

Avoidance as a learning strategy

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses avoidance as a learning strategy, and at the same time highlights the importance of this topic in SLA. The research study reported here is based on nine Spanish speakers' attempts to learn the English negation system. The first section deals with the systematisation of the concept of *avoidance*, which has only relatively recently received attention in SLA research, and continues with an analysis of the different approaches to the topic and an examination of the limited number of empirical studies carried out so far. In the second section, findings on this topic from the empirical study mentioned above are presented. The extensive usage of *avoidance* by all of our subjects, and its cyclical character is highlighted. The article concludes by considering the use of *avoidance* in relation to three separate age groups, children, adolescents and adults.

Key words: Avoidance, learning strategy, English negation, SLA.

La elusión como una estrategia de aprendizaje

RESUMEN

Este artículo se centra en el estudio de la elusión como una estrategia de aprendizaje, poniendo de manifiesto su relevancia en el ASL. La investigación se basa en el comportamiento de nueve sujetos aprendiendo la negación inglesa. En la primera parte se estudia el concepto de la elusión, que hasta hace muy pocos años no había recibido atención alguna en el ASL, se analizan los diferentes enfoques con que ha sido abordada y se examinan los escasos estudios empíricos que se han realizado hasta la fecha. En la segunda parte se analizan los hallazgos de nuestro propio corpus, en el que se pone de manifiesto la elevada utilización que los nueve sujetos hacen de esta estrategia, así como su carácter cíclico. El artículo concluye con el estudio de la utilización de la elusión por cada uno de los tres grupos de edad, niños, adolescentes y adultos.

Palabras clave: elusión, estrategia de aprendizaje, negación en inglés, adquisición de segundas lenguas.

SUMARIO: 1. Introduction. 2. The concept of *avoidance*. 3. Classifications of categories of avoiding strategies. 4. *Avoidance* and empirical evidence. 5. A discussion of *avoidance*. 6. *Avoidance* when learning negation. Analysis of our subjects. 7. Study of *avoidance* defined by age groups. 8. Collective consideration of all nine participants, with regard to *avoidance*. 9. Conclusions. 10. References.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study reported on here explores how nine Spanish speakers approached the learning of the negation system in English. The main conclusion is that the difficulty surrounding negative syntax (Ellis 1986) in English seemed to determine a general behavioural pattern among all nine students in their responses. Approximately 30% of the answers were given with the omission of negative structures, even when these structures were necessary, and substituted by alternative constructions. In order to look at these occurrences in more detail a hypothesis was formulated that constitutes the core of this work. This is that avoidance of some of the negative constructions is a strategy used by the students, and thus plays an important role in the learning process.

2. THE CONCEPT OF AVOIDANCE

The first indirect reference to this phenomena appears in an L2 study by Duskova, (1969). *Avoidance*, (Schachter, 1974), or *low representation*, (Levenston, 1971), is the procedural strategy that the speaker uses when substituting the required form with another, due to a lack of the necessary linguistic resources (Faerch and Kasper, eds. 1983). Therefore, it involves a plan with the objective of resolving a linguistic problem. "Linguistic problems" can be understood as "*recognition by an individual...of the insufficiency of his ... existing knowledge to reach a ... goal and of the consequent need for expanding this knowledge*" (Klaus and Buhr, 1976: 974). In this study the difficulty lies in the complexity that the negative English system represents for Spanish students.

2.1. THE MODEL OF FAERCH AND KASPER

This section deals with the speakers' mental processes when they produce a verbal expression. According to Faerch and Kasper (1983) and Bialystok, (1990), the psycholinguistic model is made up of two phases, that of *planning* and that of *verbalism*. The *planning phase* consists of the mental process that is needed in order to elaborate on plans whose realisation allows the speaker to convey their communication objective.

In this phase, the speaker selects and establishes hypothetical rules, (*hypothesis formation*), which are later verified in the verbal phase (*hypothesis verification*). This phase constitutes a dynamic process, in which the hypotheses are rejected or incorporated into the inter-linguistic system, as fixed rules. If they are incorporated, a process of automation occurs, through which the availability of the rules corresponding to the inter-linguistic system is raised.

However, if on the other hand, the student has not automated this linguistic knowledge, the construction of a phrase may be extremely difficult. In trying to resolve the situation, *communication strategies* are also known as *strategic plans*,

(Faerch and Kasper, 1983). These are *realisation behaviour*, and *avoiding behaviour*. If realisation behaviour is opted for, the initial objective of verbal communication is maintained, through *realisation strategies*. However, if *evasive behaviour* is decided on, the initial objective will be altered, using *reduction* or *evasive strategies*.

