

## TOPIC-COMMENT SENTENCES IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

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<p><b>Corresponding Author</b> <b>Tran Thi Thuy Lien</b></p> <p>Vietnam - Korea University of Information and Communications Technology, The University of Danang</p> <p><b>Article History</b></p> <p>Received: 02 / 04 / 2025</p> <p>Accepted: 20 / 04 / 2025</p> <p>Published: 24 / 04 / 2025</p>	<p><b>Abstract:</b> Topic-Comment sentences (TCSs) have been shown to be common structures in many languages. However, they are one of the most controversial linguistic issues and thus pose challenges for a lot of language learners. With the purpose to examine the features of TCSs in Vietnamese and English, the purpose of this study is to improve understanding of these structures in both English teaching and learning as well as Vietnamese. The ultimate purpose of this research is to assist learners of the two languages in avoiding negative transfers and making better use of TCSs in translation and in everyday communication by offering a comparative examination of the structures in English and Vietnamese</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Topic-Comment; sentence structure; English-Vietnamese communication; English Vietnamese translation.</p> <p><b>How to Cite:</b> Lien, T. T. T., (2025). TOPIC-COMMENT SENTENCES IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS. <i>IRASS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences</i>,2(4)44-47.</p>
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### INTRODUCTION

Being a teacher of English as a foreign language (EFL) for more than 15 years now, I have been well-aware that the Topic-Comment structure has been a real challenge for my students. Because Vietnamese sentences do not require a grammatical subject if it can be deduced from the context, they specifically struggle to find the subject. Furthermore, the Topic—which might be the Subject, Object, or Adjunct of the Predicate—often comes at the start of a Vietnamese sentence. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine some common syntactic characteristics of TCSs in English and Vietnamese. In order to help Vietnamese learners of English avoid unfavorable transfer from Vietnamese Topic Comment phrases, enhance their translation skills, and improve the teaching and learning process, it also makes an effort to offer some helpful implications. To accomplish its objectives, the study is anticipated to address two

- What are the similarities between TCSs in English and Vietnamese?
- What makes TCSs in English different from those of Vietnamese?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Definitions

According to Reinhart (1987), since any part of the same sentence can serve as a topic in different contexts of utterance, topic is a term that cannot be defined directly on the basis of syntactic structures or semantic relation. Rather, it is a pragmatic relation. The “Topic”, according to the interpretation of Thái (1998), is somehow identical to the theme.

An unmarked noun phrase or its equivalent that comes before a clause and is connected to a location within the clause is

called a subject. An entity that was discussed in the prior discourse and is being discussed again in the current sentence is represented by a subject. The comment is the sentence that is connected to the subject in this manner. The structural position of the topic, its syntactic relationship to the verb, and its discourse function form the basis of this definition. Furthermore, Shi (2000) makes the assumption that the topic-comment construction in Chinese is a grammatical device that is built from syntactic processes and basic structures. In contrast, we use the following characteristics to determine topic:

- A topic is followed by a topic marker or by a pause.
- A topic is definite or generic.
- A topic usually occupies the sentence-initial position.
- The pragmatic concept of relevance or subcategorization can be used to relate a topic with its comment. The syntactical relationship between a topic and a place within the comment clause is not always true.

"Comment" is "new," meaning it is additional information, but "Topic" is the information that is "given" and regarded as being known by the hearer, with further information built upon it. Here, "new" encompasses both the significant and the unknown or difficult for the hearer to access.

#### Types of Topic-Comment Structures in English

A topic containing a resumptive pronoun in the comment clause is the first kind. In the comment clause, the topic is the antecedent of a resumptive pronoun. As seen in the example below, the topic and the resumptive pronoun share a coreferential referent:

- (1) As for Mr. Li, I gave him five apples. (Xu & Langendoen, 1985)

The second kind is called a topicalized clause construction, as in the following sentence, where the topic appears to have been taken out of its original postverbal object location, leaving a gap where it was originally extracted:

(2) As for Mr. Li, I know. (Liejiong & Langendoen, 1985).

Double nominative construction is the third kind of topic-comment structure. In a double nominative construction, possess and domain-subset are the two most common forms of semantic relationships between the two starting noun phrases. The remark clause's subject is considered a subset of the topic noun phrase's domain in sentence 3 below.

(3) As for giraffes, their necks are long. (Kroeger, 2004).

Adverbial phrases make up the fourth category of topic-comment structures. Although they are less frequently used as topics, adverbial phrases nonetheless function as the semantic frame and give context for the comment sentence. The example is shown below.

(4) In Thailand, you can eat many kinds of fruit (Liejiong & Langendoen, 1985). **2.3. Formations of Topic-Comment Structures in Vietnamese**

The various categories of subjects in Vietnamese sentences have been categorized by Rosen (1999). The following five topic-comment sentence structures are found in Vietnamese, under Rosen's classification.

#### *a. Apparent Long-Distance Dependencies*

The topic is either coreferential with the missing subject as in example (5), with an empty direct object as in (6), or indirect object as in (7). The topic is in bold letter, the gaps are represented by

A bold face **e** coindexed with the noun phrase which is the understood filler, and in the translation the pronoun put in parenthesis is coreferential missing subject.

