Introduction

Acquiring the *do*-support transformation rules as a child is an unconscious, automatic process for most native English speakers. In order to effectively teach these rules to non-native speakers, a teacher must first exhume, reconstruct and make explicit these hidden rules. This paper will touch on the historical roots that led to the rise of the *do*-support form and will explore some contemporary usage issues related to *do*-support, a.k.a. periphrastic *do* (PD). Challenges pertaining to PD for ESL learners will also be discussed, as this ubiquitous construction is required in most forms of negation and question formation. Exceptions to the *do*-support rules will also be presented.

The Rise of Do-Support

Theories concerning the emergence of *do*-support are too numerous to list in their entirety in this report. The prototypical theory asserts that, periphrastic *do* evolved out of causative *do*, from the West Germanic root, *don* and before that from the Proto-Indo-European root, *dhe*, which means *to put, place, do or make* (Ellegard, p. 208).

What did written English look like before *do*-support? The following chart provides “old” and “new” versions of the five basic, English sentence types that now require *do*-support (with the exception of causative *do*) along with the time period in which they were first recorded. It has been argued that the various PD sentence types emerged at different stages beginning with the rise of causative *do* (Ellegard, p. 162).
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(Ellegard p. 162 & Han & Kroch, pp 311-325)

Examples of lexical, main-verb *do* from Old English include: ‘Uton…*don hyne on Pone ealdan pytt*’ (Let us do [=put] him in this old well, Genesis) and ‘*Don we now our gay apparel*’ (Christmas carol). This type of lexical *do* was eventually replaced by the verb *put* (Jespersen, p.195).

One of the first uses of PD in a positive declarative sentence was recorded as early as 1225: *his pilgrim’s cloak he dude dun legge* (Ellegard, 1953. 56f & McFadden, p. 1). The use of PD in questions and negation was recorded beginning in the 14th century. But according to Biberauer & Roberts (p. 23), “the modern system of *do*-support [only] emerged [in the 17th century].”

Examples of the older grammatical form are still found in popular song, verse and even political speeches. For example, the children’s ditty, *He loves me, he loves me not* demonstrates negation without *do*-support. Other contemporary uses of negation without supportive *do* include: *I kid you not* and the famous line from John F. Kennedy’s
presidential inaugural speech: ‘Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country’ (Celce-Murcia, p. 204).

What set the historical stage for the rise of supportive do? Historical linguists point to the following: the influences of Scandinavian Old Norse and Norman French, loss of case, inflections and verb movement; transition from SOV word order to SVO; disappearance of the French negative marker ne; appearance of post-verbal not (Hudson, p.65); rise of affix-hopping and auxiliary verbs; and the rising importance of word order and subject position (Culicover, 2-58, McFadden 1-16).

Other historical linguists argue that the ability to introduce a one-syllable ‘dummy’ word such as do was a big help to Middle English poets, since do could be used as an auxiliary to complete metrical rhythms and rhymes in their verse, e.g.: ‘Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May...’ (Shakespeare, Sonnet 18). In this regard, Jespersen believes the periphrastic do “served chiefly to fill up the line and to make it possible to place the infinitive at the end as a convenient rime-word [in poetry]” (Jespersen, p. 195).

The introduction of printing to England by William Caxton in 1474 helped standardize English spelling and grammatical forms (Baron, 45-47). Some linguists theorize that the spread of PD in the 17th century may also have been tied to social factors such as the influence of “prestige” dialects, which may have included greater use of PD than the dialects of the lower classes (Nurmi, 1999, pp 373–394).

The benefits of do-support can be understood best by analyzing more complex sentences. For example, if the following line from Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing (act IV, sc. II) ‘What heard you him say else’ were uttered in a modern English
conversation, the listener would most likely draw a blank. It is interesting to note that Shakespeare’s plays include passages with and without do-support, as the 16th century was reportedly a period when this construction was still optional. “One consequence of the slow development of do-support is the existence of two systems for a time as exemplified in Shakespeare’s English” (Hamann, p.282). Additional examples of competing linguistic constructions include: ‘I know not how I lost him’ (Othello) and ‘Why do we hold our tongues?’ (Macbeth). From 1400 to 1800, both PD and non-PD clause types were available; however, by the 19th century, the PD construction was firmly established (Warner, p. 257).

Some historical linguists theorize that the use of the periphrastic do reduced grammatical complexity and increased comprehensibility by helping the hearer distinguish between the subject and the object. “This notion of complexity…offers the potential for explaining language change in terms of the pressure to simplify…[which] translates into learnability and [reduces] processing complexity” (Culicover, p.51).

Indeed, negation and question-formation without do-support sound almost incomprehensible to modern ears, especially when a sentence includes direct and/or indirect objects, adverbs and/or prepositional phrases. This can be demonstrated with the following two declarative sentences, both of which are equally comprehensible with adverbs in either position:

1) He put out the fire at the church single-handedly.

2) He single-handedly put out the fire at the church.

If, however, the modern listener hears negative versions without supportive do,

3) ?He put out not the fire at the church single-handedly.
4) ?He put out not single-handedly the fire at the church,

these constructions sound archaic, ambiguous and/or ungrammatical. In addition, incomprehensibility results with respect to the negative interrogative versions:

5) ?Put out he not the fire at the church single-handedly?

