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## THE ACQUISITION OF ANY-TYPE ENGLISH NEGATIVE POLARITY ITEM BY TURKISH L2 LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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## LANGUAGE LEARNING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

### The acquisition of any-type English negative polarity item by Turkish L2 learners of English

Ayşe Gül Özay-Demircioğlu\*

**Abstract:** The present study investigates the acquisition of any- type negative polarity items (NPIs) by advanced Turkish learners of English. It explores whether Turkish learners are aware of the ungrammaticality of using any- with a negative expression at the beginning of a sentence because of the violation of the c-commanding relationship and whether there is any significant difference between native speakers and advanced learners of English in their grammaticality judgments. Data were gathered through a grammaticality judgment test consisting of 14 any-type NPIs items and 14 distractor items. Data were collected from 32 advanced learners of English and 15 native English speakers. The findings showed that 62 % of the advanced English speakers interpreted ungrammatical any usage as grammatical, which may indicate overgeneralization of explicit instruction; however, when the NPIs were in the object position instead of the subject position, there was a noticeable difference in grammaticality judgments. Lastly, a significant difference existed between native speakers and advanced speakers in the judgment of grammaticality when any- is used in the subject position, which may be because they have not achieved native-like proficiency yet. In the end, the recommendations and pedagogical effects of this study are presented.

**Keywords:** any-type negative polarity items, explicit instruction, language acquisition.

Negative polarity items (NPIs) in English have been an extensively studied topic for more than 30 years (Hoeksema 2000; Hoeksema, 2012; Linebarger, 1987; Rullermann, 1996). The issue of how, where, or when NPIs can be used has been investigated in a wide variety of studies (Fitzpatrick, 2005; Koster & Van Der Wal, 1996; Linebarger, 1980; Van der Wal, 1996). In addition, comparative studies showing the difference between English and other languages in terms of the usage of NPIs have been conducted in various languages such as Korean or Japanese (Kim, 2012; Lee, 1996; Song, 2003). One of the languages in which the usage of NPIs differs from English has been the Turkish language (Bulut, 1996; Can & Ağçam, 2011). The present study investigated the possible positions (subject or object) of any and whether advanced Turkish learners and native speakers differ in their grammaticality judgment of any- type NPIs.

## 1. Literature review

### 1.1. Negative polarity items in English and Turkish

A negative polarity item is a word or phrase used in a context that has negativity (Can & Ağçam, 2011). Two examples of NPI's in English are 'any' and 'ever'. They are defined as licensed items by negative expressions, which means being able to use these items, there should be a negation in the sentence as shown in (1a) and (1b).

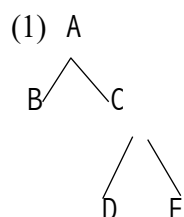
(1) (a) I did not tell anyone.

(b) I have not ever met your teacher.

In addition to a negation, NPIs may appear only in a restricted context, such as comparatives, questions, and the antecedent of a conditional as in (2a) and (2b) (Hoeksema 2000; Linebarger, 1987; Rullermann, 1996).

- (2) (a) Have you ever been to Ankara?  
 (b) If you see anyone, please let me know.

However, there should be a c-commanding relationship between NPIs and negative expressions (Klima, 1964; Rullermann, 1996). C-commanding means that in a phrase-marker, A c-commands B if and only if the first branching node that dominates A also dominates B, and A and B do not dominate one another (Reinhart, 1976). It is a kind of relationship between siblings and their antecedents and a structural relation that holds between two elements, element A and element B, in the constraint (Bulut, 1996) as shown in (3).



In this tree;

- 1) A does not c-command any node.
- 2) B c-commands C, D and E.
- 3) C c-commands B.
- 4) D c-commands E.
- 5) E c-commands D.

Regarding NPIs, negative expressions are preceded in the sentence, and they c-command NPIs. In (4a) negative expression not (X) c-commands anyone (Y).

- (4) (a) [CP We [TP have [NegP not] [VP found anyone to replace you]]].  
 (X) (Y)

In Turkish, negative meaning is provided by the suffix –me as in (5a). The Turkish NPI kimse is used in very limited contexts such as overt negation, morphologically negative predicates, and several implicit negation environments while the English NPI any has broader various contexts, which creates difficulty for Turkish learners of English.

- (5) (a) Ali kimse ile konuş-ma-dı.

Ali anybody with talk – NOT- past tense- 3rd person singular Ali did not talk with anybody.

