

# Students' attitudes towards English syntax learning

*Phạm Thị Thùy Trang*

*ThS. Trường Đại học Tài Chính - Marketing*

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**Abstract:** *English syntax involves understanding the structure and rules governing sentence formation, which can pose significant challenges for non-native learners. The research examines how students perceive the complexity, relevance, and practicality of syntax learning in relation to their overall language acquisition. Through a questionnaire, data was collected from third-year English majors of proficiency to analyze their motivation, difficulties, and engagement with syntax instruction. Based on the research data, the findings of the study are believed to apply to the learning and teaching practice at University of Finance and Marketing and similar contexts.*

**Keywords:** *Syntax, compulsory subject, language knowledge*

## 1. Introduction:

The study of English syntax is necessary for developing proficiency in the language, yet students often approach this aspect of learning with a mix of enthusiasm and apprehension. Syntax is the set of principles, rules and processes having an influence on the structure of the sentence in English. It is very important for English majors to know about the sequence of the word and the structure of the sentence. Currently, many students find English syntax very difficult to study. Understanding how students perceive and engage with syntax learning can reveal insights into their overall language acquisition processes. By examining students' perspectives on English syntax, educators can better tailor their teaching strategies to foster a more positive learning environment, ultimately enhancing students' linguistic skills and confidence. This finding not only contributes to the field of language education but also informs broader discussions about effective methods in teaching English syntax.

This article focuses on two issues:

How have the students learned syntax?

Why should a teacher teach syntax to English majors?

## 2. Content:

### 2.1. Theoretical framework

#### 2.1.1. Definition of syntax

According to Roberts, N. B. (1999), syntax is about studying the form, the positions, and groups of the factors going to create the sentences. Therefore, it is the grammatical structure of words and phrases to make coherent sentences and studying grammatical relations among words and other units

in the sentence, the word order and the sentence formation. Language does not differ in sounds; it is the way in which words can be connected into larger units as well. Five years later, Radford (2004) considered syntax as the set of rules, principles, and processes governing the structure of sentences in a language. He also highlighted the essential part of syntax in forming a sentence and its systemic feature in linguistic theory. Moreover, Leech (2006) developed syntax as arranging words to form the meaningful sentences; therefore, it expressed how different words were combined, sequenced, and structured in a sentence. He viewed syntax as a tool for construction of meaning through setting up words.

#### 2.1.2. Some basic aspects of English syntax

According to Kim, Jong-Bok. & Sells, P. (2008), one important field of teaching English syntax is that there should be a balance in the general approach between reality and theory. As a result, the learners need help in order to understand the structure of English in a systematic and scientific way. Having a look at basic aspects of syntax, the kinds of sentences containing a subject and a predicate and parts of speech have to be taken into consideration.

#### 2.1.3. Types of sentences containing a subject and a predicate

Syntax usually examines sentences that have a clear internal division into subject and predicate. There are three types of sentences: (1) a simple sentence - contains at least one subject and one predicate; (2) a compound sentence- is two or more independent clauses joined into a single sentence. Each simple sentence maintains its own internal

syntactic structure. They may be joined by a coordinating conjunction such as for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so; and (3) a complex sentence - is a sentence in which there is one independent clause joined with two or more dependent clauses.

#### 2.1.4. *Parts of speech*

Words and phrases can be grouped according to the functions of the sentence building. Syntactic classes of words are traditionally called parts of speech. In English, the parts of speech are identified such as: verb, noun, adjective, adverb, pronoun, preposition, verbal particle, and article.

### 2.2. *Research design*

This article has been done to find the answer to the following questions:

How have the students learned syntax?

Why should a teacher teach syntax to major English learners?

#### 2.2.1. *Research method*

Research method is “the way one collects and analyzes data” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 9). In order to reach the purposes of the study, the researcher conducted a survey on a formal class with thirty-nine students- LOPGHIDANH. They are the students who did not pass their official examination on syntax.

In order to conduct this research, the two qualitative and quantitative approaches are used. The main method, namely questionnaire was employed to collect data relevant to aspects as mentioned. The quantitative approach was used to gather a collection of data from questionnaire to find out the answers to the questions raised above.

#### 2.2.2. *Participants for the research*

Thirty-nine students of the formal relearning class- LOPGHIDANH including five males and thirty-four females among the students who failed the official examination on syntax were the participants of the study. The reason why the researcher chose this class as the participants of the study was that she was teaching them and realized that most of them were bad at this subject.

