

Analysis of EFL Students' Mistakes Towards Negation Structures in English

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ABSTRACT

In the field of linguistics, negative structures seem to be a universal topic of research. There have been numerous studies conducted on the grammatical mistakes associated with negative constructions. Nonetheless, researchers discovered that there are just a few research that has looked at mistakes from semantic and pragmatic perspectives. Explicitly, the goal of this research was to identify and analyze the mistakes that EFL students often make while interpreting negative English structures, as well as the factors that contribute to these errors. Notably, 220 students from four universities in Ho Chi Minh City took part in the survey research. The data was gathered via online questionnaires, which were then evaluated using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The findings revealed that EFL students made a variety of errors when it came to recognizing and using negative structures in semantic and pragmatic contexts, depending on their level of proficiency. As a result, several recommendations are made regarding the teaching and learning of these structures in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: *Negation structure, error analysis, semantic and pragmatic aspects, EFL students.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the fact that it is a necessary part of daily communication, negation is a universal language concept. As a result, logicians, philosophers, and linguists have been fascinated by the notion of negation in natural language for centuries now. So far as it is known, negation is in opposition to affirmation in most situations. Every language has its own negation particles/operators or alternative expressions. There has been a plethora of research conducted throughout the years on a variety of various elements of negation. Klima [1] examined negation in the English language, Horn [2] investigated metalinguistic negation and pragmatic ambiguity, Horn [3] provided a natural history of negation, and Horn [4], with his work on the expression of negation, completed the line of research. In recent years, much attendant has been given to the structure of negation sentences or principles of negation. Especially, negation structures in English were researched in syntactic – structures interface. From that point, the results of syntactic–structure studies were applied in teaching English.

For the purpose of contributing to the theory and practice of English negation structures, this study will

investigate and discover the causes of errors made by EFL students in understanding and applying English negative structures in order to assist EFL students better understanding the significance of the english negative structures as well as teachers effectively apply them to EFL classes in HCMC universities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Error analysis

Recently, several academics in the area of second language acquisition became intrigued by error analysis as a topic of research. Those who have studied the analysis of errors, such as [5], have stated that it is a technique for analyzing errors produced by EFL and ESL learners while learning a language. It is possible to detect linguistic problems and requirements of second language learners by looking at their mistakes as they go through the language learning process.

2.2. Negation structures in English

2.2.1. Definition of Negation

There are several definitions of negation offered by logicians and linguists. According to Horn [2], all human communication systems include a representation of negation. No animal communication

system contains negative utterances, and therefore none has a mechanism for assigning truth value, lying, irony, or dealing with incorrect or contradictory assertions. Then, Horn [4] affirms ‘*what makes us human, imbuing us with the capacity to deny, to contradict*’.

2.2.2. Types of Negation

According to Karen [6], the type of negation was summarized in below table:

Table 1. Types of negation.

		n’t/not	not	non-	un-/in-/dis-/a-
	External negation	Internal negation			
Klima		Sentence negation	Constituent negation		
Frege	Propositional negation				
Aristotle		Predicate denial	Predicate term negation		
Horn/Dahl				Morphological/ lexical negation	
Jespersen		Nexal negation	Special negation		

2.3. Semantics and Pragmatics aspects

2.3.1. Presupposition

According to Richard [7], from the standpoint of pragmatics, the presupposition is what a speaker or writer thinks the recipient of the message already knows. It implies that both the speaker and the listener are aware of the shared background knowledge (presupposed information). As per To [8], presuppositions may be used to convey information indirectly, and after a discussion has concluded, we might discover that certain facts given to us are not explicitly stated, which are referred to as presuppositions. All of these definitions convey the key presuppositional features clearly. In this research, a presupposition is a generic information that is always the same when describing the same condition of an affair, even if it is stated in different negation phrases, and a negation sentence/utterance includes at least one presupposition.

2.3.2. Implicature

Grice [9] uses the term "conversational implicature" to describe the process of becoming implicated in a conversation. Following that line of reasoning, he asserts that the "cooperative principle" is applicable to the "conversational implicature." The cooperation principle consists of the following elements: quality, quantity, relation and manner. When engaging in conversation, this concept of collaboration must be maintained; yet, in practice, the use of language often breaches it and has ramifications for the participants. The term "implication" refers to what the listener

requires to infer for himself from a speech in order to correctly and completely grasp the meaning of that utterance.