In Turkish, any can be used as the subject of the sentence while in English, NPIs are not moved overtly out of their licensing domains as seen in (6a) because it violates the feature c-commanding (Merchant, 2002).

- (6) (a) Kimse okul-a gel-me-di.

Anybody school-dat come-NOT-past-3rd sing.

\*Anybody did not come to school.

Can and Ağçam (2011) researched this difference. They looked at bi-clause structures which have any-type NPIs in their embedded clauses. In English any can be used as a subject or an object of an embedded sentence even if the negative component is used in the main clause because of the c-commanding relationship between the negative component and any-type NPIs as in (7a), but not in (7b) or (7c) (Can & Ağçam, 2011).

- (7) (a) Ali does not think that anybody likes him.  
(b) \*Ali thinks that anybody likes him.  
(c) \*Ali doesn't think anybody doesn't like him.

However, as double negatives are possible in Turkish structures, a sentence like in (8a) is called grammatical, as shown in (8a).

- (8) (a) Ali kimse-nin onu. sev-me-diğ-i-ni  
Ali anybody-gen. him like-NOT-Part.-Poss-Acc.  
düşün-mez  
think-NOT-Simple Present Tense -3rd person singular.

\*Ali doesn't think anybody doesn't like him.

In their study, Can and Ağçam (2011) examined to what extent any-type NPIs were used by Turkish learners of English. The data were collected through an oral sentence-completion task from two different proficiency groups (intermediate and advanced Turkish speakers of English) via picture description and learners were asked to describe the pictures by making bi-clause structures in which researchers elicited the use of any. To make bi-clausal sentences, the participants were given the first part of the sentences and asked to complete these sentences as shown in (9a) and (9b).

- (9) (a) The dog does not believe that .  
(b) The monkey thinks that .

The authors found a significant difference between the two groups in terms of frequency of the use of NPIs, which showed a higher frequency in advanced learners. In addition, they found that NPIs were generally used in the object position and the negative pronoun nobody was used more in the subject position. This preference was explained through more exposure to the negative pronoun than to NPIs within the L2 input they had received. The results of this study were in line with what Song (2003) found.

In his study, Song (2003) examined Korean-speaking children who speak English as a second language (ESL) and Native English-speaking children through five different experiments. In the first two experiments, he tested the use of any-type NPIs in simple sentences in English with the help of the oral production elicitation task with the picture description. Then, in experiments 3 and 4 he investigated the frequency of usage of the Korean any-type NPIs through the same instruments as in the first experiments. In the last experiment, he looked at the production of any-type NPIs in four different bi-clausal English sentences. He concluded that when children are less fluent in the second language, they produce NPIs less frequently. Also, native English-speaking children in the first experiment used negative pronouns in the subject position. In contrast, second language learners produced a similar number of NPIs in the subject and object positions.

Another study investigating the use of NPIs by second language learners was conducted by Gil, Marsden, and Whong (2011), who examined what helped the acquisition of the distribution of any, investigating whether negative evidence in the form of explicit instruction or L1 transfer played a role in the acquisition of any- type NPIs by comparing the data from Arabic and Chinese L2 learners of English with previous data from Korean L2 learners of English (Gil & Marsden, 2010). To check the distribution of any, they utilized acceptability judgment tasks involving any in affirmative declarative sentences as in (10a).

(10) \*Anyone is eating a banana

They concluded that the findings were not adequate to decide the roles of negative evidence and L1 transfer in the acquisition of any, and generative SLA should also deal with the questions of explicit learning. The effect of explicit instruction discussed in this article might be related to the present study because of how any- NPIs are taught in Turkey.

Similar to Turkish, Korean has matrix subject NPIs. Kim (2012) examined L2 Korean speakers of English to see the potential transfer effect of English in terms of the usage of the embedded object NPI any. He found the effect of English, which might show the effect of transfer from English to Korean in the embedded object NPIs.

While the former examined NPIs in terms of transfer effect and in bi-clausal sentences, the current study investigated the possible transfer of Turkish, in which any type NPIs can be used as either subject or object, on English NPIs in which it can be used only in object position. In this respect, I present the research questions in the following part.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research questions

- 1) To what extent are advanced level Turkish L2 learners of English aware of the grammatical usage of any-type NPIs regarding its position in the sentence?
- 2) Is there a significant difference based on the position of any-type NPIs (subject or object) in the grammaticality judgment task?
- 3) Is there any significant difference between advanced level Turkish L2 learners of English and native English speakers in the grammaticality judgments of any-type NPIs?

