ACQUISITION OF WH-QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH BY SAUDI ENGLISH MAJORS IN NAJRAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT: *This study analyzes question formation errors in English made by EFL majors in Najran University - KSA. The aim of the study is to find out the types and causes behind making such errors. For this purpose, the researcher has designed a wh-question generating instrument. After identifying the categories of errors, the data analysis has shown agreement with similar previous studies. The most common error types in forming wh-questions in English are: auxiliary omission, wrong question word, aux.-subject inversion, Wrong auxiliary and many others.Our study has also revealed that some of the errors are due to grammar incompetence required for question formation, while others can be attributed to structure dissimilarities of the two languages.*

KEYWORDS: Question Formation, Grammar, L 1 Interference, EFL Learners, Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my long experience in teaching English to Arab EFL university majors, I've noticed that many of them experience difficulty while forming grammatically-correct English questions in spite of the fact that they study grammar for many years both at school and in the university.

This particular issue has previously been studied by a panel of researchers, as is mentioned bellow, nevertheless, this problem still exists among the overwhelming majority of university English learners, which is a major point of weakness, especially that making questions is almost a daily practice in the life of a normal student.

Objective of the Study

This study analyzes the problem of making questions in English faced by EFL majors in Najran University – KSA. The study will determine the types of errors by classifying them according to their recurrence.

There will also be an attempt to determine the causes behind this problem in order to find practical solutions. The findings will be reported in the recommendation section.

Research Questions

The present study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Are EFL students in Najran University capable of producing correct questions in English?

2. What are the areas of difficulty while forming English questions?

3. Could the difficulty in forming English questions be attributed to L 1 interference?

Limitation of the Study

This study is restricted to exploring the difficulties in forming wh-questions only. We did not include yes-no questions while designing the tool, for we think they are self-inclusive in the structure of a wh-question, as both types are marked by subject-auxiliary inversion.

Significance of the Study

"He who asks a question is a fool for five minutes; he who does not ask a question remains a fool forever" – Chinese proverb.

There's no doubt that asking questions is an effective way of learning. Therefore, this study draws its significance from the value of asking questions as a good learning tool; a practice that has a direct impact on the quality of choices we make. It enables us to gain deep insight, develop communication and open our minds to other opinions and beliefs. Asking questions stimulates our creativity to discover innovative solutions and make better choices and decisions.

It's extremely essential that learners were able to produce correct and valuable questions as part of their daily learning life. Researchers, scientists and thinkers never stop asking questions:

Newton and Galileo discovered a lot about motion of objects only by asking questions, such as:

"Why does an apple fall from a tree but, why does the moon not fall into the Earth?"

The result was the science of mechanics.

Darwin: "Why do the Galapagos Islands have so many species not found elsewhere?"

The result was the historical theory of evolution.

Einstein: "What would the universe look like if I rode through it on a beam of light?"

The result was the theory of relativity.

Planck found answers to some questions about black body radiation, and the result was Quantum physics.

It was only by asking questions that great scientists and thinkers were able to achieve historic breakthroughs. In his book "A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas", Warren Berger cited the example of Edwin H. Land, who invented the Polaroid camera in response to his 3 year old daughter asking why the camera that they used couldn't produce a photo immediately.

Many companies and even entire industries can be traced back to a single question and much of our success in life depends on asking the right questions.

In education, the benefits of asking good questions are countless.

It enhances learning processes by inspiring critical thinking skills, encouraging active participation and help teachers assess the effectiveness of their own teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wh-question is a term in generative grammar for a question that is formed with an interrogative word, (what, who, whom, whose, which, when, where, why, or how), that expects an answer other than "yes" or "no."

Wh-questions are marked by a wh-word and subject /verb inversion (or subject-auxiliary inversion), except in those cases where the subject itself is a wh-word. Wh-questions are also known as wh-interrogatives, information-seeking questions, and content questions.

The difficulty of making grammatically-correct question in English encountering Arab EFL learners has recently been discussed by some researchers. It can be traced in the works of Mukattash L (1980) (1981), Al-Mekhlafi MA (1999) (2006), Umale J (2011) and lately in Al-Hassaani, A. M.A (2016) who conducted a case study on the problem of question Formations among Saudi EFL Learners in Bisha University.

The study took place in 2015 on 80 EFL learners from different levels of the English Language Department. The results showed that learners had lacked the requisite skills and practice in questions formation.

Appreciating the importance of asking questions in the classroom, Alhassani 2016 states: "questions are the corner-stone around which all interaction and activities between the teacher and his/her students take place at every stage of teaching".