2.3.3. Speech-act

A speech act may be characterized in a number of different ways. According to Hurford and Heasley [10], many acts may be accomplished via the use of words, which goes against common perception. As another example, Richard [7] defines a speech act as a functional unit of communication consisting of an utterance. To get an exact conception about speech-act, Peccei [11] gives the following linguistic expressions typically related to various types of speech-acts:

Table 2. Types of speech acts.

Speech-act category	Typical expression
Declarations	Declarative structure (with the speaker as subject and a performative verb in simple present tense)
Representatives	Declarative structure

Expressives	Declarative structure with words referring to feelings
Directives	Imperative sentence
Rogatives	Interrogative sentence
Commissives	Declarative structure

2.3.4. Sentence Meaning and Ambiguity

In general, ambiguity refers to the existence of several potential meanings in a word, phrase, clause, or sentence. There are two kinds of ambiguity in speech and writing. To [8] asserts that ambiguity has two levels: structural ambiguity and linguistic ambiguity. When a structure allows for more than one interpretation, it is said to be structurally ambiguous. Syntactic ambiguity, on the other hand, refers to any ambiguity arising from the ambiguity of a word.

2.3.5. Double Negation

Robert Lowth [12] states that "two negatives in English either destroy each other or are equal to an affirmative." According to Horn [13], "the expectation that two negatives would cancel out is a linguistic expression of the logical Law of Double Negation, $\sim(\sim a) = a$."

2.4. Related studies

Up to this point, research has been conducted throughout the globe to study the analysis of EFL students' English errors. Some research focused on analyzing student faults in writing negative phrases or interpreting negation, as well as grammatical problems, among other things.

Mita and Herlina [14], for example, identified the cause of students' mistakes in writing negative sentences in the simple present tense and simple present continuous tense and discovered 10 types of errors committed by students. Federico and Bonnie [15] find manual error analysis in interpreting negation in their research. This research demonstrated that human error analysis on a Chinese-to-English translation, and it is a collection of semantic components involved in the meaning of negative (like cue, event and scope). Sermsook, Liamnimitr, and Pochakorn [16] investigated the types of mistakes made by Thai EFL students in written English sentences. These authors discovered that mistakes at the sentence and word levels often occurred in Thai EFL students' written texts.

In light of these prior investigations, the present study focused on mistake analysis and English negation sentences. The present research sought to examine the strategies used by EFL students in acquiring English negation statements.

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

This study seeks to detect EFL students' errors with negation structures in English in the higher education setting in HCMC, in line with the present context and the gap in the theoretical foundation. As a result, the study question is:

What are the errors made by EFL students at HCMC institutions when it comes to negation structures in English?

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Settings

This study was carried out at four universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, namely Hoa Sen University, Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City, University of Economics and Finance, and Van Lang University. Hoa Sen University was the primary research institution, while the other three universities were secondary research institutions.

4.2. Participants

The participants of the study were 221 English-major students in their second academic years at Hoa Sen University, Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City, University of Economics and Finance and Van Lang University, consisting of 164 females and 55 males. These students were recruited for the following reasons: (a) since they major in English, their English proficiency may range from intermediate to advanced levels; (b) as sophomores, they had at least 1 year of training with the English language programs in the universities.

4.3. Research design

For the purpose of gathering information, a survey was used in the current study. According to Leedy and Ormrod [17], the use of surveys is a method for collecting information from individuals in order to learn about their characteristics, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences. As per Brewer [18], surveys are often used in education since they may provide valuable feedback that can be used in the classroom. Beyond these factors, the survey technique was chosen for the current study because it provides for uniform evaluation. In particular, it contributes to the provision of similar information [19]. In addition, the author

emphasizes that a particular purpose survey may provide information that is required for the study's objectives to be accomplished. The purpose of this research is to perform a survey study, which has been determined to be appropriate, in order to collect responses to the specific structure in English questions.

4.4. Research instrument

Questionnaires were employed as the main research instrument in this study due to the nature of the survey and the aim of the investigation. It is possible to collect information from a large number of students' knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs on a certain scale using a questionnaire designed for that purpose [20-21]. According to Dörnyei [22], questionnaires are comprised of inventories, tests, batteries, checklists, scales, surveys, schedules, indices, or indicators. In addition, questionnaires may be used to collect information. In applied linguistics, creating prompts from the theory is the ideal approach since evaluating published ideas may lead to the extension or modification of those theories, which is beneficial to both parties. As a result, this approach is advantageous since it enables for testing of the theory's implications.

