Teaching the grammar of questions and negations: an innovative approach

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Abstract

This article presents an innovative approach to teaching English tenses, more precisely to teaching the grammar of questions and negative sentences. It describes, analyses and compares the innovative top-down approach with the traditional methods. It introduces the reader to the theoretical concept of the English predicate structure, on which the new approach is based. Consequently, the paper explains how the theoretical approach may be beneficial in practice, i.e. in English language teaching. Compared to the traditional methods, the paper shows that the grammar of questions and negatives of all tenses can be explained using three simple rules. Finally, the paper lists the advantages and disadvantages of the new method and suggests suitable target students.

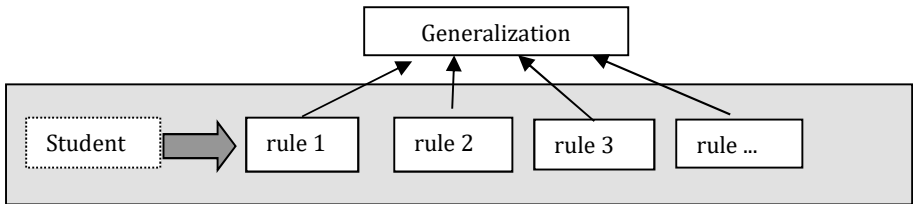**Keywords:** teaching grammar, question, negation, operator verb, auxiliary do

1.Introduction

Both theoretical linguistic research and English language teaching have the same area of study, namely the language. Despite this fact they are frequently handled as two separate disciplines, which rarely utilize the knowledge and experience of the other. This article will demonstrate that a theoretical approach to the language can lead to fertile ground for a new method of teaching English grammar. The study focuses on a tense system in English; more precisely it shows how the grammar of questions and negative sentences can be taught more effectively. The paper aims to combine theory and practice; i.e. the basis of the new method is first explained theoretically and then its practical application follows, accompanied by examples. Despite the fact that the basis of the approach proposed here originates in the concepts and principles of theoretical grammar, a successful use of this method in classes requires no theoretical knowledge, neither on the part of the teacher nor the student.
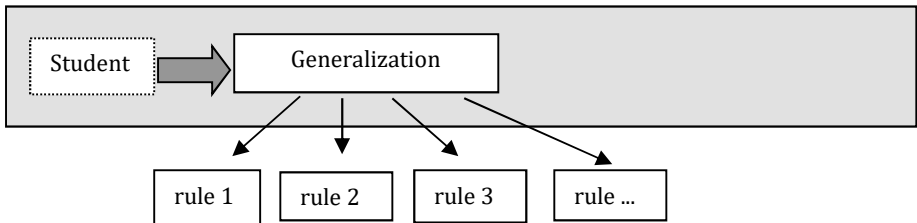
2.Bottom-up and top-down methods

In terms of teaching any part of the grammar of a foreign language in general, the teacher may choose between two methods, namely the bottom-up and the top-down approaches. The bottom-up method is based on providing students with a series of grammatical rules for each particular case. The stage of generalization follows, i.e. a student synthesizes the general principle and then is able to apply the general principle to the whole system−see figure 1.

Figure 1: Bottom-up method

In contrast to the bottom-up method, the top-down approach to grammar, which will be applied here, is based on the notion that students have access to the general rule first. Then, they can apply the general rule to particular cases−see figure 2.

Figure 2: Top-down method

3.Traditional bottom-up approach

For the purpose of this article, several widely-used text books and grammar books were randomly selected and analysed to ascertain how they present the grammar of questions and negatives. The analysis focused on well-established study and reference materials by major publishers such as Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Macmillan, and Pearson Education Limited. The set included:

- *Oxford practice grammar: Basic* (Oxford University Press), example pages: 2, 6, 10, 12, 20, 24, etc.
- *New Headway English course: Elementary student's book* (Oxford University Press), example pages: 126, 127, 129, etc.
- *Oxford English grammar course: Basic.* (Oxford University Press), example pages: 2, 18, 20, 22, 48, etc.
- *Macmillan English grammar in context: Essential with key* (Macmillan), example pages: 8, 20, 26, 36, etc.
- *Straightforward: Elementary student's book* (Macmillan), example pages: 30, 60, 61, etc.
- *Straightforward: Pre-intermediate student's book* (Macmillan), example pages: 14, 24, 44, etc.
- *Essential grammar in use* (Cambridge University Press), example pages: 12, 14, 16, 20, etc.
- *English grammar in use* (Cambridge University Press), example pages: 4, 10 and others
- *New grammar practice for pre-intermediate students* (Pearson Education Limited), example pages: 30, 32, 38.

