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Difficulties Encountered by Iraqi EFL Undergraduates in the Recognition of Non-assertive Forms in English

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Abstract

One issue that is important at the university level is non-assertiveness which is a problem that Iraqi English language learners (ELT) need to address. It is crucial to pinpoint the cause of this issue in order to better comprehend it and, therefore, fix its origin. This paper aims at 1-Explaining the different aspects and contexts of nonassertive forms. 2- Identifying and analyzing Iraqi EFL undergraduates' difficulties in the recognition of non-assertive forms. 3- Identifying the inferences and sources of errors which affect the students' performance in such forms.

In this research paper, it is hypothesized that: (1) Iraqi EFL undergraduates still struggle to produce non-assertive forms of English and (2) exposing students to tests that focus on producing assertive and non- assertive sentences in an unequal way, makes it more difficult. A randomly selected sample of 25 fourth-year college students from the Department of English, College of Education, Wasit University, was given a written test with ten items. From the theoretical and analytical part of this research paper, it is confirmed that Iraqi EFLstudents have many difficulties in the recognition of non-assertive items, though the well percentage of correct responses that has reached to 64%, that doesn't mean that there are no difficulties which need to be identified and analyzed, so those difficulties have been identified according to error sources of language learners which clarifies the effects of interlingual, intralingual interference and induced errors on students' acquisition of non-assertive forms. It is intended that the study's conclusions will be helpful to researchers, curriculum designers, and English teachers of second and foreign languages.

Key-Words: non-assertion, assertion, non-assertive items, errors and Iraqi learners of (EFL)

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طلاب البكالوريوس في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في التعرف على الأشكال غير المثبته (المنفيه) في اللغة الإنجليزية

مناهل سلمان عويد

متوسطة ابو وهاب الجابري، مديرية التربية والتعليم بذي قار، ذي قار العراق

خلاصة

إحدى القضايا المهمة للمتعلمين العراقيين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، حتى في المرحلة الجامعية الأولى ، هي عدم الاثبات. للمساعدة في فهم هذه المشكلة بشكل أفضل وبالتالي معالجتها ، من المهم تحديد أصلها. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى 1-شرح الجوانب والسياقات المختلفة للأشكال غير المثبته . 2- تحديد وتحليل الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلاب الجامعيون في العراق في التعرف على الأشكال غير المثبته. 3- تحديد الاستدلالات وأسباب الأخطاء التي تؤثر على أداء الطلاب في مثل هذه الأشكال.

تبين من الدراسة (1) الطلاب الجامعيين العراقيين الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لا يزالون يواجهون مشاكل في إنتاج أشكال غير مثبته في اللغة الإنجليزية (2) تعريض الطلاب لاختبارات تركز على إنتاج جمل مثبته ومنفيه بشكل غير متكافئ ، مما يجعل الأمر أكثر صعوبة في انتاج الاشكال المنفية. وتم إنشاء اختبار تحريري يتكون من عشرة بنود وطرحها على عينه تم اختيارها عشوائياً من 25 طالباً جامعياً في السنة الرابعة من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية ، كلية التربية ، جامعة واسط. من الجزء النظري والتحليلي من هذه الورقة البحثية ، تم التأكيد على أن الطلاب الجامعيين في العراق للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية يواجهون العديد من الصعوبات في التعرف على الأشكال غير المثبته ، على الرغم من أن النسبة الجيدة للإجابات الصحيحة وصلت إلى 64٪ ، فهذا لا يعني انه لا توجد صعوبات يجب تحديدها وتحليلها ، لذلك تم تحديد هذه الصعوبات وفقاً لمصادر الخطأ لمتعلمي اللغة (الطلاب)والتي توضح آثار التداخل بين اللغات والأخطاء المتكونة عند اكتساب الطلاب للأشكال غير المثبته. من المأمول أن تكون الآثار المترتبة على نتائج الدراسة في تحديد نقاط القوه والضعف في تكوين الجمل غير المثبته (المنفيه) للطلاب مفيدة للباحثين ومصممي المناهج الدراسية ، فضلاً عن معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية / ثانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عدم التوكيد، التوكيد، البنود غير الجازمة، الأخطاء والمتعلمين العراقيين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

1.Introduction

Non-assertive forms are words that are conditioned by the contexts in which they occur (Berry, 2015:179). Non-assertive forms that include any and its series (as, anyone, anybody, anything and anywhere) and adverbs like yet and ever, which occur in non-positive contexts. Based on the fact that identifying a problem is an integral part of its solution, This research paper is going to identify the difficulties of EFL undergraduates in the recognition of non-assertive forms, with some recommendations that can be diagnostic points. According to Quirk etal. (1985: 303-4) discourse functions of sentences distinguish according to the form (syntactic one) of simple sentences into four types. The discourse functions of sentences are:

1-Statements are basically used to convey information which function as declaratives.

