

# A Case Study on Learning Grammar among Junior High School Students: The Case of Negation

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**Abstract**-This is an initial study that through a case study research focuses on the problem of making negative sentences the Iranian junior high school learners of English may face in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). In this study, a pre-test was used based on their textbook which deals with negative sentence construction. Then the instruction on remedial strategies on six students in face to face instruction was started based on PPP (Presentation, Practice and Production) approach. The case study research design was implemented and after the identification of the problems that the learners committed, they received four sessions of negation treatment. Finally, a post- test on making negative sentences was given to the students. A Paired Samples *t*-test revealed that that using case study was useful enough to tackle those problems.

**Key Words:** Negation, Case study research, PPP approach, Remedial treatment

## Introduction

An obvious benefit of a case study is the increase of commitment and professionalism of the teachers involved to our understanding of how teachers work within the EFL classrooms (McDonough, 2002, p. 134). Nevertheless, a case study is one of those techniques many teachers and researchers, especially in Iran, do not pay considerable attention to. Although using a case study as McDonough (2002) stated is time-consuming cycles of reconnoitering, involving, evaluating the situation and repeating the same procedures, the author of this paper, considering its benefits, uses this technique to investigate the students' problems of making negative sentence (Gorjian, Alipour & Saffarian, 2012).

This study aims to identify negation problems that the students have in making negative sentences and make attempt to find out the reasons why they have these problems through a case study (Zhang & Wu, 2008). Furthermore, it is hoped that by doing this study, some solutions for overcoming the students' difficulties could be offered (Zhang & Wu, 2011a, 2011b). It is also expected that the findings of this study provide the English teachers with a valuable knowledge of how to teach negation that help them in teaching English in the future. To this end, these research questions have been proposed: 1) why do the junior high school students have

difficulties in making negative utterances? 2) What can a teacher do to tackle these problems and improve the students' ability to make negative utterances?

## Review of Literature

One of the few linguistic phenomena which seem to be universal in a very straightforward sense is negation. All human languages have means to overtly deny the truth of a proposition (Dahl, 1993, p. 914). Negation is part of grammar (the form and function of words). We make negative verb forms by putting *not* after an auxiliary verb (Swan, 1995, p. 352). In every day communication, negative sentences play a very important role with a high Frequency. However, using them correctly is a common problem many EFL junior high school students have in learning English. As a teacher, I have personally found that the comprehension and production of negative sentences in English is problematic for EFL students. As a result, since negation changes the meaning of utterances and the intention behind them, any difficulty in comprehension of negation makes problem for the understanding of the whole utterance. Hence, sufficient attention on negation should be given into consideration. For this reason, negation has been under the focus of many studies (e.g. Labov, 1972; Laka, 1990; Zanuttini, 1991). However, very few, if any, studies in Iran have

targeted this problem. Moreover, a case study to identify the EFL student's problems in negation and provide a plan to remove these problems is rather rarely found in literature. According to Horn and Kato (2000, p. 1), negative utterances are a core feature of every system of human communication and of no system of animal communication. Negation and its correlates—truth-values, false messages, contradiction, and irony—can thus be seen as defining characteristics of the human species.

*Do* is normally used if there is no auxiliary, and *do* is not used with another auxiliary verb. For the sake of easiness in learning negation the words *have* and *have* are treated as auxiliary verbs in negation at the beginner levels. Negative sentences in English can be classified into four types (i.e., Auxiliary negation, Noun phrase negation, Adverb negation, and Morphological negation. To limit the scope of the study, we deal with the first type which I demonstrated in Figures 1 and 2.

	Negative element + contracted forms	Examples
To be verbs	am+not=am not (*amn't) is+not=isn't are+not = aren't	I am not a nurse. He isn't at home. There aren't two pens on the desk.
Have and has as auxiliary verbs	*have+not = haven't *has+not = hasn't	We haven't a TV. Shiva hasn't a sister.

Figure 1. Auxiliary verbs

Tense	Negative element + contracted forms	Examples
Present Simple	do+not=don't does+not=doesn't	I do not (don't) play football. She does not (doesn't) play football.
Present Progressive	am + not = am not (*amn't) is+not=isn't are+not=aren't	I am not playing football.

