

SOME COMMON MISTAKES OF USING NEGATIVE SENTENCES ENCOUNTERED BY EFL STUDENTS AT QUANG BINH UNIVERSITY (QBU)

MỘT SỐ LỖI SỬ DỤNG CÂU PHỦ ĐỊNH THƯỜNG GẶP CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGỮ TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC QUẢNG BÌNH

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Abstract: *The purpose of learning English is to communicate in the language. In order to communicate well, the learners need to be aware of the language form and meaning and the way they are interconnected. English negative sentences are very complicated, which causes to EFL students many mistakes and difficulties. This paper focuses on finding out some common mistakes that EFL students in QBU may encounter within using negative sentences and expressing negation in attempt to help them to get more knowledge about negative sentences and use negative sentences more correctly and effectively.*

Key words: *Mistakes, negative sentences, EFL students.*

Tóm tắt: *Mục đích của học tiếng Anh là để giao tiếp. Nhằm giao tiếp hiệu quả, người học cần phải ý thức được đầy đủ cả mặt nghĩa và hình thức của ngôn ngữ cũng như cách thức mà chúng được kết hợp với nhau. Câu phủ định trong tiếng Anh rất phức tạp và gây cho sinh viên chuyên ngữ rất nhiều khó khăn và lỗi sai trong quá trình sử dụng. Bài báo này tập trung vào tìm hiểu và phân tích các lỗi sai thường gặp của sinh viên chuyên ngữ tại Trường Đại học Quảng Bình khi sử dụng câu phủ định nhằm giúp cho họ có thêm kiến thức sâu sắc về câu phủ định và biết cách sử dụng chúng hiệu quả và chính xác hơn.*

Từ khóa: *Lỗi, câu phủ định, sinh viên chuyên ngữ.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As a teacher who is writing, grammar and semantics, I find out that English negative sentences are very complicated, which causes to EFL students many mistakes and difficulties. In theoretical and practical aspect, it seems that many Vietnamese learners when expressing negative ideas in English, they are sometime affected by their mother tongue's rules, therefore often encounter some problems and produce such grammatical and semantical mistakes. For example:

In Vietnamese we have these sentences:

(1) - Hôm qua bạn không đi đến buổi tiệc à?

- Không, có chứ. Tôi có đi đến buổi tiệc mà.

(2) - Không bao giờ tôi tin bạn.

(3) - Tôi sẽ ở lại đây không lâu.

When being translated into English by some English learners, these sentences are sometimes translated like that:

(1) - *Didn't you go to the party*

yesterday?

- *No, I did. I went to the party.*

(2) *Never I will believe you.*

(3) *I will stay here not long.*

Whereas the true sentences in these cases must be:

(1) *No, I didn't. I didn't go to the party*

(2) *Never will I believe you.*

(3) *I won't stay here long.*

These mistakes are the result of interferences between mother tongue and English. English learners tend to apply their mother tongue's grammar rules and meanings to build these English sentences, therefore lead the misuse in negative sentences' structures and meanings. According to an article entitled, "Negation in English: a corpus-based study" by Richard Xiao and Tony McEnery, "Negation is an important concept not only in logic and philosophy but also in language. The linguistic concept of negation is even more sophisticated than that in philosophy or logic because it involves meaning as well as form". For that reason, this project is expected to examine the common features of English negative sentences and find out some common mistakes that EFL students in QBU may encounter within using negative sentences and expressing negation in attempt to help them to get more knowledge about negative sentences and use negative sentences more correctly and effectively.

2. STUDENTS' COMMON MISTAKES IN USING NEGATIVE SENTENCES

The results from the test made by 50 EFL students at QBU languages showed

that they still encountered many mistakes in using negative sentences.

Based on the test, we have the following categories errors encountered by EFL students:

- Error 1: Word order
- Error 2: Subject and Verb Inversion
- Error 3: Form and meaning
- Error 4: Agreement between Subjects and Verbs, and contraction forms of verbs
- Error 5: Adjuncts
- Other errors: Double negation, answers to yes-no questions, etc...

2.1. Word order

As mentioned before, the differences between English and Vietnamese negative sentences have caused EFL students much interference. When studying English negative sentences, EFL students seem to apply some grammar rules of Vietnamese negative sentences to English ones, thus cause some mistakes unintentionally as wrong word order.