Until now, investigations into the learning process of the negative system have only dealt with *realisation behaviour* and the expressions already automated, based on the evolution of correct and transitional structures. The objective here was to focus on the study of avoiding strategies.

3. CLASSIFICATION OF CATEGORIES OF AVOIDING STRATEGIES

There are several classifications of *avoidance*, but Tarone, Cohen and Dumas', (1976, 1983) and Tarone (1979, 1982) is perhaps one of the most useful¹. It was made according to an interactive perspective of communication, as a result of a study based on the oral inter-linguistic expression of students in L2. Their classification is the most exhaustive and presents six different categories: *avoidance of the topic*, *semantic avoidance*, *stopping mid sentence*, *paraphrasing*, *asking for help and changing language*. Each can affect the different levels of the inter-linguistic system: phonology, morphology, syntax and lexis.

Avoidance of the topic consists in avoiding using structures that require the use of grammatical rules which the student has still not mastered, for example, where the speaker shies away from referring to hypothetical situations, as they require the use of the conditional tenses which he/she is unsure of. *Semantic avoidance* is different from *avoidance of the topic*, in that learners express themselves through syntactic constructions that, although not the required ones, are close to them. Thus they indirectly answer the question that has been posed. The following is an example of a speaker trying to avoid using the subjunctive in Spanish due to the difficulties encountered by using it.

Question: “¿Qué quieren los pájaros que haga la mamá cuando abren la boca? ”

‘What do birds who open their mouths want their mama to do?’

Answer: “Quieren comer” .

‘They want to eat’

Another category of evasive strategy is *stopping mid-sentence*, which occurs when the student begins to talk about a subject and leaves the sentence unfinished, e.g. ‘He wanted me to...’ instead of saying, ‘He wanted me to go to the shop’.

Paraphrasis consists of conveying a message through an alternative L2 construction in order to avoid any problems that may arise. The three main ways of

¹ Other classifications, Faerch and Kasper (1983), Bialystok (1990) and the Nijmegen Project (Kellerman et al. (1987); Kellerman et al. (1990)), deserve mentioning, especially for their attempts to simplify Tarone's study, although this remains the most usual point of reference.

doing this are *approximation*, *inventing words*, and *circumlocution* (answering questions in a roundabout way). *Approximation* is the use of a sole element or a structure that shares semantic characteristics with the element they are looking for, e.g., ‘*pipe*’ instead of ‘*waterpipe*’. *Word Invention*, an expression coined by Varadi (1973), is when the speaker creates a new word in the second language, e.g., ‘*airball*’ instead of ‘*balloon*’. *Circumloquium* is when the description of the characteristics or elements of an object or action are given, e.g. ‘*he is, uh Persian, and we use in Turkey, a lot of*’.

The speakers may *ask for help* via three different types of behaviour:

- (a) They can ask someone to tell them the necessary linguistic form, e.g.,
Question: ‘He wants...’
Answer: ‘me to go away’
- (b) They can ask if they are using the right or wrong form.
- (c) They can search for the answer themselves, e.g., in a grammar book, a textbook or a dictionary.

The last category of avoiding strategy mentioned by Tarone et al, is that of *change of language*, where the student uses an expression or structure from their native language without attempting to translate it. For example, *Je ne pas* go to school.

4. AVOIDANCE AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

The few empirical studies carried out in this field have had, as a main research topic, the origin of *avoidance*. Schachter (1974), Hakuta (1976), Kleinmann (1977) and Dagut and Laufer (1985) have all agreed that it is due to the difference that exists with respect to syntactical structures between the mother tongue language and the second language. They conclude that L1 plays an important role in the learning of L2, and *avoidance* is a valid index of learning difficulty that can be predicted through analysis.

Schachter (1974) studied the frequency of relative clause sentences by adult students from two different languages, firstly Arabs and Persians and secondly, Chinese and Japanese. He found that the Chinese and Japanese had made fewer mistakes as they had made only half the number of sentences. This difference was due to the difficulty they have with this structure. This difficulty had caused them to use relative clauses very carefully, thus ensuring a low level of mistakes.

Hakuta (1976), like Schachter, concluded that *avoidance* was determined by the different syntactic difficulty between L1 and L2. However, the first exhaustive study of *avoidance* was by Kleinmann (1977), which concluded that *avoidance* could be considered as a symptom of transfer.

Gass (1980), criticised Kleinmann’s study, stating that *avoidance* does not depend on the differences between L1 and L2 and is not related to linguistic transfer. Chiang’s study (1980) of relative clauses adds another new variant. Although agreeing with Kleinmann that *avoidance* stems from the differences between L1 and L2, he also considers that it can be explained by the proficiency level of the student.