2-Questions are primarily used to search about a special point. These are the functions of interrogatives.

3-Directives are mainly used to instruct someone to fulfill something which function of imperatives.

4-Exclamation are primarily used for expressing someone's surprise and its extent. These are the functions of exclamative sentences.

So we should concentrate on the function of a sentence to distinguish whether it is assertive or non-assertive. The sentence will be assertive if it is positive and declarative and it will be non-assertive if it is negative or interrogative and consequently interrogative may be positive or negative. Accordingly, the positive and declarative sentences will be excluded in this paper.

The study concentrates on the theoretical background of non-assertion: its definition, non-assertive forms, their context, their characteristics. The researcher sets up four questions in order to answer them and solve the problem. Also, the study depends on a written test for undergraduates to see their performance in non-assertive forms and the difficulties they face in order to identify the types of errors. (James, 1998) identifies three major sources of errors: 1-interlingual interference , 2-intralingual interference, 3- induced errors.

2.Literature Review

Instead of just distinguishing between positive and negative forms in English, we must first make a distinction between positive and non-positive forms, often known as assertive and non-assertive forms. Although it is more accurate to say that the context, not the form, determines whether something is forceful or not. Some aggressive words, like some, are frequently used in assertive circumstances. These are distinguished by

the factuality attribute and are represented by positive declarative phrases. Any and other non-assertive terms are used in negative or non-assertive settings. These have the non-factuality feature, which is present in sentences like interrogative, negative, conditional, and comparative, among others. The context is actually provided by the overall non-factual meaning rather than any specific grammatical structure (Downing, and Locke, 2000: 173).

What are assertive and non-assertive forms?

Assertive and non-assertive forms are words that are conditioned by the contexts in which they occur (Berry, 2015:179). A generally accepted viewpoint holds that making an assertion entails taking on a certain set of obligations and pledging allegiance to the veracity of a claim. Being dedicated to the truth of a claim also usually entails being critizable if it turns out to be untrue and/or being accountable for defending your stance in the face of valid objections. This perspective is one of the most influential methods to model the illocutionary import of declaring a claim, and it has been supported by researchers from several schools (Cepollaro etal., 2019:2).

The word "assertion" refers to a claim (a statement or declaration) that something is (or is thought to be) true. Assertion is a pragmatic issue even though it attends to be formed in grammatically positive and declarative sentences and some syntactic structures can form it. Assertive forms involve a group of words which include some and its series (as, , somebody, someone, something and somewhere) and adverbs as, already and still. Positive polarity items or affirmative forms are other names for assertive forms. These words are used with positive declarative contexts (e.g. I have some books.) (Aarts et. al., 2014:36-7).

In contrast, non-assertive pro-forms often referred to as elective or elective-existential pro-forms, are a collection of words or expressions that make general references to certain things or people without providing explicit identification. When we want to identify any member of a group without mentioning specific individuals, we utilize them (https://langeek.co/en/grammar/course/1004/non-assertive-pro-forms). In negative interrogative and conditional context, non-assertive forms are also known as non-affirmative forms or negative polarity items. They include any and its series (such as, anyone, anybody, anything and anywhere) and adverbs as yet and ever, occur in non-positive contexts such as, negative declarative [I don't have any books), interrogative [Do you have any books?], imperative [Don't buy books anymore], comparative [These books are more interesting than any books I ever read.] and conditional clauses [I want to know if you have any interesting books for me]. Negative clauses, interrogatives, and conditionals are all considered to be in a non-assertive context or territory (Aarts et al., 2014:37)

The features of assertive and non-assertive forms

In addition to the mood structure kinds that have been described, it is important to look at their meanings in the context of two ideas known as assertion and non-assertion. A situational context will be used to utter a clause that the speaker would either present as forceful or non-assertive. Positive declarative clauses frequently use assertive forms with factual implications, such as some, someone, and someplace. Non-assertive terms like "any," "any," "anything," and "ever" are frequently used in interrogative and negative clauses among other grammatical contexts. These words have non-realistic connotations, such as unfulfillment or potentiality because non- assertive forms depend on these features rather than specific syntactic contexts. But it must be emphasized that neither of these are the whole scope of non-assertion. (Downing and Locke, 2000: 173).