5) **Tôi**, thì **e** chỉ muốn về Việt Nam.

I topic marker only wish return Vietnam

Translated English sentence: As for me, I only wish to return Vietnam.

6) **Quyển truyện đó**, tôi đọc **e** rồi.

Book that I read already

Translated English sentence: I've already read that book.

7) **Cô Lan**, thì ông Ba tặng **e** một bó hoa hồng. Ms Lan topic marker Mr. Ba gave (her) one bunch roses Translated English sentence: As for Ms Lan, Mr Ba gave her one bunch of roses.

#### *b) Coreferential Noun Phrase Topics in the Comment Clause*

In this formation, the topic is related to an overt constituent in the comment clause as it is coreferential with a noun phrase in the comment. Example (8) is a case where the topic corresponds to an overt subject and example (9), where the topic corresponds to an overt object.

8) **Ông Ba** ông ấy hay đi Đà Lạt lắm.

Mr. Ba Mr that often go Dalat very

Translated English sentence: As for Mr Ba, he often goes to Dalat.

9) **Giáp**, nó không dám làm việc ấy đâu.

Giap he not dare do thing that not at all

Translated English sentence: As for Giap, he doesn't dare to do that thing.

#### *c) Noun Phrase in the Comment Clause with Semantically Related Noun Phrase*

According to Rosen, this sort of structure is highly prevalent in Vietnamese. According to Chao, the subject-predicate in these constructs is embedded in another subject-predicate structure. Although the topic occasionally fills the space in the comment, Rosen thought that the relationship between the noun phrase topic and the noun phrase in the comment clause was not grammatical, thus she labeled this semantically connected.

10) **Hộc tủ** ấy thì tôi đã làm mất chìa.

Drawer that topic marker I anterior lose key.

Translated English sentence: As for that drawer, I have lost the key.

#### *d) Noun Phrase Topics in the Comment Clause Without a Corresponding Noun Phrase*

Regarding this type of construction, the topic of the Noun Phrase may not be connected to any of the comment's empty or explicit constituents. Let's look at two instances.

11) **Thú cưng**, tôi thích con mèo.

Animal I like classifier cat

Translated English sentence: As far as animals are concerned, I like cats.

12) **Điều gì** Giáp cũng biết.

Matter any Giap also know

Translated English sentence: Giap knows everything.

Rosen (1999) also noted that in these examples, there is hardly any syntactic relationship between the topic and the comment. In terms of semantic relationship, the comment can be considered a predication for the referent of the topic.

#### *e) Verb Phrase and Clausal Topic*

In Vietnamese, a noun phrase can also serve as a verb phrase in addition to a topic. As we will see in the example, there are instances when the topic contains a single-word verb that is repeated in the remark clause:

13) **Ăn**, thì ông Ba ăn khỏe lắm.

Eat topic marker Mr. Ba eat much very

Translated English sentence: As far as eating is concerned, Mr Ba can eat very much.

Additionally, the topic may be a verb phrase, as in the sentence that follows, in which only one word is repeated in the comment clause.

14) **Đi Sài Gòn** thì tôi đi mỗi tuần ba lần.

Go Saigon topic marker I go per week three time

Translated English sentence: As for going to Saigon, I go three times per week.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Data description is the main method in the current study, which is combined with the qualitative approach to make the data analysis more reliable. In order to prepare the base for the research, I proceeded to carry out the tasks as follows:

- Defining the theoretical framework that guides our investigation.
- Collecting and analyzing data: I read books, articles, and materials on the internet to gather information related to TCSs in English and Vietnamese.
- Analyzing the findings and drawing conclusions.
- Putting forward some implications for the teaching and learning English and giving some suggestions for further research.

The two most crucial requirements to ensure the caliber of the data collection processes are validity and reliability. The majority of the study's conclusions come from the examination of data, statistics, and frequencies. Consequently, the study's objectivity is guaranteed.

## RESULTS

### *What are the similarities between TCSs in English and Vietnamese?*

Data analysis has found some significant similarities between English and Vietnamese Topic Comment sentences.

Firstly, as for the position, both languages consist of the topic appearing in the initial position and comment standing in the remaining part of a sentence.

Second, the topic and the resumptive pronoun share a coreferential referent, which is where the similarities reside. In other words, the comment contains a repetition of the noun phrase from the topic. In every topic-comment sentence, this repetition occurs frequently.. Here are two typical examples where the topic is repeatedly used in the sentence.

Vietnamese	English
<b>Ông Ba ông ấy</b> hay đi Đà Lạt lắm. (The subject is “Ông Ba”, which is then mentioned in the comment as the subject)	As for <b>Mr. Li</b> , <b>he</b> gave me five apples. (The subject is “giraffes”, which is then mentioned in the comment as part of the subject)
<b>Quyển truyện đó</b> tôi đọc nó rồi.	As for <b>Ms Lan</b> , Mr Ba gave <b>her</b> a bunch of roses.