Figure 2. Tense

In this type of negation, in order to form a negative sentence, "not" is inserted after an auxiliary verb or "be" in the positive one. In the following table, a summary of negation in Iranian grade two students' English book with some examples are presented. Negation and teaching negation has been addressed by many researchers. Among them, Hodgson (2011) performed an interesting work on teaching negation to EFL students. He made attempt to provide some ways by which teaching negation cause no frustration and suggested these different ways of teaching negation: Introducing not, looking at pictures, following verbal directions, and playing barrier games. Unfortunately, in Iranian researchers' studies, negation has not received considerable attention. Keshavarz (2003), in his contrastive analysis book, has predicted some errors might be committed by Iranian learners of English in making negation, but the experimental studies in this area is very scarce.

## Method

### Participants

This study aims to increase the knowledge and ability of making negative sentences by junior high school students studying in Nour1 School in Izeh. The scope of the study is limited to junior high school grade 2 students' book. Students were selected through the pre-test phase based on their English test scores. Then Six out of 24 students who got the scores around the mean were selected based on cluster random sampling method. The participants were

asked to change 30 affirmative sentences to negative sentences during the pre-test.

### Instrumentation

Two instruments were used in the process of data collection: (1) A grammar achievement test on negation including 30 affirmative sentences. Its reliability coefficient was calculated through KR-21 formula as ( $r=.68$ ), (2) A post-test teacher-made grammar test on negation based on the pre-test content with reliability coefficient calculated through KR-21 formula as ( $r=.79$ ). The time given for each was 20 minutes. After the construction, the test was examined by three experts for its content validity.

### Procedure

Thus, just negation with *to be verbs*, *have* and *has* and *main verbs of simple present tense* are included here. Data were collected through using a pre-test which revealed that the students have difficulties in making negative sentences covered in their books. The problem areas were found based on their answers to the pretest. Based on the answers to the pretest, the participants' areas of difficulties were investigated and the following problems were found in: (1) Making negative sentences from the sentences in which there is no auxiliary verb (Simple present tense sentences) is more difficult for them than those sentences with auxiliary verb (to be, have & has and present continues sentences); (2) Finding and

recognizing auxiliary verbs is problematic for them, therefore; in order to make a sentence negative, they add *not* to any part of speech in a sentence like after the main verb, subject and possession pronoun; (3) In sentences with auxiliary verbs like *to be verbs*, they added *don't* or *doesn't* after the auxiliary verb; (4) Using *No* at the beginning of the sentence when they want to change an affirmative sentence to a negative one; and (5) In simple present tense sentences they didn't know when to use *don't* and *doesn't*.

The following activities has been planned to overcome the problems the students have in making negative sentences:

*Direct instruction on negation (Presentation phase):* First the researcher explained that sentences in English can be negated through verb phrase negation. Verb phrase in English can be negated by inserting the negative adverb *not* after the auxiliary verbs of the verb phrase in the positively stated sentences. In simple present tense, lacking auxiliary verbs it is typically added with the auxiliary verb *do*.

*Production practices (Practice phase):* when the researcher taught the negative forms of *to be verbs*, he asked them to say some negative sentences about what there is not or there aren't in their class. This activity was also used about *have* and *has* and they were asked to say some negative sentences about what they and their friends have not. Similarly, it was done for simple present tense and present continues.

*Contrastive analysis of negation between English and Persian:* in order to comprehend the meaning and concept of negation, first the teacher does a contrastive analysis of negation in simple terms for students. That is, he compared and contrasts the negation in Persian and English using simple sentences. Subsequently, each student was asked to translate a negative sentence, given by the teacher, from Persian to English. The rationale for employing this technique is that making the students aware of the parameters of their native language will help them set up new parameters or switch the parameter opposite to their L1 setting (difference doesn't necessarily equal difficulty) (McDonough, 2002, p. 64).

*Special practice on negation:* the simplest activity for teaching negative sentences is to assign students a list of positive sentences to be turned into negative sentences. Since the participants were young and inexperienced in English, the researcher used simple sentences. At first the teacher makes some affirmative sentences, with a variety of subjects, to negative. Then, she gave a positive sentence to each student and they make that negative one by one. Another activity is to provide the students with several words-one of which is a negative form of verb phrase like "don't" or "isn't"- and the students were supposed to put the words in the correct order. This activity forces students to think slowly and carefully about each aspect of the sentence and the subsequent appropriate negative element. Furthermore, by this activity the students' ability in recognizing the verb

*Activities (Production phase):* The case study was done in four sections. In each section, one of those structures mentioned earlier (sentences with *to be verbs*, *have* and *has*, simple present tense and present continues) were taught and all the activities used in a case study was done for each structure.