### 2.2. Context of the study

This study specifically looks at the negative polarity item any by Turkish learners of English and examines to what extent advanced Turkish learners of English know the difference between any and its Turkish equivalence kimse based on its location (object or subject position) in the sentence. It will investigate whether or not the advanced learners are aware that any-type NPIs should not be used in subject position as it is not preceded by a negative expression. This study might be called the first one, which includes the native speakers and grammaticality judgment of the any-type NPIs from the point of view of advanced Turkish learners of English.

### 2.3. Participants

For this study, the experimental group participants were chosen through convenience sampling. I have chosen advanced speakers of English as a foreign language as the unproficiency in English may affect the result of the study. I would like to see what the advanced learners of English think about the any-type of NPIs in the subject position. The lower levels of learners may judge the sentences as ungrammatical because of the lack of information. However, when the advanced speakers do it, another reason for this misjudge may arise. Therefore, the experimental group participants were studying at a private Turkish university in a preparatory school, which provides English education for students from level A1 to C2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001). In the study, there were 32 students registered in C2 level English classes. The participants' English level was determined with a placement test at the beginning of the semester by the institution. There were 18 females and 14 males. Their ages were between 18 and 21 ( $M=19.13$ ,  $SD=.83$ ). 25 % of the participants have been learning English for 5 to 7 years ( $n=8$ ), and 75 % of them have been exposed to English for more than seven years ( $n=24$ ).

Control group participants were chosen through convenience sampling who lived in Turkey. Fifteen American speakers of English. There were 11 females and 4 males. Their ages ranged between 22 and 52 ( $M= 26.73$ ,  $SD=7.35$ ).

#### 2.4. Data collection instruments

To check how the participants judge the sentences with -any type of NPIs in subject position, a grammaticality judgment task was prepared. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first part, seven ungrammatical statements with any- in the subject position as seen in (11a) and seven grammatical statements with any- in the object position as shown in (11b) were given to the participants so as to see whether any difference could be found depending on the position. The participants were asked to decide the grammaticality of statements by choosing one of the options, grammatical or ungrammatical (App. A).

(11) (a) \*Anyone cannot smoke inside the building.

(b) She can't eat anything because of her toothache.

16 distractors were consisting of reflexives in (12a) or reduced relative clauses in (12b) to prevent the participants from understanding the aim of the study (App. B). Some of these statements were intentionally left ungrammatical to provide the participants with statements that they could mark as ungrammatical.

(12) (a) \* She is too young to go out by himself.

(b) \* The plants keeping outside grow faster.

In the second part of the questionnaire, one open-ended question with one ungrammatical statement was given. The participants were asked whether they thought this kind of statement was grammatical or ungrammatical and to write their rationales behind their ideas (App. A). This open-ended question showed what the participants' rationales were when they marked an ungrammatical statement, either grammatical or ungrammatical in the questionnaire. I have asked one question because what I wanted to learn was to learn the reason behind their answers. This one question provided an answer to this question.

After preparing the experimental items, the items were sent to a native English speaker and an expert in English Language Teaching. They approved the appropriateness of the items for this study.

#### 2.5. Data collection procedure

The questionnaire was prepared on Google Forms. Data from second language learners were collected from a preparatory school at a private Turkish university. At the second hour of their school day, so they would not feel sleepy or tired, the questionnaire link was shared with the participants through an application called Remind. Before participants started doing the survey, they were informed about the study and told them they could quit doing it whenever they wanted. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire in a classroom environment in which a researcher was with them to solve any possible problems during the questionnaire. It was an offline task completed on either the cellphone or the computer. After obtaining their permission through an online informed consent form (App. C), the participants completed the questionnaire.

The link was sent to native speakers of English through WhatsApp and they were informed about the study face to face. They agreed on an informed consent form, and they completed the questionnaire.

#### 2.6. Data analysis

To analyze the data, the responses of the participants were coded as grammatical (2) or ungrammatical (1) and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 23.0 for Windows. The mean scores of

each position (subject and object) for each group were calculated. A paired samples t-test was administered because the same participant group's reaction was compared across two different conditions. Secondly, to see the difference between the native language group and advanced learners, an independent samples t-test was administered.

### 3. Results

In this part, the results are presented based on the research questions.