These errors are the cause of the interference between English and Vietnamese word order. They had applied word order in Vietnamese to produce English sentences. However, word order in English and Vietnamese is rather different.

Unlike *Not* in English, which is rarely used immediately before an adverbial of manner or an intensifier, which is the focus of negation, Vietnamese negator *Không* is normally put immediately before it. This accounts for the fact that Vietnamese students sometimes produce English

negative sentences with **Not** coming immediately an adjunct of manner.

Sentence 1: *I speak English not well.*

Whereas the right sentence must be:

- *I do not speak English well.*

The same thing is true for some adverbials of frequency:

Sentence 2: *I will stay here not long.*

Whereas the right sentence must be:

- *I will not stay here long.*

It is surprising that there are 50% second-year students encountered this error while first year students are lesser with 36%.

2.2. Subject and Verb Inversion

The differences in English and Vietnamese negative sentences also lead students to committing errors of Subject and Verb Inversion.

In English, when negative elements as adverb (never, little, hardly, only, scarcely, barely, seldom...) or determiner (few, rare, few, only...), are put initially, they require subject-verb inversion, whereas in Vietnamese the inversion

between subject and verb never takes place. This difference has caused the error to the EFL students. When producing English negative sentences with initial negative adverbials or determiners, they often forget to inverse subject and verb.

The results from the items in the test have proved that this error is very common among students at both levels. When being ask to decide which sentences are true among these following sentences:

1. *Never I will believe you.*

2. *Never will I believe you.*

3. *Little information you will get from him.*

4. *Little information will you get from him.*

Indeed, regardless of levels, there is a considerable number of students still encounter the error of subject and verb inversion. The reason for this is the differences of grammar rules between English and their mother tongue.

2.3. Form and meaning

Table 1: Error 3: Form and meaning

| Sentences | University course 58 (20) | | University course 58 (20) | |
|---|------------------------------|----|------------------------------|----|
| | No | % | No | % |
| 1. He is little known, is he? | 16 | 32 | 21 | 42 |
| 2. You went nowhere, didn't you? | 3 | 6 | 3 | 6 |
| 3. No one listens to me, doesn't he? | 10 | 20 | 14 | 28 |
| 4. Do it now, don't you? | 9 | 18 | 10 | 20 |
| 5. Let's go, shan't we? | 10 | 20 | 16 | 32 |
| 6. "Didn't you do the exercises?" - No, I did or Yes, I did not. | 13 | 26 | 5 | 10 |

From the data collected, error of form and meaning is the most common error that EFL students encounter. In many cases, instead of expressing negative meaning, they use positive one and vice versa. This error may result from the misuse of semi-negative words, of the form of finite verb, of the form of subject... Another reason leads the EFL students to committing this error is the interference of form and meaning between English and Vietnamese. Some cases only exist in English and vice versa, thus make the EFL students confused.

2.4. Adjuncts

One more error that EFL students have when using negative sentences is adjuncts. It is not a common error, however, does still exist. The result from the questionnaire pointed out that there are 40% of students committing this error. This proved that this error is worth of analyzing and should be concerned about.

In this category, the most common mistake can be found in the first item: “*I am not little worried*”. “Little” as well as “few” are indefinite quantifiers of adjuncts of intensifiers in English. They themselves are negative and are never negated. Therefore, “*few*” and “*little*” cannot be used with another negator (*not*, *no*, etc.) but their counterparts in Vietnamese can be. However, their comparative forms can be used after *no* or *not* (*no fewer*, *not less than*). A few and a little can be used after *not* (*not a few*, *not a little*). Hence, a passive transfer from Vietnamese may result in such

unacceptable sentences as sentence: “*I am not little worried*” (correct sentence: *I am not a little worried*).

The second case in this error category is in the second item: “*He always does not keep his promise*.” This sentence seems to be the most basic and easiest one to the EFL students; however, the data collected was very surprised. There are still 20 EFL students out of 50 EFL students using this sentence instead of the correct one: “*He never keeps his promise*”. This basic error results from their misuse of adjuncts of high frequency like *always*, *constantly*, *continually*...