Babear (1988) carried out a study of *avoidance* of passive voice structures with Arabic and Hispanic students, showing a relevant occurrence of this in both groups. Irujo (1993) highlighted how Spanish speakers with a fluent knowledge of English avoided using colloquial expressions. Laufer and Eliasson (1993) studied the phrasal verbs used by Swedish speaking English as L2 and found that *avoidance* occurred when these expressions had a semantic structure which was very different in both languages.

5. A DISCUSSION OF AVOIDANCE

From these theoretical and empirical studies of verbal communication of L2 students it follows that *avoidance* is a fundamental cognitive strategy. However, studies into the learning process of the use of negation in English, both as a native and second language, have mainly focussed on the negative forms that the speaker uses. In other words, they have only taken into account those responses which correspond to correct negative structures, e.g., 'I do not go to Madrid', or those negative forms which make up a part of the negative interlinguistic system as a result of cross-linguistic transfer, *'I no have a dog'. They have not taken into account, in all its entirety, the study of the forms which the students use when they opt for evasive behaviour, ignoring the influence on the negative interlinguistic system (Bialystock, 1990).

6. AVOIDANCE WHEN LEARNING NEGATION. ANALYSIS OF THE SUBJECTS

In this section I discuss the role of *avoidance* in the development of the learning process of negation in English. My approach to *avoidance* could be categorised as one which considers it as a cognitive strategy of learning.

Avoidance (Tarone, Cohen and Dumas, 1983 and Bialystok, 1990), is taken as a strategy which participants turn to when they find learning difficulties. In this empirical study, it has been counted as (a) answers which do not use negation, (*I have a cat*, instead of *I do not have a dog*), (b) answers which are not connected to the question asked, (*I like summer*, instead of *winter is not hot*) and (c) not giving any answer. Considered in this way, apart from its classification in learning process strategies, *avoidance* presents a clear correspondence with error analysis (Corder, 1967). *Avoidance*, considered as an attempt at eluding the use of negative constructions which may be unknown or difficult to use verbally, is a source of errors. Given this relation between the use of *avoidance* and error analysis, participants should show a decreasing trend in their use of *avoidance* as their learning progress.

The corpus used here for studying *avoidance* as a strategy of learning negation, is made up of recordings of nine participants from different age groups, children, adolescents and adults. They are all monolingual native Spanish speakers resident

in the Madrid region, and are in their first year of learning English (Neff, Liceras, Díaz, Alonso et al, 1997)².

The main consideration when selecting the subjects was their level of English proficiency. This was determined by a comprehensive-productive placement test made for the purpose. The subjects were all volunteers attending EFL classes at beginner level, and they were interviewed during their first year of English studies. All participants attended state schools.

Eight different tests were specially made in order to use a different one each month, thus avoiding a practice effect in the subject's answers. They included instructions and training exercises at the beginning of each task. The aim of the interviews was to elicit negative structures from the subjects at particular points in time. The interviews consisted of a number of tasks with at least ten different questions in each. The interview materials were based on three different types of tasks: free production tasks, guided production tasks, and controlled ones, so that subject's use of negative structures in various situations could be tested. All the pictures used to elicit data were easy to describe and kept in front of the subjects during the interview.

To meet the aims of the study longitudinal data was required from the earliest stages of their attempts to use the negative system. Therefore, data elicitation, in order to take into account the eventuality of the period of silence, began three months after the subject's first exposure to the target language structures. There were two reasons for this three month period, firstly, following Butterworth and Hatch (1978) and Bongaerts et al. (1995), it seemed a long enough period of time for subjects to make themselves familiar with the learning of English negative devices, and secondly, following Saville-Troike (1988) L2 learners – both children and adults – may go through a period of silence to prepare for the time they begin speaking the L2. This period is thought to take place during the initial three months.

Speech samples needed to be frequent enough to detect fairly small changes in the participants' rule system as manifested by their speech production. Therefore, subjects were interviewed once a month for eight months. All participants followed the same interview procedure in the same week, so their negation evolution could be compared. Each subject had a record sheet with the recorded date on it. To avoid strain on the participants, interviews lasted no longer than fifteen minutes. For each interview the subjects sat individually at desks, facing the interviewer either at their school or at the interviewer's home. The interviews were later transcribed in traditional orthography. After this, the recorded sessions were collected in one record for each subject. These records were used as the main source of data.