RQ1: To what extent are advanced level Turkish L2 learners of English aware of the grammatical usage of any-type NPIs regarding its position in the sentence?

To test this research question, the participants were given any- type NPIs in both subject and object positions on the questionnaire. When it was in object position, sentences were negated through a negative expression not, which makes the sentences grammatical. The participants marked these sentences as grammatical and their means were high ( $M=1.95$ ,  $SD=.10$ ). On the other hand, these NPIs were placed in the subject position followed by a negative expression not, making these sentences ungrammatical. However, they marked most of these sentences as grammatical with a high mean ( $M=1.63$ ,  $SD=.27$ ) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The mean scores of Any- type NPIs (n=32)

		M	SD
	Mean Score of Any- in Object Position	1.95	.10
<b>Advanced Speakers</b>	Mean Scores of Any- in Subject Position	1.63	.27

RQ2: Does a significant difference based on the position of any-type NPIs (subject or object) in the grammaticality judgment task exist?

To answer this question a paired samples t-test was administered. As shown in Table 2, this paired samples-test showed that there was a significant difference between two different positions: subject position and the object position ( $t(31)=7.05$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), which is not expected.

Table 2. A paired samples t-test.

Advanced Speakers	Object Pos. vs. Subject Pos.	t	df	Sig.
		7.05	31	$p < 0.001$

RQ3: Is there any significant difference between advanced level Turkish L2 learners of English and English speakers in the grammaticality judgments of any-type NPIs?

To answer this research question, the means of two groups' participants were calculated based on their position in the sentence. Descriptive statistics of their means were as shown in Table 3. Both advanced speakers ( $M=1.95$ ,  $SD=.10$ ) and native speakers ( $M=1.95$ ,  $SD=.07$ ) showed the same performance in the grammaticality of any- types of NPIs, when judging grammatical sentences. On the other hand, when any- was put in the subject position, the mean of advanced learners ( $M=1.63$ ,  $SD=.27$ ) was higher than that of the native speakers ( $M=1.01$ ,  $SD=.04$ ).

However, the sentences were ungrammatical because any- could not take place in the subject position. Therefore, the native speakers performed better in the grammaticality of these statements.

Table 3. Mean scores of positions (n= 32 for advanced speakers, n=15 for native speakers)

English Proficiency Level		M	SD
Advanced Speakers	Mean Score of Any- in Object Position	1.95	.10
	Mean Scores of Any- in Subject Position	1.63	.27
Native Speakers	Mean Scores of Any- in Object Position	1.95	.07
	Mean Scores of Any- in Subject Position	1.01	.04

To check whether this significance was important or not, an independent samples t-test was carried out. It indicated that while there was no significant difference between the two groups of participants when the NPI was in the object ( $t(45)=.25$ ,  $p = .80$ ), a significant difference was found in the subject position ( $t(12.47)=33.3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) as demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4. An independent samples T-test

		t	df	Sig.
Object Position	Equal variances assumed	.25	45	.80
Subject Position	Equal variances not assumed	12.47	33.3	$p < 0.001$

Lastly, based on the open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire, which asked the grammaticality of statements having any- type NPIs in the subject position, 62 % of the participants noted that they were grammatical because anybody can be used in the negative and question sentences. One of the participants expressed that it was grammatical as anyone was the doer of the action. 38% of these advanced learners answered that it was ungrammatical even though they could not give any reason for it. One of the students stated that it was weird to see any- type NPIs in the subject position although he did not know the answer. Four of the participants expressed that it would be better to see nobody instead of anybody. On the other hand, the same question was asked to the native English speakers. 100 % of them replied that to use 'any' in subject position with a negative expression was ungrammatical. They also explained as in (13).

(13) "Instead of 'anybody', 'nobody' without any negative expression should have been used to make the sentence grammatical."

On the other hand, they did not give the rationale behind it. They knew that the sentence is not acceptable and how it becomes acceptable. However, they did not know the reason why. The absence of any reason for them was expectable because they may know it unconsciously.

## 5. Discussion

This study examined (a) to what extent advanced Turkish learners of English were aware of the grammatical usage of any-type NPIs regarding their position in a sentence, (b) whether any significant difference existed based on the position of any-type NPIs (subject or object) in the grammaticality judgment task, and (c) whether there was any



significant difference between advanced Turkish learners of English and English speakers in the grammaticality judgments of any-type NPIs.