The researcher attributed the learners' failure to: mother tongue interference, large classes, lack of motivation, lack of exposure, inadequate syllabus, improper teaching materials, tasks and methodology.

Another study on the problem of question formation in English was conducted by Al-Mekhlafi, A. A (2013) in Sohar University in Oman. The study took place during the academic year of 2009-2010. The researcher, having analyzed the writings of 46 English majors, he had identified the types of errors Omani students usually make while forming questions. These errors are:

Auxiliary omission, auxiliary replacement, auxiliary subject agreement, verbal form concord, auxiliary subject inversion, auxiliary redundant, wrong question word and verb inverted.

The study also revealed that most of the errors were due to difference in the structures of forming questions in Arabic and English languages.

We cannot disagree that one of the reasons behind making errors in question formation is due to the morpho-syntactic difference between Arabic and English languages, however, it's not fair to solely relate errors to the difference in the structures of the two languages, as one cannot expect a foreign language to have a precisely identical grammar to his mother tongue.

Therefore, we cannot fully agree with Al-Mekhlafi (2013), placing all the blame on the structural difference, for there is complete similarity in some aspects as in the discussion below. Rather, we are inclined to agree with Al-Hassani (2016), partially attributing the difficulty in question formation to lack of motivation among Saudi EFL learners.

Yet, we do not totally agree with the other reasons named by the same researcher, such as lack of exposure, since students are extensively exposed to practicing questions starting from school

throughout their language learning journey up to the university. Moreover, Alhassani, 2016 himself admits this fact: "Although question formation is introduced at a very early stage of English language learning/ teaching at the Arab schools, it remains one of the most common error zones of Arab learners of English".

Reviewing the literature on question formation, we cannot overlook an interesting study conducted in Iran by Marzieh Galbat and Roohollah Maleki (2014) Entitled "Acquisition of Wh-questions in English by Persian Monolinguals and Iranian Arab Bilinguals".

102 Persian mono-lingual and Arabic-Persian bilingual learners of English were assigned to two proficiency groups after having taken the Nelson Proficiency Test. Afterwards, a grammaticality Judgment Test (GJT) was administered to measure the acquisition of wh-questions movements in English by second and third language learners within universal grammar (UG) structure. Arabic being compliant to wh-movement while Persian not, the study was meant to measure the influence of transfer in acquiring second and third languages.

The results showed no significant difference between the performance of monolinguals and bilinguals:

"the results of this research elucidated that the L3 and L2 learners' presentation were constant and the L3 learners did not act drastically higher than the mono-lingual learners even though their first language, Arabic, shared [+wh] with English, (Ibid.).

Forming wh- questions in English and Arabic

Wh- questions in English are generally formed with the assistance of an auxiliary verb (be, do have or a modal verb) that should go in accordance with the subject and tense of the sentence. Wh- questions in English follows a strict order:

wh- + an auxiliary verb + subject + main verb

Examples:

Be: What did he watch on TV yesterday?

Do: How do they live? Why didn't you inform me?

Have: How long has lived here?

Modal: Who can swim? Who (m) should she meet?

When the question with (be) is about the subject of the sentence, there is no need for both the auxiliary and the inversion:

The student completed his homework. -> Who completed his homework?

Arabic, luckily, is identical to English in forming such type of wh-question although it is a VSO language, compare:

 Anha attalibu wajibahu.

*Finished the student his homework

The question in Arabic will be:

Mun anha wajibahu?

Who completed his homework?

The example above reveals striking resemblance even in the position of wh- question words, as both languages take the initial one, which is not the case in some other languages, such as Farsi, for instance.

Benmamoun, sighted in (Marzieh Galbat, Roohollah Maleki, 2014) states:

"The formation of wh-questions in Arabic resembles English since in both languages the syntactic movement of wh-phrase to (Spec-CP) is recognized. In Arabic C bears Q and [wh]. The strong [wh] in C triggers the wh-phrase to move to Spec-Cp".

However, in spite of the similarity between the two languages in forming wh- questions about the subject, forming other types of questions demonstrates complete difference in terms of auxiliary usage and subject-verb inversion, where these techniques simply do not exist in Arabic. We believe that most of the errors made by EFL Arab learners are due to this particular fact. Let us see how a question about the object in English will look like:

Ali met Ahmad.

Who (m) did Ali meet?