All the books referred to cover approximately the levels A1-B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages since the grammar of questions and negative sentences is taught exactly at these levels.

As presumed, the majority of these study materials present the grammar of questions and negative sentences in a bottom-up method, i.e. each chapter focuses on one tense/aspect combination (for example present simple, then present perfect, etc.) providing the explanation of its pragmatic meanings and uses. The formal structure of the tense is demonstrated using several charts and tables for questions and negative sentences, as exemplified below. The examples are for present simple and present progressive respectively in Figure 3 and figure 4.

In this way, the paradigms are presented for each tense/aspect combination separately (past simple, past progressive, present perfect, future *will*), including the modal verbs (such as *can, should, must* etc.). The students, who are at the A1-B1 levels, are usually provided with three of these tables for each tense (one for a declarative sentence, one for questions and one for negative sentences), which they are required to learn. My own teaching experience based on working with Czech students shows that the presentation of grammar using the charts is difficult and confusing for the majority of students. Furthermore, it imposes high requirements on their ability to memorize patterns, and students often feel discouraged and unmotivated.

Figure 3: Paradigm for Present Simple

Declarative:

You	work	in Prague.
She/he	works	in Prague.

Negative:

You	don't	work	in Prague.
She/he	doesn't	work	in Prague.

Question:

Do	you	work	in Prague?
Does	she/he	work	in Prague?

Figure 4: Paradigm for Present Progressive

Declarative:

You	are	working	in Prague.
She/he	is	working	in Prague.

Negative:

You	are not	working	in Prague.
She/he	is not	working	in Prague.

Question:

Are	you	working	in Prague?
Is	she/he	working	in Prague?

Pointing out another drawback of the currently established method, students that have not yet fully mastered the system of the patterns presented in charts are prone to make mistakes resulting from mixing them, as is shown below in examples (1a–c); the asterisk symbol (*) is used here to mark a grammatically incorrect sentence.

1
a) * *Is he work in Prague?*
b) * *Does he working in Prague?*
c) * *Works he in Prague?*

Although the prevailing representation in books is the bottom-up method, the materials referred to sometimes do contain a chapter that presents the grammar in the top-down manner (such as in *English grammar in use*–page 98 or *Straightforward pre-intermediate student's book*–page 9), i.e. the overall view on forming the questions across the tenses is provided, such as in figure 5.

Figure 5: Grammar of questions

Are	you	working?
Did	you	work?
Does	he	work?
Can	he	work?

However, such summarizing top-down presentations are frequently found in chapters focusing on the grammar of questions, which are usually placed at the end of the book or section, or in the reference materials for intermediate students and higher. Apart from these rather limited exceptions, none of the grammar books present the grammar of English questions and negatives in a consistent top-down approach.

The following part of the paper aims to offer a competing method to teaching questions and negatives based on a top-down approach to the language. In contrast to the traditional bottom-up method, this approach teaches students to form questions and negatives first (top), and only then does the application to particular tense/aspect combination follow (down).

4. A Top-down approach - theoretical preliminaries

Scholars studying English have for centuries considered the language a system. A wide range of linguistic schools base their research on this assumption and without a doubt this idea is presupposed by the majority, if not all, contemporary

linguistic approaches. Therefore, it is all the more interesting that this well-established idea so deeply rooted in theoretical disciplines seems to be for the most part completely ignored in English language teaching. This article aims to show how the systematic approach to teaching English grammar can be beneficial for teaching the grammar of questions and negative sentences in the tense system.

4.1. Analytical predicates

The English predicate is to a certain extent analytical, i.e. it can consist of more than one 'verb', as shown in example 2.

2 *You have been studying a lot.*

Sentence 2 contains three 'verbs', namely *have, been* and *studying.* However, these three 'verbs' have a completely different status concerning their syntactic behaviour. The first 'verb' (*have* in this case) behaves differently from the verbs *been* and *studying*–for example it inverts in a question or the negative *not* immediately follows it, as shown in 3a–b.

3
a) **Have** *you | been studying a lot?*
b) *I have* **not** *been studying a lot.*

The above-mentioned properties are not shared by the other two verbs, as illustrated in 4a and 4b.

4
a)* **Been** *you have studying a lot?*
b)* *I have been* **not** *studying a lot.*

4.2.Operator verbs and their properties

The theoretical grammar manuals call the verbs possessing all these qualities *operators* (Quirk, 1985), or *auxiliaries* (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005). In this article, the former term will be used. As mentioned in the previous section, the *operators* have unique properties, which are discussed in detail in theoretical grammar manuals. For the purpose of this article, only two of the most obvious properties will be mentioned, namely the ability to invert in questions and the fact that they are followed by the negative particle *not.* The *operators* do, however, appear also in other contexts, such as elliptic contexts or question tags. Figure 6 shows which elements can appear in the *operator* position.