2.3 Assertive and Non-assertive Items

There are various things that happen in the aggressive domain, and they include (some, someone, somewhere, somehow, sometimes, already, too, still, a great deal, a long way, a long time, extent and one). The non-assertive objects, on the other hand (any, anyone, anywhere, ever, never, rarely, yet, either, very, now, much, far,). Examples of assertive and non-assertive passive behaviors include:

Assertive sentences	Non- assertive sentences
“We've had some (lunch).	We haven't had any (lunch).
I was speaking to someone.	I wasn't speaking to anyone.
I saw him somewhere.	I didn't see him anywhere.
She was somehow surprised.	She wasn't in any way surprised.
They sometimes visit us.	They rarely/never/also don't ever Visit us.
He helped to some extend.	He didn't help at all.
They've arrived already .	They haven't arrived yet.
John is coming too.	John isn't coming either.
They ate too many (cakes).	They didn't eat very many (cakes).
He's still there .	He isn't there now/any longer.
I like her a great deal.	I don't like her much.
He's been a long way.	He hasn't been far.
He was away a long time.	She wasn't away longer.
He saw one or other of them.	He didn't see either (one, AmE) of them.”

(Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973: 185).

When employed in negative assertions, assertive forms frequently imply a specific thing or person. The non-assertive form implies that something is not present. (i.e, refers to quantity not identity) Compare:

I couldn't locate anyone who knew the solution. (a particular knowledgeable person)

I was unable to discover someone who knew the solution (i.e., nobody knew the solution).

Some verbs demand non- assertive forms as the verb "deny", example:

I deny taking it far.

Some verbs that by their very nature convey lack of assertiveness also utilize pronouns or determiners. Compare, for instance,

I doubt we'll have any rain VS I anticipate some. https://www.eltconcourse.com/training/inservice/lexicogrammar/assertive_non-assertive.html.

2.4.Contexts in which non-assertive forms occur.

Negative declarative sentence

(Crystal, 2003:310) defines negation as a grammatical and semantic process which expresses the contradiction of some or all of a sentence meaning.

Negative sentence can be recognized by noticing the following :

A- (not) or its abbreviation (n't) after the operator which is the first Auxiliary of the sentence,(e.g. He mustn't have been late anymore .) ,

(Eastwood, 1994:17)

B- The words which have negative meaning. These words are negative verbs, negative nouns, negators, negative adverbs, negative determiners, such as: fail, no , never , none , no one , no body , nothing , nowhere, few , little , seldom , rarely , no longer , hardly , scarcely , nor , neither , .

or adjectives which have prefixes indicate negation such as, unsuccessful , non-working , incomplete , impolite (ibid: 18 and https://www.eltconcourse.com/training/inservice/lexicogrammar/assertive_non-assertive.html.)

Some examples demonstrate (B) :

~ I saw nothing interesting at all.

~ He went nowhere yet.

~ I can scarcely watch any tragic films.

~ I haven't ever seen an impolite boy as you are.

~ He fails in any project.

~ He nor behaves well , neither takes any advice.

Interrogative sentence

It is the sentence which asks a question (Quackenbos, 1866:163).

The auxiliary should precede the subject in the interrogative sentence as in these examples with non-assertive forms:

~Did you take any apples?

~Haven't you travelled to London yet?

Conditional clause is the clause which causes a particular statement or command to depend on the fulfillment of a given condition (Wickens, 1980:76).

Examples with non-assertive forms :

~If you ever need any advice, tell me.

~The computer is unlikely to be updated much, if at all.

Imperative sentence is the sentence which expresses a command (Quackenbos, 1866:163).

The imperative sentence starts by the base form of the verb[e.g. eat , drink , listen , work] (Eastwood, 1994: 21). Imperative sentence can be made negative by using don't or never (Wren, 2005:109).

Examples with non-assertive forms:

~Take anything you like.

~Don't laugh at all.

~Never eat any chocolate.

Comparative clause: It compares one thing with another. (Aarts et. al., 2014:77).

Examples with non-assertive forms:

~She is singing better than she has ever done.

~These books are more interesting than any books I ever read.

2.4.6.Non-assertive forms in assertive contexts: When non-assertive forms occur in assertive contexts then they should have the meaning of potentiality or nonspecific meaning ,unlike assertive forms which have factuality and specific meaning (Locke and Downing, 2000: 174).

Examples:

~Any child could answer that question.= non-specific meaning.

~Some children could answer that question.= specific children not anyone.

The semi- or marginal modal auxiliary verbs : only non-assertive uses of certain of these verbs are permitted as need, dare, care to, can + bear + infinitive, can + help + ing and mind. Examples:

Need we go now?