In the first pair of sentences, the presumptive pronoun *Ông ấy* and *he* in the comment clause occupies the subjects and in the second pair, the presumptive pronouns *nó* and *her* functions as the objects in the comment clause. Also in the second pair, we can see the structure Object Subject Verb appears in the TCSs in the two languages.

The semantic link between the two opening noun phrases in the TCS demonstrates yet another similarity. According to Kroeger (2004), the two most prevalent relationships among these are possess and domain-subset. The noun phrases that serve as the comment clause's objects in the examples that follow are regarded as a subset of the topic noun phrase's domain:

Vietnamese	English
<b>Học tử</b> ấy thì tôi đã làm mất <b>chìa</b> . (The subject is “Học tử” in the topic, which has the possessive relationship with “chìa” in the comment)	As far as <b>animals</b> are concerned, I like <b>cats</b> . (The subject is “animals” in the topic, which has the possessive relationship with “cats” in the comment)

The noun phrase in the topic has a possessive relationship with the objects *chìa* and *cats* in both Vietnamese and English languages.

But occasionally, the noun phrase topic might have nothing to do with any of the comment's constituents. Despite the fact that this kind of issue is present in both Vietnamese and English, most Vietnamese translators find it challenging to translate it into English.

Vietnamese	English
Các bài học ở trường tôi không có thì giờ. (Translated: As far as lessons at school, I have no time)	As far as strength is concerned, these two people are equal.

In addition to the obvious grammatical similarities noted, we may observe that not all sentence subjects are noun phrases and that a topic can be a whole clause in both languages:

Vietnamese	English
Hễ mà anh ấy mở sâm banh thì chúng ta chỉ còn cái chai không thôi. (Translated: Whenever he opens a champagne, we only have the empty bottle)	Whenever she goes out, she does not come home until midnight.

### *What makes TCSs in English different from those of Vietnamese?*

Despite many similarities between TCSs in Vietnamese and English which have been discussed in the previous part of this chapter, there are several typical differences which create challenges to the transferring of TCSs from one language to the other.

First off, in Vietnamese, the subject can be left out when the topic's noun phrase and the comment's subject are co-referential. Nevertheless, in English, the topic cannot be omitted. Let's examine some examples:

Vietnamese	English
Tôi thì <b>e</b> không ngủ được. (Translated: As for me, I cannot sleep)	As for me, I only want to return Vietnam.

As is evident, the Vietnamese sentence has a gap that shows the topic ignored in the comment. This is a regular occurrence in both written and spoken forms. However, in order to correct the grammatical norm in the English language, the topic must be repeated; the exception is only permitted in spoken form.

In this instance, it is also observed that the noun phrase in the topic and the comment remains the same in the Vietnamese sentence, however the two noun phrases in the English sentence differ in terms of part of speech in accordance with grammatical norms. An object must come after the topic marker "as for" or "as far as," and this object becomes the subject pronoun in the statement. The English subject marker may alter the noun phrases' form, whereas the Vietnamese topic marker does not.

The following sentences demonstrate the impact of subject markers in English:

Vietnamese	English
Ăn, thì ông Ba ăn khỏe lắm. (Translated: As for eating is concerned, Mr Ba can eat very much.)	As far as talking is concerned, Mrs. Ba talks a lot.

## DISCUSSION

This study has found both similarities and differences in the topic-comment sentence structures between English and Vietnamese. It has been implied that the major problem for most of the students can be how to handle the types of Vietnamese sentences topic structure, especially those in which the topic coincides with the subject or the main verbs. In sentences with verbal topics, students seem to have problems changing the form of the verbs: some may not know how to formulize appropriately, and some may know they have to change part of speech of the verbs, but cannot derive them in an appropriate way. Another problem facing Vietnamese learners of English could be that they are unable to recognize the presence, function, as well as the compulsory position of the topic in a sentence.

It is very evident that the verb phrase serves as the topic in the Vietnamese sentence, and as we covered in the previous part, the verb phrase's form remains the same in both the topic and the comment. However, the verb phrase "talk" in the English sentence gets transformed into a gerund in the topic because of the topic marker, which results in a change in the verb phrase's form. Given that the majority of Vietnamese English language learners are heavily impacted by their mother tongue, this is an important factor.

## CONCLUSION

Following a descriptive research approach, this study has highlighted some important findings. The most striking similarities of TCSs in Vietnamese and English lie in the initial position of the topic and the remaining part of the comment. Additionally, TCSs in both languages have a

coreferential referent, which means the noun phrase in the topic appears again in the comment. The most noticeable feature that distinguishes the two structures in both languages is the possibility of topic omission only in Vietnamese when the noun phrase in the topic and the subject in the comment are co-referential.

While there have been a number of studies and articles on topic-comment conducted in several languages including Vietnamese, a deep contrastive analysis between Vietnamese and English topic-comment structures at sentential level has been overlooked. Therefore, this study will be necessary and justifiable in the fields of linguistics and language teaching and learning in both English and Vietnamese.

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