ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Martha G. Irvine for the Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages presented May 26, 2005.

Title: Developmental Stages of Negation in One Learner’s Interlanguage: A Case Study

This study is the examination of the interlanguage of an instructed adult learner of English as a Second Language (ESL) to ascertain if his evolving learner language exhibits developmental stages relative to the acquisition of negation. Previous researchers have found evidence of patterns of development in second language learners’ acquisition of English negation. Their subjects were primarily children or adolescents who were learning English naturalistically; only two studies included adult subjects and two studies (of adolescents) included instructed learners. In this study the adult subject is a ‘mixed’ learner, i.e. he receives English instruction and as a U.S. resident he is exposed to English daily. The data were drawn from audio and video recordings of classroom activities which spanned an eighteen month period.

During the period under study, the negative forms the subject used to create his negative utterances and the structure of these utterances evolved, demonstrating increasing well-formedness in his system of negation. Initially, the subject’s principal negative form was no, many of his propositions were verbless, and he often deleted the subject pronoun. Over time there was a reduction in verbless propositions and an
increase in the use of subject pronouns. Plus there was a reduction in his use of *no* as his principal negative form and a resulting greater variety of negative forms including *not, don’t, never, nothing, can’t* and *didn’t*. The subject does not reach the stage of using analyzed *don’t* (which is the most complex stage of English negation).

This study differs from earlier studies of ESL learner’s acquisition of negation in that it was the first study of an adult ‘mixed’ learner and it was based on classroom interactions with no interference from the researcher. In his eighteen months of instructed English study, this ‘mixed’ learner of English demonstrated negative forms and structures in a pattern similar to those found in naturalistic learners in the early stages of acquiring English negation but did not achieve target-like production. This is consistent with the fact that he was in a low-intermediate ESL class at the conclusion of the study period.