

Analysis of Negative Sentence in English Teaching and Learning

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Abstract: A grammatical category—negative sentence was identified in the article; It explained why it is problematic for my EFL/ESL students, in terms of form, meaning and use and finally discussed its pedagogic implications in the EFL/ESL class.

Keywords: Negative sentence; EFL/ESL learners; Pedagogy

1. Introduction

Negative sentence belongs to the field of negation in English grammar, which is to the means of constructing negative rather than affirmative simple English sentences. Since negative sentence is a very frequently and widely used grammatical category in English, it is one of the beginning grammatical phenomena for the EFL/ESL learners. Yet due to the different linguistic knowledge of the learners' L1, negative sentence may present much of a problem to non-native speakers. Many of the Chinese L1 students will find syntactic negation difficult, especially at beginning level. In fact, without sufficient contextual knowledge and practice of the target language, even some intermediate or advanced learners may find difficulty in keeping accurate and appropriate when using negative sentences. The greatest difficulty lies in handling the inter-connectedness between its syntactic patterns, semantics and pragmatics.

2. What makes the negative sentence problematic?

The analysis is based on Larsen-Freeman's three dimensions' framework^[1](Larsen-Freeman 2003&2001), in which grammar entails three dimensions: form, meaning and use interacting with each other. (see figure 1)

2.1 Form

Not is the main sentence-level negator. It is usually placed after the auxiliary verbs and the *be* copula. Yet due to the reason different languages tend to place their negative particle in different positions in the sentence^[2] (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia 1999). The EFL/ESL learners may find difficulty in placing *not* in the right place. Take mandarin as an example, the negator '不' (*bu*) is usually put before the verbs, which is contrary to English. The Chinese L1 learners, especially at the beginning level sometimes may write a sentence like 'I not am a student'. When *not* is used with other main verbs other than *be* and there is no other operator

in a negative sentence, the auxiliary verb *do* will be inserted to perform the function of operator, to carry the tense and permit the negative to attach to it. This may be another challenge for Chinese L1 learners. The reason is in mandarin there is no such a rule to introduce an auxiliary verb to form a negative sentence. When a negative sentence is formed, the word '不' (*bu*) or '没' (*mei*) is enough to function as the negator. Therefore, Chinese students may sometimes forget to insert the auxiliary verb *do* before *not*.

2.2 Meaning

There are two meanings of negation in English: rejection and denial (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia 1999), which are quite similar in Chinese. Most of the Chinese students find no problems understanding them. Yet the difficulty lies in handling the relationship between form and meaning. Sometimes the same surface structure has two meanings; to distinguish one from the other depends on the scope and focus of negation. For example, the sentence "I didn't leave home because I was afraid of my father." may either mean "Because I was afraid of my father, I didn't leave home." or "I left home, but it wasn't because I was afraid of my father that I did so." However, the way we understand the scope and focus of the sentence may be determined by some other factors such as the speaker's intonation and even the specific context. For most of the Chinese students, who may usually learn the sentence isolated from the context, may sometimes find the meaning of negative sentence confused. Thus, being able to use grammar structure does not only mean using the forms accurately; it means using them meaningfully, which cannot be independent from the context in which it is used.

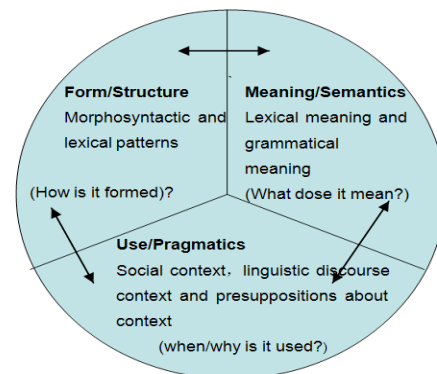


Figure 1 Three Dimensions Grammar

2.3 Use

In Larsen-Freeman's framework^[3] (2001), use means the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalized, or encoded in the structure of a language. In addition, the context can be either linguistic discourse or social.

2.3.1 Linguistic discourse context

While affirmatives are standardly used to introduce proposition, the chief use of negatives is directed at a proposition already in the discourse (Horn 1989). This means the negative sentence is used more to respond than to initiate. Moreover, the grammatical structure can indicate the register of discourse, for example, the level of formality^[4] (Cameron 2007). Take *not* contraction as an example, when *not* is contracted in form; it may not only imply a negative meaning but also an informal text (e.g. a casual talk or note); whereas it may refer to a formal text, if it is not contracted (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia 1999). Hence, the challenge for the students, especially for the intermediate and advanced students, is they should not only use the grammar structure accurately and meaningfully but also appropriately, according to certain discourse contexts.

2.3.2 Social context

In social interaction, a negative assertion can be a contrary, denying speech act^[5] (Givon 1993). Thereby, we might expect its use varies with different relationships of social interlocutors; and when and why to use a negative sentence is, to some extent, influenced by the social relationships. Therefore, when a subordinate-status speaker attempts to show a negative attitude, he/she may not use the negative sentence but other means of disagreement, such as "perhaps you may wish to consider an alternative." As Larsen-Freeman (2003) claims knowing a structure in language involves knowing both when to use it and when not to. This may be the most difficult part for the EFL/ESL learners. Due to the long-term form-oriented grammar-translation approach in Chinese English teaching, the learners may lack the contextual and socio-cultural knowledge of using the grammar appropriately. Different social context may also affect the form, meaning and use of the grammar. Take the pair of sentences in the following as an example.

- i) You didn't understand it. ii) You did not understand it.

From the form, one is contracted and the other is not. But if this is the feedback from a language teacher; the *not* contraction may not only imply the register of the text, but also indicate a different meaning and use. In ii), when *did* is not contracted with *not*, it may indicate an emphasis. For example, the teacher may feel surprised to find the student failed to understand it again or it could be a warning that the student should have known it before. However, compared with ii), i) may not have the same meaning. Therefore, understanding the social context of the language used may play an important role for the advanced learners in deciding how, when and why to use the grammar.

3. Pedagogic implications

3.1 For the beginners

According to the errors most of the beginners make, form may be the greatest challenge for them to learn negative sentence. Hence, meaningful repetition is useful. The teacher can firstly provide some examples of negative sentences, in which students are guided to pay attention to particular aspects of the target language—the form. Then students can practice contradicting when other students deliberately make statements about members of the class that are not true. For example:

Student A: Tom comes from China; Student B: No, he doesn't. He comes from U.S.A This activity may give them ample opportunities to use the form of negative sentence: *not* placement, *not* contraction, etc. It also helps bind form and meaning together. Moreover, these simple dialogues may be suitable for the beginners who lack sufficient vocabulary.

3.2 For the intermediate and advanced level learners

For the intermediate or advanced level learners, when and why to use the negative sentence may be difficult. The challenge for them is they need not only the knowledge of the form and meaning but also to make a choice. The teacher can firstly find out the use of negative sentence in different situations. With adequate explanation of the context, s/he may facilitate the learner to notice how the negative sentence is appropriately used. Then a productive practice can be used, for example, asking students to role-play some different situations, in which negative sentences are used. Role plays are ideal for working on pragmatics because the variables in role plays can be altered to help learners see and practice how context and interlocutor variable affect choice of form (Larsen-Freeman 2003).

4. Conclusion

Grammar teaching and learning should integrate form, meaning and use in order to reach the main purpose of language learning – communicating in the target language.

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