He daren't jump.

I don't care to eat at restaurants.

I can't bear to hear any more.

I couldn't help laughing.

Do you mind waiting. https://www.eltconcourse.com/training/inservice/lexicogrammar/assertive_non-assertive.html.

3.Research Question

This research paper tries to answer the following questions:

Do Iraqi EFL college students still have problems in the recognition of non-assertive items?

What are the kinds of errors which undergraduates do in their performance?

Does mother language affect the EFL learners' recognition of non-assertive forms?

4.Methodology

This study tackles one problem faces undergraduates in the recognition of non-assertive forms so the paper gives a full description to the topic and raises questions and tries to answer them for its purpose which is solving the difficulties of EFL learners in the recognition of non-assertiveness. The study depends on a written test for undergraduate and analyzes their answers. The study is achieved through searching, gathering, classifying and evaluating the students' performance to reach the acceptable findings to solve the problem.

4.1.The objectives and construction of the test

A language test is concerned with the measurement of learners' knowledge in a specific field or the whole of a language. It serves as a tool to accomplish particular goals. Thus, the first stage in creating a language exam is defining its objectives. For the current test, these objectives could be:

testing Iraqi EFL undergraduates' level and knowledge in using non-assertive forms.

identifying their errors and difficulties in the recognition of non-assertive forms.

identifying the different interferences which affect their acquisition of such forms.

As a result, the test serves a diagnostic purpose by highlighting certain learning issues. After outlining the test's goals, the following stage is to create a recognition exam that will be used to carry out the aforementioned goals. Therefore, a written test with 10 items (See appendix 1) was created and given to a randomly selected sample of 25 fourth-class college students from the English department at the College of Education at the University of Wasit. The pupils must choose the right answer from a list of multiple-choice options on the test. The test has been set up in this manner that the items test the different aspects and contexts within the grammatical area of non-assertive forms. Thus, items (1 , 2 , 4 , 5) test "any and its series , and the other items

test the other different nonassertive forms which are " any longer , yet , anymore, at all , ever ,and in any way" , and all the items content different non-assertive contexts such as , negative , interrogative , conditional, imperative and comparative clauses".

In this paper, the even test items had nearly the same content as the odd test items. Thus, the test can be thought of as having two almost identical halves: the half with odd things and the half with even items. It is believed that incorporating all potential non-assertive form fields into the exam as a whole and structuring it so that it has two nearly equivalent halves will be especially beneficial in achieving the validity and reliability, two of the most crucial aspects of language tests.

4.2.Validity and reliability of the test

Test validity can be defined as the extent to which a test accurately measures what it is supposed to measure (Wiley & Sons, 2010).

When talking about testing's validity, two things should be taken into account:

1. Examine how much the test performance resembles the performance we anticipate in real-world situations.

2. Take into account the degree to which evidence of linguistic understanding can be regarded as proof of competency (Owen 1997:13).

However, they oppose aiming for absolute or perfect validity, defining the search for validity as a means of minimizing invalidity, maximizing validity, and using measurement in validity as a matter of degree rather than a pursuit of perfection. In reference to the significance of validity in tests, Cohen et al. (2000:105) state that effective research is impossible or even "worthless" without the presence of validity (ibid).

Anastasi claims that 1982 When someone is re-tested with the same test on multiple occasions, with different sets of equal times, or under other changeable examination conditions, reliability is the consistency of their scores. Reliability relates to the general ability, consistency, and stability of a test. (Hughes, 2003:34) points out that “if a test is not reliable, it cannot be valid” There are various methods of estimating the reliability of language tests, the most typical of which are:

1-the test-retest method, that involves applying the test again to the same group of learners after an interval of time.

2- the equivalent-forms method, in which two parallel versions of the test are administered to the same group of learners;

3- Kuder-Richardson formula, where only one test administration is required to evaluate reliability using the formula;

4- The split-half approach is predicated on the idea that if a precise measuring instrument were divided into two equal pieces, the measurements made with one part would be exactly the same as those made with the other (Heaton, 1975:156). Typically, this approach appears to be more practical (Valette, 1977:53). A single administration of a test in which the items are separated into two nearly equivalent halves for scoring can be used to determine a test's reliability (Mkhelif, 2014).

The last method can be used to estimate the reliability of the present test by independently computing the scores for each of the test's five elements (i.e., the odd and even items). The Pearson formula and Spearman-Brown correction formula are used to correlate the sets of scores acquired on the items of the two halves of the exam in order to determine the test's overall reliability. With a correlation coefficient of 0.86 after applying the aforementioned formulas to the results of the two halves of the current test, the test has shown to be very dependable.