Thinking of the Arabic equivalent will definitely triggers the fundamental distinction between the two languages; English being partially analytic, questions are essentially formed by the utilizations of auxiliaries, while Arabic being synthetic, inflectional morphologies plays the crucial role in governing and coordinating the relationship between members of the sentence. Thus, the Arabic version of the above example will be:

Gabala Aliyun Ahmada.

*met Ali Ahmad

As we see, names in Arabic are inflected to mark the subject and the object, and the word order is not important, yet in English, the order of the sentence plays the essential syntactic role. Now, to figure out how Arabic behaves, let us ask a wh- question about the object:

Mun 'Gabala Aliyun?

*who met Ali?

Contrary to the previous picture, showing complete resemblance in forming wh-questions about the subject, questions about the object reveal a total dissimilarity between the two languages. The absence of both the auxiliary and the subject-verb inversion, and preserving the verb in the past tense makes the question look like a question about the subject!

This vivid difference in the typology of the two languages at the morpho-syntactic level may explain the character and the reasons behind some of the errors Arab EFL learners make while forming wh-questions.

METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This study sets out to determine the types of errors that EFL students in Najran University make while forming questions in English. So, in nature, this study is a descriptive one utilizing of quantitative data to reflect the findings.

Participants

The participants of the study are all the 22 second level EFL male students registered in the English Department at the College of Science and Arts in Sharorah, Saudi Arabia. The study took place by the end of the fourth semester of the academic year 2016-2017. The students had previously learned English at school for at least 6 years. Their mother tongue is Arabic and their age ranged between16-19.

Instrument

Since the objective of this study is to analyze questions written by the participants, the researcher designed an instrument containing 10 sentences with some underlined words in each sentence. The participants were asked to make questions so that the underlined words were answers for them, for example:

Najran is 300 km from Sharorah.

I didn't come because I was ill.

That was Ali's book.

Compared with other instruments used previously by similar studies, this method has given the researcher full control over choosing the types of questions he wanted his participants to write. Thus, the sentences with their underlined words have been carefully chosen so as to measure almost every aspect involved in forming questions, such as usage of different question words, auxiliaries and tenses.

This technique has also given the researcher the opportunity of excluding yes-no questions, as they are already inclusive in the structure of wh-questions. This could not have been achieved if we had used an instrument from a previous research.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study was collected from the instrument that had been distributed to the participants by the researcher during one of the lectures. Later on, the answer sheets were checked for errors in question formation. Afterwards, the errors have been classified into types and given codes to be analyzed later on in SPSS.

Having the results into tables and graphs, the researcher was able to examine and interpret the outcome for answering the research questions, drawing conclusions and making recommendations.

Results and Discussion

The instrument has yielded 220 questions that have been checked for errors, and then the errors were classified to types and given codes to be analyzed by SPSS.

The outcome of the study has revealed that out of the 220 questions only 66 were fully correct, while 154 were incorrect, with at least one to multiple mistakes in each question.

This figure is by all means not acceptable as it means that 70% of EFL students in Najran University experience great difficulty forming correct English questions (See chart 1).
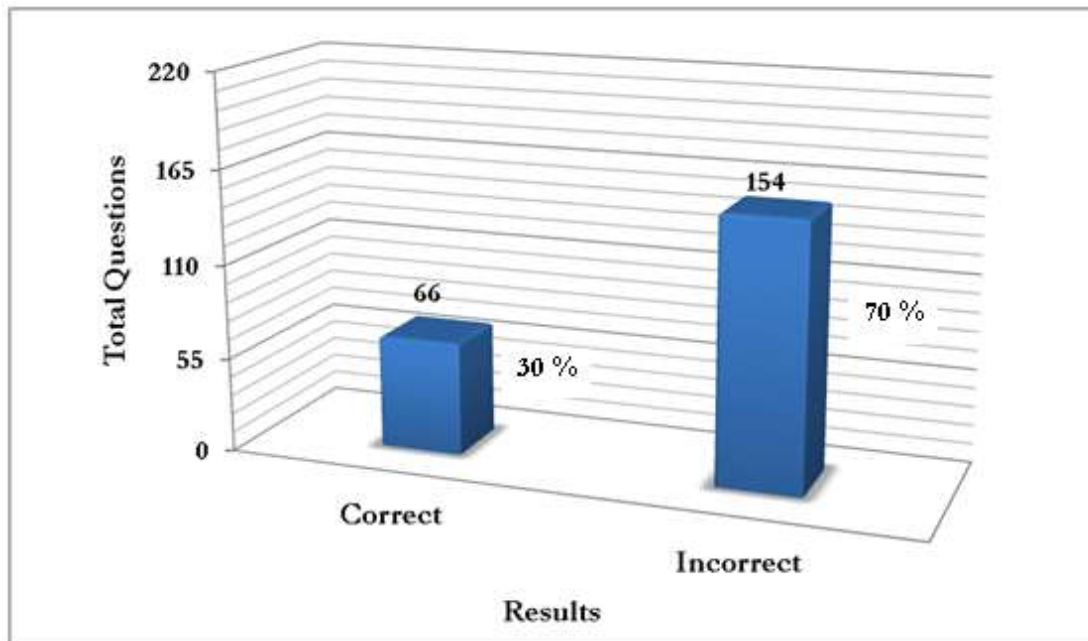