In this negation study each device used to mark negation is catalogued in the following way:

- *No V* construction: 'I *no* understand', 'I *no* can see'. 'They *no* have water'
- *Don't V* forms: 'We *don't* like it', 'I *don't* can explain', 'I *don't* have a woman'.

² The data used in this article is clearly acknowledged as coming from recorded interviews carried out in the DGICYT (PB94-1096-C02-02) *A Parametric Perspective of EFL Acquisition in Institutional Contexts*. Directed by J. Neff, J. M. Liceras and L. Diaz (1994-1997), in which I participated.

- *Auxiliary-negative forms*: ‘It’s not dangerous’, ‘He can’t see’, ‘I haven’t seen all of it’.
- *Analyzed forms of don’t*: (*do not, doesn’t, does not, didn’t, did not*): ‘I didn’t even know’, ‘One night I didn’t have the light’.

As mentioned before, the study also considers a fifth variable – *avoidance*.

6.1. A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSYS

Graphs 1 and 2 show the results obtained from an analysis of the corpus, showing the evolution of *avoidance* throughout the study period for each participant. The following four characteristics are seen from the graph:

1. The nine participants began the learning process by resorting to *avoidance* to a large extent. In the first test the participants used *avoidance* between 25% and 7% of the time.

In the second test the use of *avoidance* continued to be quite high, it ranged from between 9.5% to 37.5%, with participant 7 being the only exception, using it only 3.8%.

In the third test it ranged between 7% and 35%, with the exception of participant 6 who did not use it at all. In the fourth test there was a general increase in the percentage of *avoidance* used by the nine participants; ranging from 15% to 42%.

In the fifth test its percentage of use remained high for the majority of the participants, with values of between 8.6% and 60%. However, here there seemed to be a high dispersion of *avoidance* among the different participants.

In the sixth test they continued to use it in general, with high values but also with wide dispersion. Subject 1 did not use it at all, while participants 2 and 3 used it 25%, participants 4 and 5 used it about 33% and participant 7 used it 75% of the time.

In the seventh test there was an increase in use of avoiding strategy, by all of the subjects, with values ranging from 28.5% and 61%.

In the eighth test, the final one, usage of *avoiding* continued to be quite high, but only by some of the participants; five of them showed a limited resource, participants 5, 6,7,8 and 9.

2. Apart from being a cyclical resource, *avoidance* was always a very prominent strategy in the learning process of these participants. This is shown in Tables 1 and in Graph 3. The average use and variance of *avoidance* can be seen for each one of the nine participants throughout all eight tests.

Table 1. Average use and variance of *avoidance* for all nine participants throughout all eight tests.

<i>Subjects</i>	<i>Child 1</i>	<i>Child 2</i>	<i>Child 3</i>	<i>Adol. 1</i>	<i>Adol. 2</i>	<i>Adol. 3</i>	<i>Adul. 1</i>	<i>Adul. 2</i>	<i>Adul. 3</i>
Average	24.2	34	26.9	26.1	29.4	16.1	33.3	24.4	24.4
Variance	190.3	132.3	35.8	216.2	462.3	120.1	606	133.7	359.6

Throughout the learning process it can be seen that all the participants frequently resorted to *avoidance*. Adolescent 3 had the lowest average use, only 16.1%, followed by child 1 and adults 2 and 3, who used it for every fourth answer. The other participants used *avoidance* for every third answer. These high average values suggest that this evasive strategy is the most relevant in the learning process.

3. The participants, without exception, have shown a use of this strategy subject to continuous oscillations. The fluctuations in its use appear to refute the statements made by some authors, (Selinker, 1972), on the continuity of the learning process, as these participants demonstrated their learning through alternations and with strong discontinuity. This discontinuity of learning is reaffirmed by the high values of the variances of Table 1, for all of the subjects, especially child 1, adolescent 2 and adults 1 and 3.
4. In spite of what past theoretical considerations would predict, the participants have not shown a significant tendency to disregard this strategy.

Points 1 to 4 lead to the conclusion that even when the participants resorted to *avoidance* in an oscillatory way, its usage still remained high throughout the eight tests in this study. There was no significant tendency towards a decrease in its usage.

6.2. A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Having shown the importance of the avoidance strategy for the nine subjects, the findings will now be compared to Tarone's and other classifications. Although this study has certain limitations, the following seem to be of special interest:

1. A significant number of subject responses are noted which incorporate *Avoidance of the topic*, as they either simply do not reply or do so with affirmative structures.

