan [6], Vietnamese syllable structure permits only a limited set of consonants in syllable-final position, most of which are unreleased. In contrast, English allows a wide range of coda consonants and complex clusters (e.g., /-sts/, /-mps/), which represent structurally marked configurations for Vietnamese learners.

From the perspective of the contrastive analysis hypothesis, this discrepancy leads to negative transfer, whereby learners simplify English syllable structures to conform to the canonical Consonant-Vowel (CV) pattern of Vietnamese [8]. This process is further supported by markedness theory, which predicts that learners tend to reduce complex or marked structures to less complex forms.

Importantly, these findings are consistent with previous studies on Vietnamese EFL learners, which report similar strategies such as coda deletion and epenthesis [2, 12]. However, the present study extends earlier research by providing both perceptual and statistically supported evidence, thereby reinforcing the systematic nature of this phonological process.

From an intelligibility perspective, the omission of grammatical morphemes encoded in final consonants (e.g., plural -s, past tense -ed) may significantly affect listener comprehension, particularly in contexts where morphological distinctions carry communicative weight.

4.2. Segmental deviations: Substitution of dental fricatives

A second major source of error was the production of the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, which showed an error rate of approximately 90% in the word-list task. The voiceless /θ/ was predominantly realized as [t], while the voiced /ð/ was commonly replaced by [d]. For example, thought was produced as [tɔːt], and the as [də]. This pattern was consistent across participants and tasks, indicating a stable substitution strategy rather than random variation.

The substitution of dental fricatives can be explained by the absence of these phonemes in the Vietnamese sound system [3, 9]. In line with CAH, learners are unable to directly map these unfamiliar sounds onto existing phonemic categories and therefore resort to phonetic approximation, selecting the closest articulatory equivalents available in their L1.

From an articulatory perspective, the production of /θ/ and /ð/ requires precise tongue placement between the teeth, a gesture that is not phonologically contrastive in Vietnamese. Consequently, learners substitute these sounds with alveolar stops [t] and [d], which share certain articulatory features but lack the fricative quality.

This substitution results in phonemic neutralization, whereby distinctions between words such as tree and three or day and they are effectively lost. Such neutralization has been widely documented in prior research [2], yet the present findings highlight its persistence even among tertiary-level learners.

From an intelligibility standpoint, while some substitutions may remain comprehensible in context, frequent neutralization can lead to ambiguity, particularly in professional settings that require precise articulation. This supports the argument that certain segmental features, including dental fricatives, remain relevant within the broader framework of intelligibility-oriented pronunciation teaching.

4.3. Suprasegmental deviations: Rhythmic transfer and reduced vowel contrast

In addition to segmental errors, the analysis revealed systematic deviations in suprasegmental features. A majority of participants exhibited a syllable-timed rhythm, characterized by relatively equal duration across syllables and limited vowel reduction. Acoustic analysis supported these observations, showing minimal variation in vowel duration between stressed and unstressed syllables. Furthermore, pitch contour analysis indicated relatively flat intonation patterns, with limited modulation across utterances. Errors in word-stress placement were also observed, particularly in multisyllabic words such as journalist, where stress was either misplaced or evenly distributed across syllables.

These suprasegmental deviations can be attributed to prosodic transfer from Vietnamese, a tonal language in which each syllable carries a distinct pitch contour and maintains relatively stable duration [6, 15]. In contrast, English relies on stress-timed rhythm, where stressed syllables are lengthened, and unstressed syllables are often reduced to schwa (/ə/).

The failure to implement vowel reduction and stress contrast results in a syllable-timed rhythm that differs markedly from native English patterns. This finding is consistent with previous studies highlighting the difficulty Vietnamese learners face in acquiring English prosody [11]. From an error-analysis perspective, these patterns may reflect both interlingual transfer and developmental factors, as learners gradually acquire prosodic features not present in their L1.

