



Tag Questions in English and Vietnamese: A Contrastive Analysis of the Syntax–Pragmatics Interface and Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract

This study presents a qualitative contrastive analysis of tag questions in English and Vietnamese, focusing on their structural characteristics and pedagogical implications for English language teaching. While previous research has examined English tag questions and Vietnamese sentence-final particles separately, there remains a lack of integrative studies that jointly account for their syntactic, pragmatic, and prosodic dimensions across languages. Drawing on secondary data from authoritative grammar references and relevant linguistic studies, the analysis shows that English tag questions are syntactically complex, requiring auxiliary selection, subject–auxiliary inversion, polarity reversal, and intonational variation to encode speaker stance and communicative intent. In contrast, Vietnamese relies on sentence-final particles such as *phải không*, *à*, and *sao*, which convey interpersonal meanings without significant syntactic manipulation. These differences provide a theoretically grounded explanation for commonly reported learner difficulties, including incorrect auxiliary use, failure to reverse polarity, overreliance on invariant tags, and limited awareness of intonational meaning. The findings highlight the importance of instructional approaches that integrate syntactic rules, pragmatic functions, and prosodic features to support learners' communicative competence.

INTRODUCTION

Tag questions (TQs) constitute a significant linguistic resource in interpersonal communication, enabling speakers to negotiate meaning, seek confirmation, soften assertions, and manage social relationships in discourse. In English, TQs are commonly realized through a bipartite structure consisting

of a declarative clause followed by an interrogative tag, which together encode both grammatical and pragmatic meanings. As such, TQs have long been regarded as a complex interface phenomenon involving syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and prosody (Quirk et al., 1985; Celce-Murcia et al., 1999; González, M., & Silvano, M., 2022).

From a structural perspective, English TQs are governed by a set of formal constraints, including auxiliary selection, subject–auxiliary inversion, polarity reversal, and agreement between the main clause and the tag. In addition to these syntactic requirements, intonation plays a crucial role in signaling speaker attitude and communicative intent, particularly in distinguishing between confirmation-seeking and rhetorical uses (Quirk et al., 1985). Consequently, the appropriate use of English TQs requires not only grammatical accuracy but also pragmatic and prosodic competence.

Vietnamese, however, employs a markedly different system for expressing similar interpersonal meanings. Rather than relying on syntactic manipulation, Vietnamese typically uses sentence-final particles such as *phải không*, *đúng không*, *à*, *hả*, and *sao* to form tag-like constructions. These particles are pragmatically rich and multifunctional, encoding confirmation, politeness, surprise, emphasis, or challenge depending on context, speaker stance, and discourse relations (Nguyen, 2012; Pham, 2012; Tran, 2024). Unlike English TQs, Vietnamese tag constructions do not require auxiliary verbs, polarity reversal, or subject agreement, and grammatical meaning is largely inferred from pragmatic cues.

The typological contrast between English and Vietnamese TQs has important implications for second language learning. Previous studies have shown that Vietnamese learners of English frequently experience difficulties in forming and interpreting English TQs, particularly in selecting appropriate auxiliary verbs, reversing polarity, and using intonation accurately (Nguyen & Dao, 2018). Learners often overgeneralize invariant tags such as, *isn't it?* or transfer Vietnamese pragmatic particles directly into English, resulting in non-target-like usage. These difficulties can be explained by negative transfer from the learners' first language, where TQs are pragmatically driven rather than syntactically constrained (Lado, 1957; James, 1980).

Although TQs have been extensively examined in traditional descriptive

grammars (Quirk et al., 1985; Celce-Murcia et al., 1999) and Vietnamese discourse-oriented studies (Nguyen, 2012; Pham & Brunelle, 2019), more recent research has increasingly adopted empirical and discourse-based approaches to investigate their use in authentic communication. These studies highlight the role of TQs and sentence-final particles in expressing speaker stance, managing interpersonal relations, and organizing interaction in real-time discourse (Tran, 2024).

In Vietnamese, sentence-final particles have been analyzed as multifunctional elements sensitive to contextual and interactional factors, as well as components of the clause periphery encoding speaker–addressee relations (Nguyen, 2021; Duffield, 2025). Recent empirical work further demonstrates that forms such as *đây*, *đấy*, and *kia* function as interactional markers expressing epistemic stance and shared knowledge in conversation (Adachi, 2025).

However, existing studies tend to examine English TQs and Vietnamese particles separately, often prioritizing either structural description or pragmatic interpretation. As a result, there remains a lack of integrative contrastive research that simultaneously accounts for syntactic structure, pragmatic function, and prosodic meaning across the two languages.