Adult 3. Question: 'Did you go to swim yesterday?'
Answer: 'It is winter'

Child 1. (Exercise of transformation into a negative sentence). Question: Are there two helicopters?
Answer: 'There are one helicopter'

Child 3. Question: 'Did you think about it?'
Answer: ————— (silence)

In all cases interviewers checked that the subjects had understood the questions. More than half of the subjects responded by using *avoidance* in these ways.

2. A significant number of responses corresponding to the *Semantic Avoidance* category³ were also noted.

Adult 1. Question: ‘Was your mother sleeping when you arrived?’

Answer: ‘She was at work’

Adult 2. Question: ‘Were those children singing a song?’

Answer: ‘They not sing’

Adult 3. Question: ‘Are those children going to Madrid?’

Answer: ‘They have no car’

It is also noteworthy that the subjects who gave these responses were in general those who made the most rapid progress in English. We note that the avoidance strategy in this case was used to compensate for the absence of the correct negative form.

3. The *stopping mid-sentence* category was noted in responses such as:

Child 1. Question: ‘Do you usually catch the bus at 6:30?’

Answer: ‘I am not...’

4. A fairly high frequency of *word invention* was also found, which was often mixed with Spanish terms.

Child 1. In the ‘placard’ (for “señal”) no write metro.

Child 2. A girl isn’t skate in a ‘pist’ (for “pista”).

Child 3. The grandfather isn’t reading the ‘periodic’ (instead of ‘newspaper’)

Adult 1. Luis isn’t eating in the “camp” (for ‘countryside’)

5. The *asking for help* category was noted in the responses through attitudes towards looking for help by gestures, facial expressions or trying to guess what the interviewer was looking for. Often direct requests for help were made:

Adolescent 2. “In the picture there isn’t a... ¿cómo se dice?”

Help: wheel

Adolescent 2: “¿Cómo?”

Help: wheel

Adolescent 2: ‘In the picture two there isn’t a wheel’

³ In some of these examples it may be questioned whether the answers given can be considered as *avoidance* or are attempts to give additional information. The fact that the same subjects did not use the negative form in other cases either, suggests that they are examples of *avoidance*. Nevertheless they are so few that in any case the conclusions are valid.

Adolescent 3. 'The man don't ... "no sé"

Help: a suitcase

Adolescent 3: '¡Ah, claro! The man don't have a suitcase'

Adult 2. Question: 'Is this boy playing basket?'

Answer adult 2: 'He is playing.... "¿cómo se dice?"'

6. The *change of language* category was used very frequently by the subjects:

Child 3. Question: 'What do you do at weekends?' (Hobbies)

Answer: The hobbies "son" play "látigo" and "pilla pilla", and "pillar a los chicos"

Adult 2. Question: 'Is Luis going home?'

Answer: "a" Benidorm

Adult 1. Question: 'Does Mr. Brown wear a hat?'

Answer: No, tiene un paraguas.

Considering points 1 to 5, it appears that the participants responses fit mainly Tarone's classification system. They especially used *avoidance of the topic*, *word invention*, *asking for help* and *change of language*. This study also provides evidence for the presence of transfer. The subjects resorted to *avoidance* as a form of linguistic transfer, both positive and negative. There is an important correlation between the varieties of *avoidance* and the most marked forms in Eckman's (1982) sense. *Avoidance* was very frequent when subjects could have used the *don't* and *analysed forms of don't*.

Adult 3. (Exercise of transformation into a negative sentence). Question: 'Does the man want to eat?'

Answer: 'The man isn't want⁴'

Adolescent 2. (Elicit a negative).

Question: 'Do you study on Sundays?'

Answer: 'I study in the college'

However, subjects showed there was a complex relation between positive transfer in the *No+V* and *aux-neg* forms, and *avoidance*.

At times the subjects resorted to *avoidance* when they realised that using *aux-neg* instead of *don't +V* or *analysed don't* was not correct. So, *avoidance* and the *No+V* and *aux-neg* forms were used as alternatives.

⁴ It was noted that these were errors and conscious attempts to avoid the use of the *don't V* form.