Chart 1: coefficient of correct to incorrect questions

Question 1

Chart 1 above vividly illustrates the answer for question 1 of the research questions about the capability of EFL students in Najran University to produce correct questions in English. Taking (Crompton's, 2011) accuracy rate, after (Dulay and Burt, 1974) of 90% or higher as a sign of acquisition, 30% is a surprisingly weak rate compared to 79.78% in a similar study done by Al-Mekhlafi (2013) to Omani EFL students in Sohar University.

It's also worth mentioning that out of the 22 participants, 18 of them were not able to produce fully correct questions, making from 1 to multiple mistakes in each of the ten required questions (see chart 2).
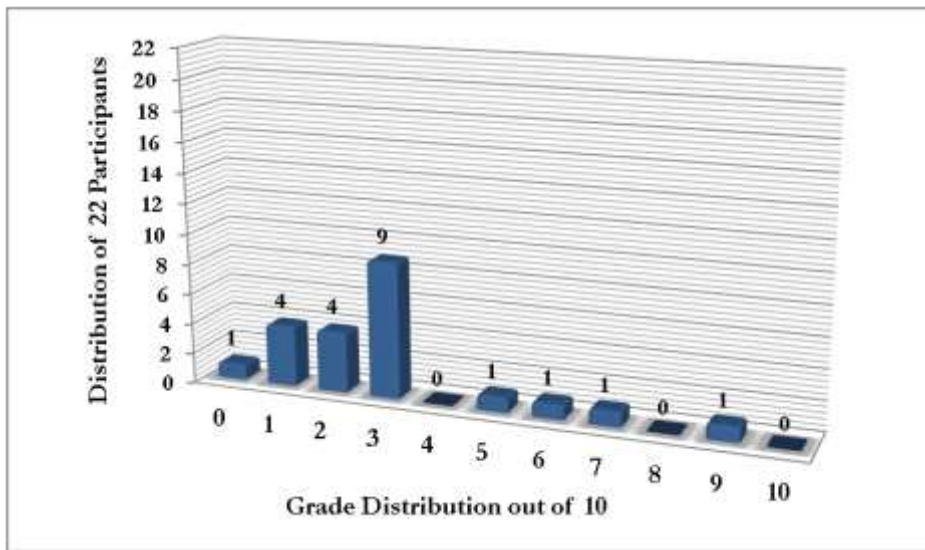
Chart 2: Participants' grade distribution out of 10 marks

Question 2

The 10-question instrument has yielded 179 errors made by 22 participants. These errors have been classified to categories according to their recurrence from most to least common.

As is seen from table 3 almost a quarter of these errors 24.58% is in auxiliary omission. This type of errors could be expected, as auxiliaries do not exist in Arabic question formation, yet, errors in the second category (Wrong question word), were far from being expected from university EFL majors.

The third category is about questions with 2 or more errors in each.

The fourth and fifth categories about auxiliaries (Aux. subject inversion, Wrong auxiliary) belong, as we've mentioned, to a problematic area for many Arab learners of English.

The sixth category (irrelevant question) means that questions were off the point and not related to the underlined word(s) as is required. Errors of this type, in my opinion, are not a matter of major concern since they might have happened because of misunderstanding of what's required.

Errors of the last three categories can be considered as isolated cases.

Table 3: Distribution of error types according to their recurrence

No.	Category	No of Errors	%	Example
1	Auxiliary omission	44	24.58	*How the students come?
2	Wrong question word	38	21.22	*What do the students come?
3	Multiple errors	23	12.84	Various answers
4	Aux. subject inversion	22	12.29	*Why you didn't come?