6) ?Put out he not single-handedly the fire at the church?

The use of supportive do seems to enhance the comprehensibility of negative and interrogative sentences—especially with negative interrogatives that include an adverb and/or prepositional phrase. For example:

7) He did not put out the fire at the church single-handedly.

It would also be acceptable to say:

8) He did not single-handedly put out the fire at the church.

With contraction:

9) He didn’t put out the fire at the church single-handedly.

It would also be acceptable to say:

10) He didn’t single-handedly put out the fire at the church.

With negative interrogative + contraction:

11) Didn’t he put out the fire at the church single-handedly?

12) Didn’t he single-handedly put out the fire at the church?

Both sentences are equally comprehensible.

Challenges for the ESL Learner

While it is essential to teach the prescriptive do-support rules to ESL/EFL students, it is equally important to teach them what native speakers actually do in
informal, conversational contexts. In addition to learning the *do*-support rules for negatives and questions, ESL learners will also need to learn the other uses of PD in creating tag questions (*he swept the sidewalk, didn’t he*?), placing emphasis (*he did sweep the sidewalk!*), and substituting for the predicate (*he didn’t sweep the sidewalk, but *I did*).

Non-native speakers of American English must be taught to contract negative questions (*do*+*not* > *don’t*) if they wish to sound informal and “native.” It would sound stilted to say:

13) *Did he not put out the fire at the church single-handedly*

14) *Did he not single-handedly put out the fire at the church?*

However, both sentences would be acceptable in formal contexts such as a political speech or legal trial.

Non-native English speakers might have difficulty comprehending utterances when native speakers reduce supportive *do* in question formation and contract it with the subject, a common practice in informal conversational contexts between native speakers. For example, it is common to hear the following sorts of informal conversational exchanges: *Djoo* [dʒuː] (*did*+*you*) *eat* yet? Or even: *Dj’eet* [dʒiːt] *yet*? (*did*+*you*+*eat*) in which the supportive *do*, the subject pronoun and the verb are all combined together into one word. These utterances would sound incomprehensible to non-native speakers learning the language, unless they were forewarned. Other listening challenges for ESL students include the colloquial *I dunno* response for *I do not know* or even, *dunno*.

The colloquial contraction of *wanna* for *want to* in spoken question formation is also very common among native English speakers and frequently supplants the use of
supportive *do*. For example, it is common to hear a native speaker ask the question: *Wanna get lunch?* In this example, the understood supportive *do*, the pronoun *you* and the particle *to* have all been deleted or elided. Rising inflection of voice on the last word provides the pragmatic information that a question is being asked in this case. Another example might be the following question: *Have fun last night?* In this case the supportive *did* and the subject pronoun *you* have been deleted. Again—rising inflection of voice on the final word carries the interrogative mood. These examples show the importance of teaching ESL learners to listen for rising inflection of voice toward the end of a sentence as a signal that a yes/no question is being asked, especially in the absence of supportive *do*.

Because it is an unexpected form of negation that frequently sidesteps the need for *do*-support, the contemporary use of Postfix *Not!* negation is another important exception to teach ESL/EFL learners. Postfix *Not!* is currently ubiquitous among younger native speakers and in the mass media. This construction could confuse learners in several ways. Firstly, sarcasm does not translate well with children or non-native speakers. Secondly, the non-native listener would most likely be oblivious to the fact that the speaker was implying a negative meaning and would not expect negation to come at the end of the sentence. Incorrect usage of this construction could lead to ridicule, as exhibited in the movie *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, so it is important to make learners aware of the pragmatics of this contemporary construction.

Other issues that might cause confusion for the ESL/EFL learner: PD is not required with the special main verb *be* because *be* acts as an “operator” in all of the
constructions requiring subject-auxiliary inversion. For example: *She is nice; Is she nice?* not *do she be nice?* It might also be worthwhile to explain the differences between the American English use of the main verb *have*—which does require *do*-support—and the British use of this verb— which doesn’t require *do*-support. *He has a car; Has he a car? vs. Does he have a car?*

Because the word *do* is so ubiquitous—as a semantically empty auxiliary verb as well as a lexical word—it might be an interesting task to ask ESL learners to collect different uses of grammatical and lexical *do* that they encounter. Following are several examples that come to mind: *I don’t do happy* (this example includes both periphrastic *do* and main verb *do*), in which the main verb *do* is defined as “exhibiting the emotions of.” Other far-ranging meanings of main verb *do* include: *to kill* and *to have sexual intercourse with.* *Do* is also used in numerous idiomatic expressions such as *make-do, do-in, do-or-die,* and as a noun such as: *do* (event or arrangement of hair), *doggie-do* (excrement), *do-gooder,* and as an adjective such as *doable.* Even the ubiquitous greeting, ‘*how do you do?*’ could form the basis for an entire lesson on *do*-support.

**Conclusion**

Reviewing the historical roots of *do*-support can shed light on the structure of the English language as well as provide concrete evidence of the “hows” and “whys” of language change—a boon to any ESL teacher’s repertoire. While ESL/EFL students must learn the prescriptive *do*-support rules, exposure to the exceptions to those rules is equally important. Speaking like a native means not only knowing the rules but knowing how and when to break them.
References


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