Figure 6: Operator verbs

Verb	Specification	Examples
modal verbs	*can, could, may, might, must, shall, ought, need, dare* (*dare* and *need* can also behave as full verbs)	He **may** be doing his homework now.
future *will*		He **will** be doing his homework.
verb *do*:	emphatic use	I **do** study hard!
verb *have*	in present perfect and past perfect tenses	He **has** done it. He **had** done it.
verb *be*	whenever it is finite (agrees with subject)	She **is** a student.

Any example chosen from the list above will demonstrate the *operator* properties, namely the inversion in questions and the negative *not* following the *operator*; see examples 5–7.

5
a) **Will** he be doing his homework?
b) He **will** not be doing his homework.

6
a) **Has** he done it?
b) He **has** not done it.

7
a) **Is** she a student?
b) She **is** not a student.

4.3. Non-operator verbs

Lexical verbs can, on the other hand, never appear in the *operator position* in English, which can be illustrated by example 8a–c showing that the full verb never inverts in questions. Neither does the negative *not* follow the lexical verb.

8
a) *He studies English.*
b)* *Studies she English.*
c)* *She studies not English.*

Besides the lexical verbs, there are also other verbs that never appear in the *operator* position–see figure 7.

Figure 7: Non-operator verbs

Verb	Specification	Examples
verb *do*	lexical use (as an activity)	*I **do** my homework every day.*
verb *have*	any non-perfective use	*I **have** two brothers*
verb *be*	if it follows another verb in the *operator* function, i.e. if it appears in the infinitive (a non-agreeing) form	*I have **been** studying a lot.*

Examples 9–11 demonstrate that these verbs do not manifest the properties of *operator verbs.*

9
a)* ***Do** I my homework every day?* lexical *do* of activity
b)*/* I ***do*** *not my homework every day.*

10
a)* ***Have** you two brothers?* non-perfective *have*
b)*/* I ***have*** *not two brothers.*

11
a)* *Have **been** you studying a lot?* verb *be*, which is not the agreeing
b)* *I have **been** not studying a lot.* Verb

4.4. Auxiliary do

Some theoretical linguistic approaches propose that the *operator verb* is present in every finite English sentence. This applies also to the sentences that have no such overt representative in them, as in present and past simple tenses–see example 12.

12 *He studies English.*

The sentence in 12 does not overtly contain any *operator*, since the lexical verb *study* does not have operator qualities, as already explained. For cases like 12, it can be assumed they contain the covert *auxiliary do,* which, however, becomes overt in question 13a, or once the sentence is negated, as in 13b.

13
a) ***Does** he study English?*
b) *He **does** not study English.*

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5. A top-down approach: practical application

This article claims that English language teaching can benefit from the division of the predicate into operator and non-operator parts. The next section of the article will demonstrate how this theory can be put into practice.

Contrary to the traditional time-consuming and demanding way of teaching the grammar of tenses based on presenting charts for question formation and negative structures as in figures 3 and 4, the top-down approach based on the previously described theory presents the grammar of questions and negatives by three simple rules.

5.1.The three rules

First of all, the students are to be provided with a list of *operator* verbs. This list will include the basic modal verbs (more advanced modals might be omitted for elementary and pre-intermediate students) and the finite forms of the verb *be.* The list is easy to remember and may look as follows–figure 8.

Figure 8: List of operator verbs

> *can, could, may, must, will, should*
> *am, is, are, was, were*

Once students are familiar with the list of the most basic *operator* verbs, they can be given the rules for their use.

Rule I describes how to form questions and negatives of sentences that contain an overt operator verb. It says that whenever there is an operator verb in a sentence, the question is made by inverting it with the subject. To create a negative sentence, the particle *not* is placed immediately after the *operator* verb; for an illustration, see the following examples in 14.

14
a) She can speak Czech.
b**) Can** she speak Czech?
c) She ca**n't** speak Czech.

Rule II explains how to form questions and negatives of sentences with an auxiliary *do.* It states that whenever there is no (overt) *operator* verb in a given sentence, the question and negative are formed adding the *operator do/does* for present and *did* for past. The inserted *do/does/did* then has the same behaviour as the *operator* verbs, i.e. it is to be inverted in questions and followed by *not* in negatives; see the examples in 15.

15
a) They work in Prague.They worked in Prague.
b) **Do** they work in Prague?**Did** they work in Prague?
c) They **do**n't work in Prague. They **did**n't work in Prague.