5	Wrong auxiliary	20	11.17	*Where are you yesterday?
6	Irrelevant question	19	10.61	**We** played football/ Will you play football?
7	Subject omission	7	3.91	*How long did stayed in Jeddah?
8	Subject-verb disagreement	4	2.23	*Where was you yesterday?
9	Aux. redundant	2	1.11	*Who did played football?
	Total	179	100%	
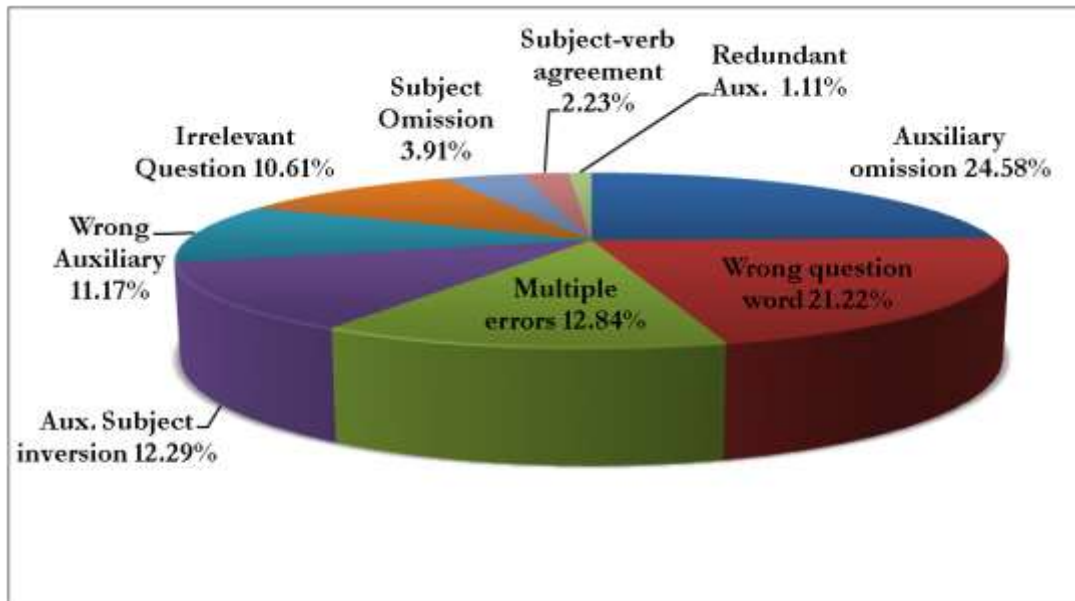
Question 3

In question formation, the influence of Arabic, being the participants' mother tongue, is clearly noticed in category 1 (Auxiliary omission) which has scored the highest rate of the errors.

Al-Mekhlafi (2013) also reported influence of L 1 in a similar research conducted to Omani EFL students. In his study, the category of (Auxiliary omission) has scored even a greater percentage 46.24%, which is a clear indication of L 1 interference.

However, not everything could be attributed to L 1 influence, for a great number of the errors have a lot to do with lack of interest and lack of motivation.

In this respect, we find support in Al-Hassaani (2016) who conducted a similar study to Saudi EFL students in Bisha University. He partially attributed learners' inability to form correct English questions to lack of motivation. This is true given the fact that English is taught in Saudi schools since grade seven. Moreover, at the time this study took place, the participants were about to finish their fourth university semester of studying, among other subjects, extensive English grammar.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study vividly show that EFL students in Najran University experience great difficulty in making grammatically-correct English questions. With a staggering rate of 70%, this problem must be urgently solved starting from its early stages.

School curriculum ought to be revised, and proper alterations addressing the issue of question formation should be made. Workshops with school English teachers could be organized to instruct them to actively encourage their students to produce correct questions.

These measures, having been introduced, there will be a need for repeating this study in order to assess whether there has been any improvement taking place in this respect.

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APPENDIX

Data Collection Research Tool

Dear participant,

We appreciate your taking the time to complete this form, which is a tool for collecting data for research on forming questions in English. We assure you that your responses will be confidential.

Thank you.

Name: (optional) …………………………………………………………

Directions: Please write questions for the underlined words:

1. The students come by bus.
   ……………………………………………………………………

2. I saw Salem yesterday.
   ……………………………………………………………………

3. They will be watching TV.
   …………………………………………………………..……

4. We played football.
   ………………………………………………………………………

5. I was at home yesterday.
   ………………………………………………………….……

6. That was Ali's book.
   ………………………………………………..………………………

7. He has 10 million riyals.
   ………………………………………………….…………………

8. I didn't come because I was ill.
   …………………………………………………………………

9. Najran is 300 km from Sharorah.
   ………………………………………………………………

10. I stayed in Jeddah for a short time.
    …………………………………………………………