After the application of the case study, affirmative sentences were given to the participants in the post-test phase. The learners wanted to change the sentences into negative.

## Results

Based on the students' answers, the following results were found:

Sample sentence 1: *There are five soldiers on the street.* Six out of ten students made it negative correctly. And four students failed to answer correctly. Two of them put *no* at the beginning of the sentence. And two of them used *don't* after the auxiliary verbs.

Sample sentence 2: *Shiva cleans her room every morning.* Three students answered correctly and seven students were wrong. Two of them used *not* after the main verb (*clean not*). Three students added *not* after the possessive pronouns (*her not*). Two of them used *isn't* instead of *doesn't* before the main verb.

Sample sentence 3: *My sisters are watching TV.* Six students were correct and four students answer incorrectly. One of them used *don't* instead of *aren't* (*don't watching*) and another one used *doesn't* before *watching*. The third used *don't* after *are* (*are don't watching*). And finally, the fourth one answered *No, she doesn't*.

Sample sentence 4: *He has a bicycle.* Six students' answers were correct. And four ones answered incorrectly. One of them added *not* before *has*. Two students used *isn't* and *aren't* before *has*. The last one put *No* at the beginning of the sentence.

Sample sentence 5: *Ali's friends go to the library in the afternoon.* Three students answered correctly and seven students' answers were incorrect. Three of them add *not* after the main verb (*go not*). Three of them add *not* after *Ali's* (*Ali's not*) while a student used *doesn't* instead of *don't*.

Sample sentence 6: *There is a white cat on the wall.* Five answers were correct and five students' answers were incorrect. One of them add *No* add the beginning of the sentence. Two students used *not* after *there* (*there not*). Another one added *not* after *white* (*white not*). And the last one used *doesn't* before *is*.

Sample sentence 7: *Our teacher is teaching English now.* Five answers were right and five students' answers were incorrect. Three of those students who answered incorrectly added *not* after *our teacher*. One of them used *don't* before *is*. And the last one

used *not* after *our*, in other words he added *not* after *our*.

Sample sentence 8: *I have a red scarf*. Five students' answers were correct. And the other five ones answered incorrectly. Two of them added *not* before *have*. Two students used *isn't* and *aren't* before *have*. And finally, one of them used *No* at the beginning of the sentence.

The results of post-test showed the students' progress in making negative sentences. All of them

negated the sentences which included auxiliary verbs correctly and just two of them failed to make negative sentences. They mostly used *doesn't* instead of *don't*. They also had problems with third person singular "s" when the used *doesn't*. For example: *\*She doesn't cleans the room*. Data were put into analysis through Paired Samples *t*-test to show the difference between the learners' pre- and post-test as it shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Statistics for differences between genders

Groups	N	Mean difference	df	Std. Deviation	<i>t</i>	P
Pre-test	6	-.250	5	1.89	-1.745	0.545
Post-test	6	2.382	5	.254	4.325	0.000

Significant at ( $p < 0.05$ )

## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has used a case study to investigate the students' problems in making negative sentences. The purpose was to increase the students' knowledge of how to make negation. After identifying the students' problems through a pre-test, the researcher used a case study research design to remedy their weaknesses (Zhang, Wang, Wu & Huo, 2011). The result of the post-test, performed after the case study, showed a good progress in students' making negative sentences. This research has some implications for English teachers in teaching negation. The most important one is that this research identified some problems which may exist for many EFL students. Being aware of these problems, the English teachers now are able to direct their teaching in the way these problems are removed (Zhang Wu, Wei & Wang, 2011). The results indicated that this case study was useful (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Naghizadeh, 2012). Therefore, it can be applied by the teachers. This [1] Dahl, O. (1993). *Negation in Syntax*. New York: de Gruyter.

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study is limited in some aspects. First, this study investigated negation of just those structures covered in Iranian junior high school students' grade two book and accordingly, of four types of negation in English only Auxiliary negation was included. So the case study and results cannot be generalized to all negations in English (Gorjian, B., Pazhakh, A. R., & Parang, 2012). Second, the results, plan, and activities used in this study were based on the research participants' problems and any implication of this study in other circumstances and conditions should be taken with caution. Finally, for further research, it is hoped that a research which take all negation into account will be done. A contrastive analysis of negation in Persian and English can also be done to predict the difficulties the students may have based on the differences of negation system in two languages.

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# **Vitae**

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