Regarding the familiarity of advanced Turkish learners of English with any-type NPIs, the results showed that the learners judged the grammaticality of NPIs almost one hundred percent correctly when it was in the object position. These results are in line with what Can and Ağçam (2011) found. They showed that as a learner's proficiency level increases, the frequency of using any-type NPIs increases. On the other hand, when it was in the subject position, some participants expressed that the statements were still grammatical, which is incorrect. At this point, we can talk about the effect of explicit instruction. As the participants stated in the second part of the questionnaire, in the Turkish educational system, any- type of NPIs are taught in a way that it can be used in the negative or question sentences without giving further evidence or the rationale behind it. When the students learn this, they may tend to overgeneralize this rule to all sentences containing any-. Gil and Marsden (2010) agreed on the idea that English language teaching materials primarily include the instruction of negation and question, which causes learners to think that any- is followed only by a semantically negative verb, being unaware that there are exceptions. It might be an overgeneralization of what they have learned, although they do not have much input in which any- is used in the subject position.

However, the difference between the participants' responses to questions asking about the different positions of any-type of NPIs was significant, which might be an indication of the idea that students are aware of the difference between subject positions' ungrammaticality and object positions' grammaticality. It was hypothesized to find no significant difference between the two positions because the students would think that both of the positions were grammatical, but this turned out to be incorrect. It was hypothesized that maybe when students see any- in both the subject and object position, they can infer there is something strange with it in the subject position. However, when they saw it in isolation at the end, they thought it was grammatical.

Concerning the last research question, while no significant difference was found in the object position, a significant difference was seen in the use of subject. In this part, I can talk about the effect of explicit instruction of any-type NPIs in foreign language education in Turkey, which emphasizes that the NPI any- should be used in negative or question sentences without stating its position in the sentence, in the subject or object position, and without explaining the need of it being preceded by a negative expression. In addition, the case that the native speakers could not give the rationale behind their decisions may indicate unconscious learning through exposure. In addition, one of the most controversial issues about first and second language acquisition is consciousness. For first language acquisition, the unconscious process plays an essential role considering the fact that it can contribute to the acquisition or the application of knowledge regardless of deliberate and controlled attention (Evans, 2008; Kuldass, Ismail, Hashim, Bakar, 2013). On the other hand, in addition to having unconscious input, it is commonly believed that second language acquisition might occur with special attention to the instructional materials (Boshuizen & Schmidt 1992; Schmidt 1990). It is assumed the reason why the native speakers of English cannot mention the rationale of not having anybody in the subject position may be because they are exposed to English without any explicit rules on NPI position. On the other hand, some advanced speakers answered the question in the same way because their exposure to English became unconscious after a while (Kuldass et al., 2013; Lightbown & Spada, 1994).

## 5. Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The findings have shown that advanced Turkish speakers of English significantly differed from the native speakers of English in the grammaticality judgment of ungrammatical usage of any- type NPIs, which might be an indication of the effect of lack of explicit instruction. It was evident that it is more difficult for even advanced learners to acquire the usage of any-type NPIs and their position in the sentence. Moreover, the awareness of learners in terms of the grammatical or ungrammatical position of any- was supported by the significant difference between them.

For further research, the researchers can collect data from beginner and advanced level learners to check whether there are any developmental patterns of their usage, but this study demonstrated the difference between native speakers and advanced learners. In addition, the real-time processing of any-type NPIs could be tested through online tests, and based on the duration of the processing, related inferences can be made.

Regarding implications of this study to the pedagogy, this study touched upon the issue of explicit instruction and generalizations made by students. To prevent these kinds of misunderstandings and overgeneralizations, SLA researchers and teachers should be in contact. These researchers and teachers should focus on the most problematic parts, and they should not stop teaching exceptions to rules. In other words, they should explain the grammar rules explicitly and mention the specific rules in a detailed way. This does not mean that we should go back to the Grammar Translation Method. Instead, while teaching grammar communicatively, at the same time, they should expose the students to the explicit grammar rules. The materials should be arranged based on the explicit instruction of any topic, and this topic should be presented considering that. Also, the topic can be presented through example sentences, and from the small picture, they can move to the big picture. In my case, the students have been presented with sentences with any-type NPIs in both subject and object position, and students are asked how much these sentences are acceptable and what the rationale behind it may be. In this way, it raises awareness among the students. By doing this, educators can more effectively meet students' second language acquisition needs.

## 6. Disclosure of conflict

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest.

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