7. STUDY OF AVOIDANCE DEFINED BY AGE GROUPS

Graph 4 shows the evolution of *avoidance* by age group, i.e. children, adolescents and adults. From this graph it can be deduced that:

1. The three age groups show examples of improvement and deterioration throughout the learning process. However, taking the eight tests overall, none of the three groups show any significant tendency towards a decrease in their use of *avoidance*.
2. The children's group shows the highest and most stable use of *avoidance*. In the first four tests, values remain around a significant 32%. In tests 5 and 6, they improve considerably, with the use of *avoidance* at around 17%. Finally they show a clear deterioration in the last two tests, 7 and 8, reverting back to using *avoidance*, around 30% of the time.
3. The adolescents, in spite of being the group with the lowest average usage, show a high and very fluctuating use of *avoidance*. They start off very high (40%), later decreasing in tests 2 and 3, showing a clear improvement in their learning. From that point on, they showed a deterioration in tests 4, 5, 6 and 7, where avoidance reached a figure of 43%. In test 8 they showed notable signs of improvement, reducing *avoidance* to 7%. The high variance of this age group, (197), confirms the fluctuating characteristic of the learning process.
4. The adults also showed a significant use of this learning strategy, and the highest fluctuations. This group started learning with a very high use of *avoidance*, (40%, which diminished notably in the second test (10%). In tests 3, 4 and 5, *avoidance* increased considerably, reaching 45%, which demonstrates a clear deterioration in the learning process. However, in tests 6, 7 and 8, they gradually reduced the usage of *avoidance*, improving their learning process, as too did the adolescents. The path of *avoidance* use for the adults almost parallels that of the adolescents.

The data in Table 2, plotted also on Graph 5, corresponds to the averages and variances of the usage of *avoidance* for each age group. This data allows an expansion of the previous analysis

Table 2. Average use and variance of avoidance by the children, adolescents and adults.

	<i>Children</i>	<i>Adolescents</i>	<i>Adults</i>
Average	28.25	23.9	27.4
Variance	56.6	197	208

The average use of *avoidance* by the three age groups was quite similar, apart from the small gap between the adolescents compared to the children and the adults. It can be seen that the three age groups used *avoidance* every fourth answer they give. This reaffirms the importance of this strategy. As for variance, there is a much more stable usage for the children than for the adolescents or the adults, who have similar values for their variances.

I conclude that the three age groups used *avoidance* to a large extent, and in a similar way. However, although the adolescents and the adults tried to reduce its usage, the children appeared to be anchored down by this strategy.

8. COLLECTIVE CONSIDERATION OF ALL NINE PARTICIPANTS, WITH REGARD TO AVOIDANCE

Graph 6 shows the evolution of *avoidance* when all nine participants are considered collectively. We conclude from this that:

1. The resource of *avoidance* shows a clearly fluctuating use, decreasing in tests 1 to 3, increasing in test 4, stabilizing in tests 5 and 6, increasing in test 7, and considerably decreasing in test 8.
2. No significant reduction with regard to this resource has become evident at any point in this period. As I have repeatedly stressed, some theoretical studies lead to the idea that *avoidance* would possibly be substituted for negative verbal forms (auxiliary-negation, *don't V* and *analysed don't*), or by those of transition (*No+V*). However, this was not the case at all.
3. The average value of *avoidance* use by the nine participants throughout the tests was 26.5%. This shows that on average, the participants resort to *avoidance* in one out of four times that they give an answer.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Avoidance is a field only recently covered in SLA research publications, but it has already provoked a wide theoretic literature, fundamentally centred on establishing its concept and trying to improve its classification. However, it is currently the subject of very few empirical studies.

In this article I have presented a study of the learning process of negation in English by nine native Spanish speaker participants in an EFL context. From the study, it can be seen that all of the participants without exception use and revert back to *avoidance* as a learning strategy. On average they used *avoidance* in every fourth answer.

It was also noted that the usage of this strategy fluctuates throughout the controlled tests, more so in the adults and adolescents than in the children, who showed no sign

of abandoning this strategy. This fluctuating path highlights the fact that the learning process of our participants was not one of continuous improvement.

Table 3. Average use of negative forms and avoidance in the eight tests, by all nine participants.

<i>No+V</i>	<i>don't V</i>	<i>Aux-neg</i>	<i>Analysed don't</i>	<i>Avoidance</i>
37.6	5.9	24.5	5.5	26.5