These students actually came from three different classes such as 17 students of 20DTA01 (43.5%); 15 students of 20DTA02 (38.5%); and 7 students of 20DTA03 (18%).

#### 2.2.3. *Teaching methods and activities in the classroom*

The main syllabus is Analysing Sentences: An Introduction to English syntax which consists of eleven units taught in nine weeks.

For this class, teaching program throughout the course was arranged as: In the first week, the teacher delivered the students the lists of abbreviation of parts of speech such as NP (noun phrase), VP (Verb phrase); AP (Adjective phrase), AdvP (Adverb phrase); PP (Prepositional phrase), N (Noun), V (Verb), etc; In the second week, the teacher taught the students the complements of the Verb Group: (1) monotransitive or transitive [trans]; (2) intransitive [intrans]; (3) ditransitive [ditrans]; (4) intensive [intens]; (5) complex transitive [complex]; (6) prepositional [prep]. In the third week, the teacher reminded the students three types of sentences: simple, compound and complex sentences. In the third week, the students were taught how to identify phrases and worked on them from the simple phrases to more difficult phrases: NP, VP, PP, AP, and AdvP. In the fifth week, the students learned how to draw simple sentences and had a mini test. In the sixth week, the students learned how to draw compound sentences and had a mini-test. In the seventh week, the students learned how to draw complex sentences. In the eighth week, the students learned about finite verbs and non-finite verbs. In the ninth week, they learned the function of non-finite verb phrases. Also, they always had opportunities to work on exercises by drawing tree diagrams.

#### 2.2.4. *Data collection*

The data in this study were collected through pre-questionnaire and post-questionnaire: the opinions of major English learners on learning English syntax and why syntax is a very important subject to be taught.

### 2.3. *Data analysis from questionnaire*

This section presents information collected from the students’ responses before and after English syntax learning

#### 2.3.1. *English syntax learning*

The first question of the questionnaire was about the students’ opinion on English syntax learning before and after the course that the students chose in “agree scale”. The situation showed that after the course, the number of the students agreed for the item: “I find English syntax difficult to learn” reduced remarkably from 13 down to 1 student. The items “It’s a very boring subject, so I hate learning

it” and “It’s not a very necessary subject to learn” dropped from 26 down to zero and 32 down to zero. A good thing is that the increasing number of the students for the item “It’s a very necessary subject to learn” from 4 up to 37 students showed that many students really know the importance of syntax learning. They did not get bored with English syntax learning. Instead, they were interested in it and believed that English syntax learning is very necessary.

### 2.3.2. *The ways of learning syntax*

The second question of the questionnaire presents the ways the students learn syntax. After all, the students know what to do in order to learn syntax effectively. It is proven that there was an increase in the students who agreed with all items in question 2- understand grammar rules (2-30); identify the types of sentences: simple- compound-complex sentences (4-37); remember the ways of abbreviation of phrases (7-33); identify verb groups (2-32).

### 2.3.3. *The importance of learning syntax*

The frequencies of the students’ opinions on the importance of learning syntax in the third question before and after the course were paid much attention. Based on the result, there is a noticeably increasing result among students that showed an agreement with the items in question 3. The opinions were that “know how sentences are put together”; “determine the sentence structure”; “know the rules used to join words into meaningful sentences” went up from zero up to 31; from 1 up to 32 and from 6 up to 30.

Therefore, it can be inferred that the students know the importance of learning syntax.

## 3. Conclusion

This study was conducted with the aim to find out the information to answer the following research questions:

How do the students learn syntax?

Why should a teacher teach syntax to major English learners?

The findings presented in the previous chapter helped answer those questions, specifically, when the students are taught English syntax through the process presented in part 3, they changed their opinion of learning it. At the outset, many of them didn’t like learning English syntax. They believed that learning syntax was difficult and boring; it is not

a very necessary subject. All of those have changed completely after the relearning course.

Though the book “Analysing Sentences: An Introduction to English syntax” is the main source and have the orders, teachers teaching syntax don’t need to focus on the orders. There must be an integration of many sources and techniques which are mainly based on communicative activities.

Understanding students’ attitudes towards English syntax learning is essential for fostering a more effective and engaging educational environment. Positive attitudes can lead to greater motivation and improved performance, while negative perceptions may hinder students’ progress and confidence. Ultimately, nurturing a positive outlook on English syntax not only benefits students academically but also equips them with vital communication skills that are crucial in our increasingly globalized society.

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