In response to this gap, the present study conducts a qualitative contrastive analysis (CA) of TQs in English and Vietnamese, focusing on their structural characteristics, pragmatic functions, and pedagogical implications.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in CA to examine the structural and pragmatic characteristics of TQs in English and Vietnamese. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study focuses on describing linguistic patterns and interpreting functional meanings rather than measuring statistical frequency or testing hypotheses quantitatively. CA is particularly suitable for identifying similarities and differences between languages and for explaining potential learning difficulties in second language acquisition (Lado, 1957; James, 1980; Fisiak, 1981).

The data for this study were drawn from secondary sources, including authoritative English grammar references, Vietnamese linguistic studies, and

peer-reviewed journal articles. Examples of English TQs were extracted from comprehensive grammatical works such as *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk et al., 1985) and pedagogical grammar descriptions commonly used in English language teaching (Celce-Murcia et al., 1999). Vietnamese tag-like constructions were obtained from descriptive linguistic studies on sentence-final particles and discourse markers in Vietnamese (Nguyen, 2012; Pham, 2012; Tran, 2024). These sources were purposively selected to ensure descriptive accuracy, theoretical reliability, and representativeness of standard usage in both languages. More specifically, the selection of data sources was guided by three criteria: (1) scholarly credibility, including peer-reviewed publications and widely recognized grammatical references; (2) descriptive comprehensiveness, ensuring that the sources provide detailed accounts of structural and functional aspects of TQs; and (3) pedagogical relevance, particularly in relation to common learner difficulties in English language teaching contexts. Sources focusing on highly specialized, dialectal, or less attested usages were excluded to maintain consistency and generalizability of the analysis.

The unit of analysis in this study is the TQ construction, defined as a clause-final element used to seek confirmation, express the speaker's attitude, or manage interpersonal interaction. In English, this includes canonical TQs with auxiliary–subject inversion as well as selected invariant forms. In Vietnamese, the analysis focuses on commonly used sentence-final particles functioning as TQs, such as *phải không*, *đúng không*, *à*, *hả*, and *sao*. Only examples illustrating typical and pedagogically relevant usage were included, while highly marked or dialect-specific forms were excluded.

The data analysis followed three main stages. First, TQs in each language were described independently in terms of their formal structure, polarity patterns, and pragmatic functions. For English, attention was given to auxiliary selection, subject agreement, polarity reversal, and intonation patterns. For the Vietnamese, the analysis focused on particle choice, discourse function, and contextual interpretation. Second, the findings from each language were systematically compared to identify similarities and differences in how equivalent communicative purposes are realized. Finally, the contrastive results were interpreted from a pedagogical perspective to identify

potential sources of learner difficulty and areas of negative transfer for Vietnamese learners of English.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, source comparison was achieved by consulting multiple authoritative sources in both languages. The interpretations were cross-checked against existing linguistic descriptions and empirical studies to ensure consistency and validity. However, as the study relies on secondary data, it may not fully capture the variability and interactional dynamics of naturally occurring discourse. The absence of primary corpus data or learner-based evidence may also limit the empirical generalizability of the findings. Future research is therefore recommended to incorporate corpus-based or experimental approaches to validate and extend the present findings. Although the study does not involve human participants, ethical considerations were observed by accurately citing all sources and avoiding data misrepresentation.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented and discussed in relation to the structural and functional characteristics of TQs in English and Vietnamese. Drawing on a qualitative CA, this section first examines the syntactic features of English TQs, followed by their pragmatic and prosodic functions. It then analyzes Vietnamese tag-like constructions, with particular attention to sentence-final particles and their interactional meanings. Finally, a contrastive discussion is provided to highlight key cross-linguistic differences and to explore their implications for second language learning and teaching.

Syntactic Features of English Tag Questions

The analysis of English TQs reveals that their formation is governed by a set of strict syntactic constraints. Canonical English TQs consist of a declarative clause followed by a reduced interrogative tag containing an auxiliary verb and a subject pronoun. A defining feature of this construction is polarity reversal, whereby an affirmative statement is typically followed by a negative tag and vice versa. This pattern reflects the speaker's assumption regarding the propositional content and their expectation of agreement from the addressee (Quirk et al., 1985; Celce-Murcia et al., 1999).

This pattern is illustrated in the following examples:

- (1) Your aunt isn't visiting, is she? (Celce-Murcia et al., 1999, p. 259)
- (2) She assigned homework, didn't she? (Celce-Murcia et al., 1999, p. 260)

In addition to polarity reversal, auxiliary selection and subject agreement are central to the grammaticality of English TQs. The auxiliary verb in the tag must correspond to the tense, aspect, modality, and polarity of the main clause, while the subject is realized as a pronoun referring back to the subject of the declarative clause. For instance:

- (3) Joan recognised you, didn't she? (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 810)
- (4) We ought to go, oughtn't we? (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 812)

These formal requirements contribute to the structural complexity of English TQs and help explain why they pose difficulties for learners whose first language does not employ auxiliary-based question formation.