Importantly, research suggests that suprasegmental features play a crucial role in intelligibility. As noted by Derwing and Munro [5], deviations in rhythm and stress can impose a greater processing burden on listeners than segmental errors. The relatively flat intonation observed in this study may therefore reduce listener engagement and increase the effort required for comprehension, particularly in extended discourse.

4.4. Pedagogical implications and the intelligibility gap

The findings of this study indicate that the participants' interlanguage phonology is strongly shaped by L1 constraints across both segmental and suprasegmental levels. While learners demonstrate a functional command of grammatical structures, their pronunciation patterns reveal persistent deviations that may affect intelligibility.

This discrepancy points to an "intelligibility gap" between learners' current phonological competence and the communicative demands of real-world contexts. In particular, for students in journalism and communication, where clarity and precision of speech are essential, these phonological limitations may hinder effective message delivery.

In line with current trends in pronunciation research, the findings support a shift toward intelligibility-oriented instruction [5, 14, 16]. Rather than aiming for native-like pronunciation, pedagogical efforts should prioritize features that have the greatest impact on listener comprehension, including coda consonants, key segmental contrasts, and prosodic patterns.

Furthermore, consistent with recent developments in educational technology, integrating AI-based pronunciation tools offers a promising avenue for addressing these challenges. As highlighted by Avrianti et al. [17], such tools can provide immediate, individualized

feedback and facilitate high-frequency practice beyond the classroom. When combined with explicit phonological instruction, these technologies may help learners gradually overcome entrenched L1-influenced patterns and improve their overall intelligibility.

5. CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate common pronunciation errors among first-year non-English majors at the Academy of Journalism and Communication, with particular attention to the role of Vietnamese phonological interference. Drawing on the combined framework of the contrastive analysis hypothesis and error analysis, and supported by both perceptual and acoustic data, the study provides a comprehensive account of learners' interlanguage phonology at both segmental and suprasegmental levels.

The findings indicate that pronunciation errors are systematic rather than incidental, with three major areas of difficulty identified: (1) coda consonant deletion, (2) substitution of dental fricatives, and (3) deviations in stress and rhythm. These patterns can be largely explained by structural differences between Vietnamese and English, particularly in terms of syllable structure, phonemic inventory, and prosodic organization. The results thus confirm the continued relevance of L1 transfer in shaping learner pronunciation, while also highlighting the role of developmental factors in interlanguage formation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the existing literature by integrating contrastive analysis with empirical evidence from both perceptual judgments and acoustic measurements. In doing so, it addresses a gap in previous research, which has often relied on descriptive approaches without sufficient phonetic validation. Furthermore, by focusing on non-English majors in a specialized academic context, the study expands the scope of pronunciation research beyond traditionally examined learner populations.

Pedagogically, the findings underscore the need for a more balanced approach to pronunciation instruction in Vietnamese tertiary education. In particular, greater emphasis should be placed on features that have a direct impact on intelligibility, including coda consonants, key segmental contrasts, and suprasegmental patterns such as stress and rhythm. The results also support the integration of technology-enhanced learning tools, especially AI-based pronunciation systems, which can provide individualized feedback and facilitate sustained practice outside the classroom.

Despite these contributions, the study is not without limitations. The sample size is relatively limited and restricted to a single institutional context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the data were collected through controlled and semi-controlled tasks, which may not fully reflect spontaneous speech production. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal designs to examine the development of pronunciation over time. Further studies may also explore the effectiveness of AI-assisted pronunciation training in improving specific phonological features among Vietnamese learners.

In conclusion, this study highlights the persistent influence of L1 phonology on English pronunciation among Vietnamese learners and underscores the importance of adopting a more integrated, evidence-based approach to pronunciation teaching. By combining theoretical insight, empirical analysis, and pedagogical application, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of pronunciation development in EFL contexts.

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THÔNG TIN TÁC GIẢ

Lương Bá Phương

Học viện Báo chí và Tuyên truyền