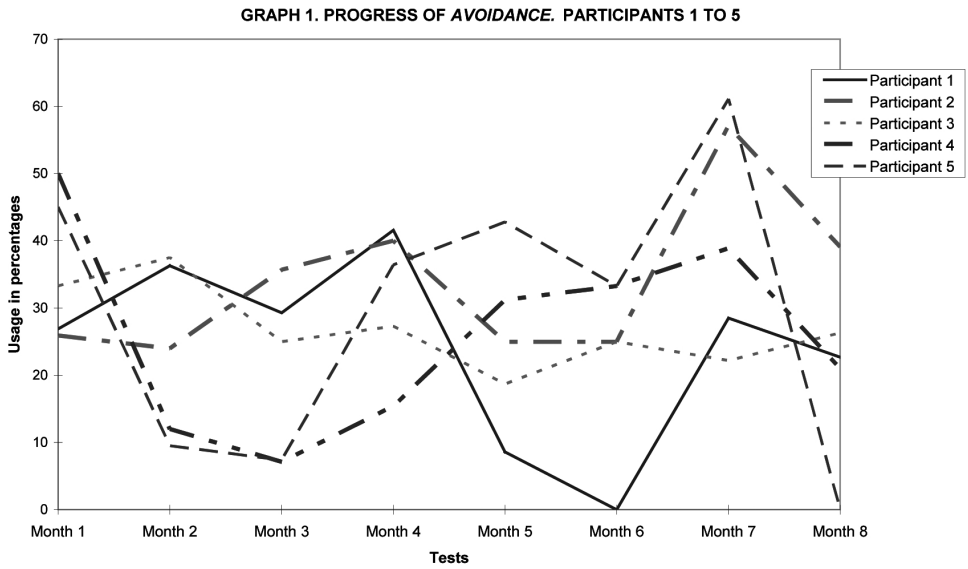
The relevance of *avoidance* can be seen in Table 3. It shows the use of the different negative forms during the specified time-scale of eight months. In this table shows that *avoidance* was the second most used form by all nine participants. It is only exceeded by the transitional form *No+V*, clearly used more than any of the other correct verbal forms. This seems to imply the need to include *avoidance* in the studies of SLA, at least for those people beginning their learning of the English language.

It has been shown that the subjects used *avoidance* in accordance with the classification presented by Tarone et al., and that the category *avoidance of the topic* was the most used one.