Pragmatic and Prosodic Functions of English Tag Questions

Beyond syntax, English TQs are strongly shaped by pragmatic and prosodic factors. Intonation plays a crucial role in signaling speaker stance and communicative intent. Rising intonation typically signals genuine uncertainty or a confirmation request, whereas falling intonation indicates that the speaker assumes the proposition to be true and seeks agreement or interpersonal alignment (Wei, et al. 2023; Quirk et al., 1985).

The same syntactic structure may thus convey different meanings depending on prosodic realization:

- (5) He likes his job, doesn't he? (rising intonation: verification)
- (6) It's wonderful weather, isn't it? (falling intonation: confirmation)
- (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 811)

In addition to canonical forms, invariant tags such as, *right?*, *eh?*, and *don't you think?* are also commonly used. These forms do not vary according to polarity or tense and are structurally simpler. However, they remain pragmatically significant, as they allow speakers to soften assertions, express uncertainty, or invite the addressee's opinion:

- (7) She passed the exam, right?
- (8) You're going, eh?
- (9) They forgot to attend the lecture, don't you think?
- (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 814)

Overall, English TQs demonstrate a close interaction between syntactic

structure and prosodic realization in encoding interpersonal meaning.

Structural and Pragmatic Features of Vietnamese Tag Questions

In contrast to English, Vietnamese TQs are structurally simple but pragmatically rich. Rather than involving syntactic manipulation, Vietnamese relies on sentence-final particles such as *phải không*, *đúng không*, *à*, *hả*, and *sao* to perform functions comparable to English TQs. These particles do not require auxiliary verbs, polarity reversal, or subject agreement, and their interpretation depends heavily on discourse context and speaker intention (Nguyen, 2012; Pham, 2012; Tran, 2024).

A typical example is:

(10) Họ nên có nhiều bài tập hơn, đúng không? (Pham, 2012, p. 23)

[They should get more exercise, shouldn't they?]

Vietnamese tag particles serve a wide range of pragmatic functions, including seeking confirmation, expressing politeness, indicating surprise, softening assertions, or challenging the interlocutor's assumption. For instance:

(11) Anh đã làm bài xong chưa? (Nguyen, 2012, p. 13)

(12) Hát chèo là từ miền Bắc à? (Tran, 2024, p. 74)

Unlike English, where meaning is encoded through syntactic structure and intonation, Vietnamese relies on lexicalized particles whose meanings are flexible and context-dependent. This reflects a broader typological tendency toward pragmatically driven meaning construction.

Contrastive Analysis and Pedagogical Implications

A comparison of the two languages reveals a fundamental typological contrast in how similar communicative purposes are realized. English TQs encode meaning primarily through syntactic structure and prosodic cues, whereas Vietnamese TQs rely on pragmatically driven sentence-final particles without structural manipulation.

This contrast helps explain the recurrent difficulties faced by Vietnamese learners of English. Learners often struggle with auxiliary selection, polarity reversal, and the appropriate use of intonation. They may overgeneralize invariant forms such as, *right?* or avoid TQs altogether, relying instead on simpler yes–no questions. These patterns can be attributed to negative transfer from Vietnamese, where tag constructions are structurally

uncomplicated and pragmatically flexible (Lado, 1957; James, 1980).

While previous studies have described English TQs and Vietnamese sentence-final particles separately, the present analysis provides a more integrated account by examining how syntactic, pragmatic, and prosodic dimensions interact across languages. The findings suggest that TQs should not be treated as functionally equivalent across languages, as similar communicative goals are realized through fundamentally different linguistic mechanisms.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results highlight the importance of integrating form and function in instruction; teaching English TQs solely as grammatical patterns may result in formal accuracy but pragmatic inappropriateness. Instead, instruction should incorporate syntactic rules, pragmatic meanings, and intonation patterns to support learners in developing more contextually appropriate and native-like usage.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The study demonstrates that English and Vietnamese tag questions differ fundamentally in how they encode interpersonal meaning: English relies on syntactically complex structures involving auxiliary selection, polarity reversal, and intonation, whereas Vietnamese uses pragmatically driven sentence-final particles without structural manipulation. This contrast helps explain Vietnamese learners' common difficulties with English tag questions, particularly in auxiliary use, polarity, and prosody, often resulting in negative transfer or overreliance on invariant forms. Pedagogically, these findings highlight the need for integrated instruction that combines syntactic accuracy, pragmatic awareness, and prosodic competence through form-focused exercises, intonation training, and contextualized communicative practice, alongside contrastive awareness activities to reduce cross-linguistic interference. However, as the analysis is based on secondary data, its claims remain theoretically grounded rather than empirically verified; thus, future research should incorporate learner data and more robust designs to further examine how instructional approaches impact learners' grammatical and pragmatic development in using English tag questions.

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