There were eight questions in this questionnaire that were intended to evaluate the EFL students' prior knowledge of negation structures from a semantic-syntactic standpoint. In the following section, seven questions were created to assist EFL students in determining their background in pragmatic views such as implicature, presupposition, and speech-act. There were no single-answer questions. All were multiple choice. The questions were presented in both Vietnamese and English to ensure that the students understood what was being asked.

5. FINDINGS

5.1. Understanding the meanings of negation structures

Table 3: Data on errors of sentence meaning.

Types of error	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Errors of sentence meaning			
Double negation	143/222	64.4%	4
Q1	159/222	71.6%	1
Q7			

Negation meaning	41/222	18.5%	12
Q5	56/222	25.2%	9
Q6	69/222	31.1%	7
Q8	154/222	69.4%	2
Q11 (translating)			
Irony			
Q13	43/222	19.4%	11
Q14	99/222	44.6%	6
Ambiguity			
Q2	36/222	16.2%	14

Table 3 displays statistics on sentence meaning mistakes. Questions 5, 6, 8, and 11 focus on students' knowledge of paraphrased sentences. The data analysis shows that a large proportion of individuals grasp sentence meaning through paraphrasing. An overwhelming majority of EFL students (81.4 percent in question 5, 74.7 percent in question 6, and 68.9 percent in question 8) can distinguish between negation and affirmation sentences. However, question 11 was challenging since it requires students to translate an English sentence into Vietnamese while maintaining the sense. This issue necessitates that students not only have a strong command of the English language but also of Vietnamese.

Question 11: "Our director won't be back from his business trip until Saturday";

- a) Đến thứ bảy, ông giám đốc mới đi công tác về.
- b) Ông giám đốc đi công tác mãi đến thứ bảy mới về.
- c) Ông giám đốc sẽ không đi công tác về cho tới ngày thứ bảy.

The three sentences above have distinct meanings when translated into Vietnamese. For example, " Ông giám đốc đi công tác mãi đến thứ bảy mới về " indicates "late" regarding the director's return, while "mãi...mới" in Vietnamese means highlighting what has already occurred, implying "it's too late." The translation " Ông giám đốc sẽ không đi công tác về Cho tới ngày thứ bảy " maintains the negative connotation of the English sentence, but it is an awkward sentence with a forced structure in Vietnamese. As a result, the correct translation is "Đến thứ bảy, ông giám đốc mới đi công tác về" whose negative meaning, despite the loss of the negative marker (not), may still be emphasized. To Vietnamese native speakers, the "return" timeframe has the most natural form. Due to the complexity of the question, only approximately 30% of students can respond

properly, obtaining a very low rate when compared to the questions before, which solely queried in English.

On the comprehending double negation sentence, the data likewise indicates that only 79 out of 221 students (35,7%) misinterpreted "nobody has nothing to eat" as "everyone has something to eat." The majority of participants (47,5%) believed that "everyone doesn't have something to eat." "Nobody" and "nothing" are absolute negators that, when combined with a predicate, form a double negation sentence with an affirmative meaning. When two negative words are used in the same statement, it is referred to as double negation. If the two negative words are referring to the same item, they cancel each other out, resulting in a positive message. This is perplexing, and it is a big blunder if students are in a formal setting. Question 7 in the questionnaire likewise refers to a double negation sentence, and the results indicate that only 63 out of 221 students had the correct response. As a result, this is the problem with EFL students' negation structural reading.

Question 13 and 14 of the questionnaire are on the figure of speech – negation irony. With question 13, the sentence: "He is a little...somewhat...not extraordinarily brilliant" indicates that the individual in question is "not exceptionally bright"; the speaker first intended to imply that person was a fool, but changed his mind and finally rephrased it more nicely. Analysis of student's answers for question 13 shows that 179 out of 221 students (80,6%) have the answer "he is an idiot".

However, on question 14, only 123 out of 221 (55,4%) respondents get the correct answer, owing to a mix-up between negation irony and metaphor or descriptive meaning.

Structural ambiguity is most common at the finite clause level, as in the sentence in Question 2. The meaning of the sentence "Bob didn't write to Sue yesterday" was recognized by stress or emphatic; nevertheless, the meaning of this sentence belongs to a word or phrase in the scope of negation marker "not." There are many ways to understand a referring expression:

- a) Bob didn't write to Sue yesterday (but he phoned her)
- b) Bob didn't write to Sue yesterday (but he wrote to Ann)
- c) Bob didn't write to Sue yesterday (but he wrote this morning)

The results indicate that EFL students have a high proportion of correctly comprehending this negation

structure (83,8 %), indicating that ambiguity in this kind of negation sentence may be addressed with the aid of textual context; context is required to determine the purpose of the statement.