Rule III treats the placement of agreement *–s* for the 3rd person singular present for the auxiliary *do*, and at the same time it describes the placement of the *–ed* marker for the past. It says that *–s* or *–ed* markers must be attached to the *operator* verb *do* whenever it is present in a sentence. On the other hand, i.e. when none of the operator verbs appear in a sentence, the suffixes must be attached to the lexical verb in a sentence; see examples 16a–c.

16
a) She work**s** in Prague. She work**ed** in Prague.
b) Do**es** she work in Prague? D**id** she work in Prague?
c) She do**es**n't work in Prague. She d**id**n't work in Prague.

Obviously, rule III does not hold for all *operators* (for example modal verbs do not combine with -*s* suffix) and, therefore, this rule might be mentioned only when students have persistent problems with the correct placement of the suffixes.

5.2.Strengths and weaknesses
Using these three simple and easy-to-learn rules, students of English are able to form with confidence questions and negations at the earliest stages of learning English. Since the whole system can be nearly taught within one teaching hour, it is very efficient. Moreover, these rules apply to all tenses and modal modifications, namely the verb *be* in present and past, in present simple, present progressive, past simple, past progressive, future with *will,* future with *be going to,* modal verbs, etc. (the issue of perfect tenses will be discussed below). That is, as more complex tenses are taught later, the students easily extend their competence, as shown in figure 2.

Another asset of using the alternative approach is the fact that students are less likely to make mistakes caused by mixing different patterns, as mentioned in 1 and repeated here as 17 for convenience.

17
a)* *Is he work in Prague?*
b)* *Does he working in Prague?*
c)* *Works he in Prague?*

This method provides students with a smart way of learning to form questions and negatives in English, and since the rules presented here are based on the structural framework of the language, they therefore do not exhibit any

exceptions. However, there is one verb which may, due to its multitude of meanings, forms and uses, be confusing (though it is problematic in a traditional approach as well), namely the verb *have*. The exceptionality of this verb lies in the fact that it can function both as an *operator* as well as a *non-operator* verb. In present-day usage, the *non-operator* uses cover the lexical *have* 18a, the possessive *have* 18b, the modal *have* 18c. On the other hand, the *operator* uses *are* as well as the possessive *have got*–19a, and the perfective *have*–19b.

18
a) He *has* a bath every day.
b) He *has* one brother.
c) He *has* to study English.

19
a) He *has* got one brother.
b) He *has* finished his homework.

Due to this discrepancy, there is a question whether or not to include the verb *have* in the list of *operator* verbs when teaching this system. When focusing on the functions of the verb *have* from the perspective of difficulty, it is clear that students are likely to encounter the possessive *have* and lexical *have* at first. Whereas these uses are taught at elementary levels, present perfect with *operator have* is taught at higher levels of language proficiency. Therefore, it is convenient not to include *have* in the list of *operator verbs* at the beginning; it can be added later when teaching present perfect tense, stressing that only particular uses of the verb possesses *operator* properties.

Another problem is caused by the couple *have* and *have got.* The fact that the different grammatical behaviour of the possessives *have* and *have got* is a source for much confusion results from the unfortunate common practice of teaching them at elementary levels and sometimes even within one lesson. Teaching them separately and explaining *have got* a lot later (for example when teaching present perfect) causes much less confusion (a detailed theoretical analysis of *have got* and *have* is provided by Veselovská, 2010). However, when *have* and *have got* must be taught together, the teacher should list *have got* as an exception belonging to operator verbs, in order to maintain consistency in the method.

5.3. Target students

Concerning age, my experience shows that this method is popular with adult learners, especially the technically oriented, who appreciate understanding the system behind the grammar. Young learners, on the other hand, do not usually have difficulties learning the grammar by the traditional method, as their ability to acquire the patterns presented by the charts is much better than of adults.

Besides the adult target group, it may be the false beginners that can benefit from this method. When the traditional method keeps failing, they may find this method refreshing. This undoubtedly contributes to their motivation, which students of this type usually lack.

The experience also shows that since this method is time-saving, it can also be used with success in heterogeneous courses, i.e. in courses with students of different levels of English, when several individual students with less knowledge of the language need to quickly catch up with the rest of the class.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to present a new and effective approach of teaching questions and negatives. The method proposed here is not meant to condemn the traditional presentation of English grammar, nor does it aspire to replace the methods proven to be useful by generations of English teachers. It rather should be viewed as a refreshing alternative to the well-established techniques and another option in cases when the traditional methods do not work. Due to its simplicity, the proposed method is time-saving and can significantly facilitate the teaching and learning of this feared and troublesome part of English grammar and, hence, improve students' attitude and motivation for the study of English.

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