As mentioned before, in both English and Vietnamese, in most cases, adjuncts are positioned before the negator if they are outside the scope of negation, or after it if they are the focus of negation. However, English of high frequency never precede a negative predicator, whereas their counterparts in Vietnamese (*luôn luôn*, *bao giờ cũng*...) do. Therefore, the correct sentence in this case must be “*He never keeps his promises*”.

2.5. Agreement between Subjects and Verbs, and contraction forms of verbs

The agreement between negative subjects and their finite verbs is quite a problem to Vietnamese learners since some of them takes a singular verb (***nothing***, ***nobody***, ***no book***), some takes a plural one (*no books*), some other take either a singular or plural verb (***none***, ***neither Hai nor Lan***). In negative sentences, ***neither*** as a negative determiner is followed by a singular countable noun and hence takes a

singular verb. *Neither* can also be followed by one of + pronoun. When *neither* functions as an indefinite pronoun, it also takes a singular verb or in formal style, it takes a plural one when used as subject. Therefore, item 1: “Neither of these pens are mine” is a wrong sentence, and the correct one must be “neither of these pens is mine”.

The similar rule is also applied to the determiner *No*, however it is rather more complicated. *No* as an indefinite determiner can be used before a singular countable noun, a plural countable noun, and non-countable noun. When functioning as subject, *no* with singular nouns take singular verb forms and those with plural nouns take plural verbs, thus requires a carefulness of learners in using appropriately verb form and subject. Item 2 is a typical example. In this sentence: “There is no books to read”, *no* goes with a plural noun, so requires a plural form of the verb “to be” (are) not singular one. Consequently, in the sentences that have determiner *No* or *Neither*, it is often very confusing for the Vietnamese learners to use correctly agreement between subjects and verbs. In fact, there are 46% of students having wrong answers in this category.

2.6. Double negation and non-assertive words

The last error category caused by EFL students is the misuse of double negation and non-assertive words. The percentage of wrongly doing in this category is lower than the others are, however, that does not mean that every EFL

students did correctly.

There are 16 EFL students having error in the sentence “She is not not happy.” This error results from the double negation, which is unfamiliar in English, but very common in Vietnamese as mentioned before. Because of interference from Vietnamese, EFL students are likely to create sentences with double negatives which sound very odd in English like sentence “*She is not not happy.*” In English, to express double negation, people use an adjective or adverb with a negative prefix or suffix. Therefore, sentence “*She is not not happy*” must be changed to “*She is not unhappy.*”

Another error discussed in this category is shown in item 2 “Either book is not mine.” When the EFL students were asked to choose whether sentence “*Either book is not mine*” or sentence “*Neither book is mine*” is true, 20% of EFL students chose the first one whereas the true sentence must be the second. The misuse of non-assertive words in the sentence caused this error. English non-assertive words (*either, any, some*) never precede the negator in the negative sentences except when they are post modified (*Anyone who knew that would be killed*), while most English non-assertive forms can behave so with combination with the particle *cũng* (*ai/ người nào cũng không, đâu/ nơi nào cũng không...*)

3. CONCLUSION

Negative sentences in English is very complicated, especially some inversions and forms that Vietnamese negative

sentences do not have. Teacher's duty, at that time, is to give students some comparisons between English negative sentences and its counterpart in the Vietnamese ones. To help them realize differences quickly, sometimes teachers should give students some chance to distinguish or compare some kinds of negators, negative adjuncts etc...in both English and Vietnamese so that students themselves can develop their memory and creativeness in learning. "Contrastive analyses of features of both languages" is always a necessary skill for students in learning English. To my opinion, this skill should be concerned about, and taught as a subject in university so that students can be more active and creative in their studying.

Moreover, as for many people, learning English is a bit for not only the beginners but also the advanced students. While mastering English they cannot avoid making mistakes. Whenever they make

mistakes, they often feel disappointed and less confident. So generally speaking, teachers should encourage students frequently. The students' effort alone cannot be the most effective as expected unless there is help from teachers in the process of teaching. In class, students are encouraged to talk freely whatever they like, write whatever they think; however, teachers should be a supervisor and correct mistakes for them if necessary.

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