4.3. Analysis of the Item

The present study's item analysis was restricted to determining the frequencies of correct and incorrect answers for each test item as well as for the entire exam, together with their percentages

4.4. The result of the test

The following table shows students' performance on the test items:

Items No.	No. of correct answers	Percentage %	No. of incorrec t answers	Percentage %
1.	17	68%	8	32%
2.	20	80%	5	20%
3.	14	56%	11	44%
4.	14	56%	11	44%
5.	20	80%	5	20%

6.	14	56%	11	44%
7.	14	56%	11	44%
8.	11	44%	14	56%
9.	18	72%	7	28%
10.	18	72%	7	28%
Tot al	160	64%	90	36%

As we see in the table above , the total number of the correct responses is "160" and their percentage is "64%" which is a good or at least not bad result, but that doesn't mean that Iraqi EFL undergraduates don't have difficulties in the recognition of non-assertive items, and this is clear from the total number of incorrect responses which is "90" and their percentage which is "36%" , this shows that they don't have complete knowledge in this topic and they have many difficulties which need to be identified.

Errors analysis :

An error according to Corder, in (Ellis, 1994), takes place when the deviation arises as a result of the lack of knowledge.

Error Analysis is one of the most important areas of second language acquisition because it examines mistakes made by L2 learners and outlines a series of steps to recognize, characterize, and explain mistakes made by learners. According to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), error analysis is the study and analysis of mistakes produced by speakers of second languages.

It is considered an important technique for obtaining information about learners' levels and the difficulties facing them.

sources of errors :

In order to analyze errors , we are required to identify errors according to their sources.

(James, 1998) identifies three main sources of errors: 1interlingual interference , 2-intralingual interference, 3- induced errors.

interlingual Interference :

According to (Corder, 1981), mistakes with this source happen when the learner's habits (patterns, systems, or rules) partially or partially prevent him or her from picking up the patterns and rules of the second language. According to (Lado, 1964), interference (negative transfer) is the mother tongue's (L1) adverse effect on the proficiency of the target language.

In the present test, in the item {No. 6} , 36% of students chose (already) though the sentence is interrogative! This error can be caused by interlingual interference between the meaning of (already) in Arabic language and the meaning of (yet) that they have approximately similar meaning while in English language , (yet) is restricted to non-assertive contexts and (already) is for "assertive contexts.

intralingual interference :

This interference is not concerned with the effect of the mother tongue on students' learning but it has its roots in the target language itself since they find it difficult to use because they do not know it well.

According to (Richard, 1974: 6), intralingual interference refers to statements made by students that are based on partial exposure to the target language rather than the mother tongue's grammatical structure. According to (ibid, 120), there are four categories that make up intralingual errors: "overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of the rules, and false concept hypothesized or semantic errors." So , in the present test, we notice a lot of errors which seem to spring from a lack of knowledge in the rules of English grammar.[e.g. using "some" instead of "any" in the non-assertive contexts in many items].

Induced errors :

They are errors that are more a product of the learning environment in the classroom than of either the student's limited command of English grammar (intralingual errors) or the first language's interference (interlingual errors) (Stenson, 1983: 256). These mistakes are a result of the definitions, illustrations, explanations, and practice methods used by the teachers. For instance , the item {No. 3} some students chose "can and could" though the sentence has a non-assertive

form which is (any longer) this may be a result of the way their teachers explain the subject of non-assertive forms which makes the students don't know the exact meaning and usage of (any longer), some of them think that it means," longer time or more time", so then it can be used in assertive contexts to make like this sentence " I can wait any longer" which means as they think " the ability of waiting more time" . While the exact meaning of (any longer) is " that something is now not true or not possible" and it is used in only non-assertive contexts (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 1828).

5.Conclusions

From the theoretical and analytical part of this research paper, it is confirmed that students of EFL in Iraq have many difficulties in the recognition of non-assertive items, though the well percentage of correct responses that has reached to 64%, that doesn't mean that there are no difficulties which need to be identified and analyzed, so those difficulties have been identified according to error sources of language learners which clarifies the effects of interlingual, intralingual interference and induced errors on students' acquisition of non-assertive forms.

After achieving the aims of this research, it is the time to outline some recommended or diagnostic points as the following:

1-Teachers are required to explain the different aspects and contexts of non-assertive forms.

2-Teachers need to use better methods which make the students more interactive with the material given and make better understanding of the topic.

3-Students need to focus and study more and they also need more practice to cope with the difficulties and interferences of L1 and L2.

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