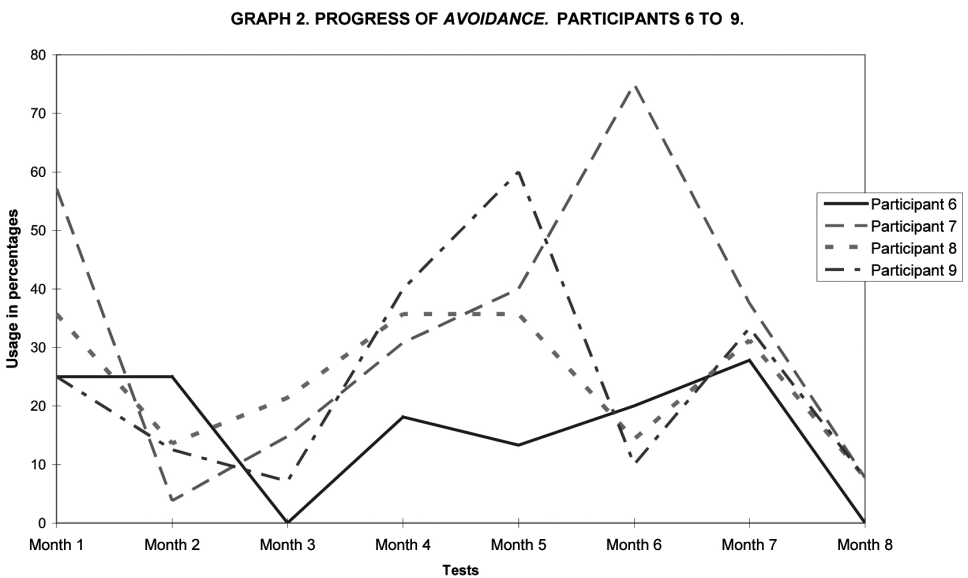
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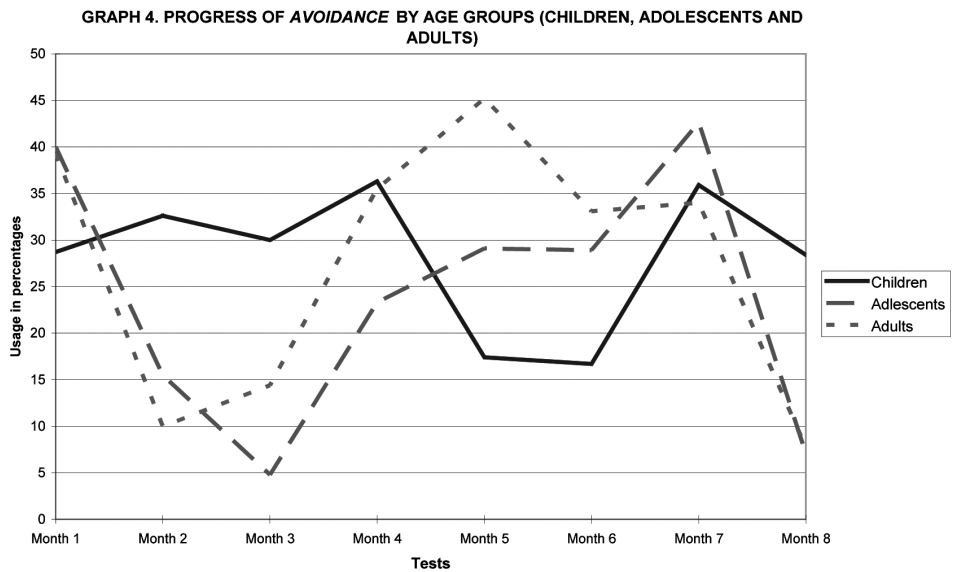
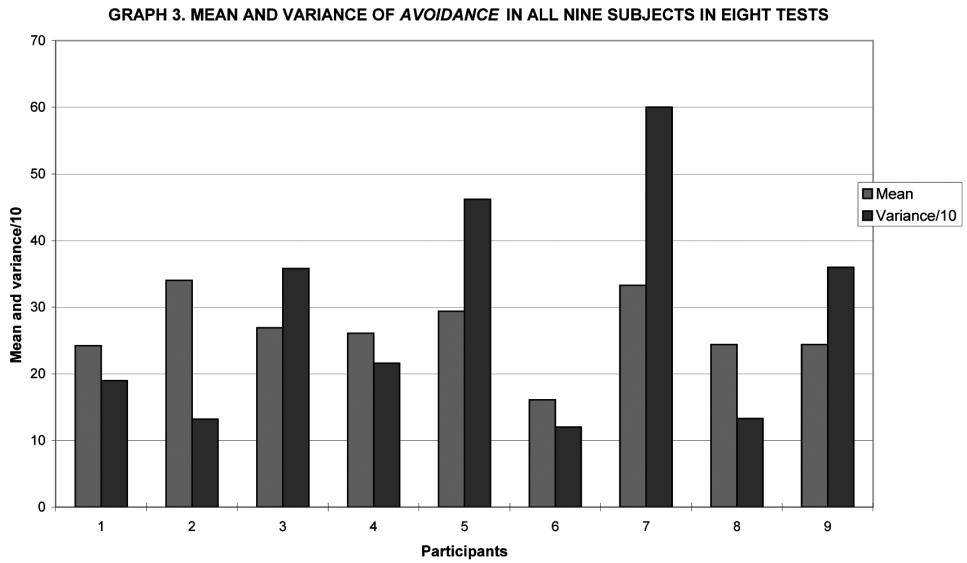
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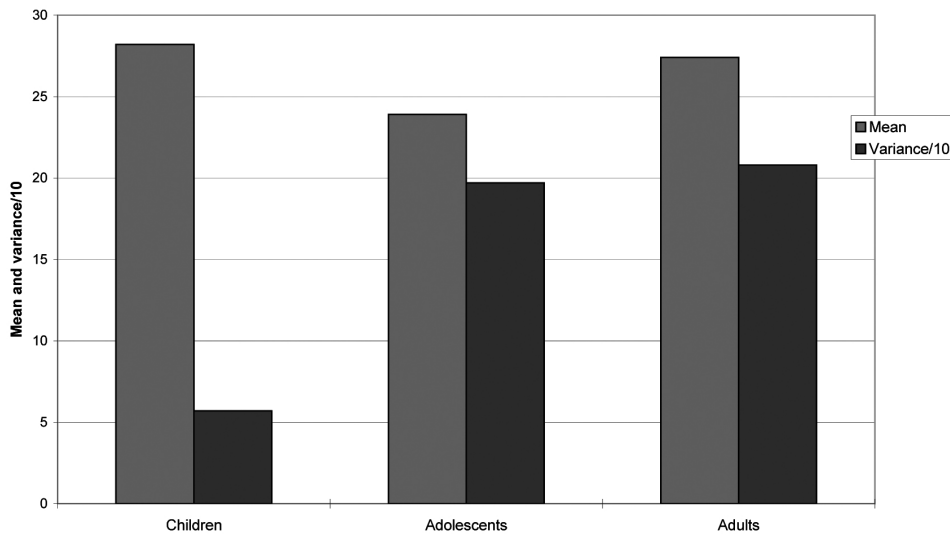


APPENDIX. GRAPHS 1 - 6





GRAPH 5. MEAN AND VARIANCE OF AVOIDANCE BY AGE GROUPS



GRAPH 6. PROGRESS OF AVOIDANCE BY ALL NINE PARTICIPANTS