5.2. Understanding the utterance meaning

Table 4: Data on errors of utterance meaning

Type of error	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Errors of utterance meaning			
Presupposition			
Q3	38/222	17.1%	13
Q4	55/222	24.8%	10
Implicature			
Q9	25/222	11.3%	15
Q10	60/222	27.0%	8
Speech-act			
Q12	139/222	62.6%	5
Q15	149/222	67.1%	3

Table 4 contains information on utterance meaning errors. Answers to questions 3 and 4 are intended to test the presupposition in a negation utterance. In most cases, the fact serves as the assumption. The factual assumption is present in both "I was unaware that she was married" in question 3 and "He didn't regret not reserving the trip in advance" in question 4, which are both true. Obviously, the use of a negation structure to aid in the fact of a statement expresses the speaker's strong commitment to the truth of the proposition. It implies that the speaker acknowledges that the condition of things described in the proposition is correct; for example, the negation utterance of question 3 is correct in that "she was married," and the negation utterance of question 4 is correct in that "he did not book the ticket in advance."According to the results of the study, a vast number of EFL students in question 3 (82,9 %) and question 4 (75,2 %) correctly answered the question.

Question 9 and question 10 were designed to test the knowledge of the implicature. According to the results of the data analysis, the proportion of correct answers is likewise very high (88,7% in question 9 and 73% in question 10).

Question 14 and question 15 are meant to evaluate the comprehension of negation structural implicature.

The results of the data analysis indicate a surprising proportion of the importance of negation reading in a real-world setting.

Question 12 asked participants to identify several kinds of speech-act of denial structures that they had heard in a discussion. The reality is that B uses indirect means to hide the true cause for his divorce from his ex-wife. As a result, this is very expressive. The responses to Question 12 of the questionnaire are shown in the illustration below. Almost all students confuse B's behavior as being either representational or expressive in nature.

6. DISCUSSION

Although there are numerous linguistic theories concerning negation, there are few research that applies these ideas to the area of English language education. As a result, the aim of this research is to identify the errors that EFL students undertake while employing negation structures in two aspects of pragmatics and semantics, utilizing existing theories in conjunction with certain practical investigations on negation (but in other dimensions).

Several implications for learning and teaching negation structure may be derived from the results, including the following: Students at HCMC University may not be aware of how to utilize semantic and pragmatic aspects in an effective manner, despite the fact that they have studied them in regular English classes. In general, comprehending negation structure is dependent on negation markers or particles; nevertheless, the fact that negation is semantically and pragmatically complex does not seem to be as straightforward as basic negation.

According to the statistics, the group of semantic mistakes that students make the most often include double negation, ironic negation, ambiguity negation, and other similar errors. It is mostly presupposition recognition mistakes that cause utterance meaning errors. Other types of utterance meaning errors include conversational implication errors and speech-act errors. It is not only monotonous but also fundamentally interoperable between negation markers and operators, quantifiers, and adverbs, thus increasing the scope of ambiguity in the sentences. It is the concept of integrating the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of denial in a single sentence or phrase. Those are the points to remember while teaching negative sentence construction in English, both in terms of semantics and pragmatics.

The major drawback of the research is there are not many prior studies to draw on. Thus the findings only indicate the learners' mistake in solving the issue, and

there are not much relevant data to verify. It is anticipated that more researchers would become interested in the area of applied linguistics in general and negation in particular in order to conduct more varied studies. Furthermore, research on negation translation in the pragmatic and semantic elements of the English-Vietnamese comparison should be conducted.

7. CONCLUSION

The results of this research specified the important consideration for teaching negation structures at EFL class. Both semantics and pragmatics perspectives are necessary for EFL students to understand and learn English negation structures. After conducting a survey by means of questionnaires, error analysis and the fundamental content of negation structure have been formed and will be used in EFL class.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Nuong Nguyen Thuy is currently a Linguistics lecturer and Ph.D. student at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. Her interests are Theoretical linguistics, Syntax, Vietnamese syntax, Vietnamese morphology; Semantics and Pragmatics, and Applied linguistics. Her have about 10 years experience as a position lecturer teaching Vietnamese and Linguistics.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Part of this paper was supported by the Linguistics Faculty, University of Social Sciences & Humanities, Vietnam National University -Ho Chi Minh City and the ELT Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Hoa Sen University.

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