Research   Article

A study of question formation in the English writing of Omani Efl learners

Dr. Mohammad Abdu Ahmad Al-Mekhlafi

Associate Professor of English, Department of English, Faculty of Education, Sana'a University, Yemen

Author Email: malmekhlafi@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study analyzed the question formation errors generated by 46 English major students registered in the first semester of the academic year 2009/2010 in Sohar University in the Sultanate of Oman. The aim of the current study was to find out the kinds of errors the student teachers make while forming questions in English. Data were derived from an Advanced Writing class. The students were asked to write 10 questions on the topic: Wedding in the Sultanate of Oman. The analysis of the data suggests that the difficulties that Omani student teachers face while forming questions in English are: auxiliary omission, auxiliary replacement, auxiliary subject agreement, verbal form concord, auxiliary subject inversion, auxiliary redundant, wrong question word and verb inverted. The differences in the structures of question formation in L1 and L2 cause most of the errors.

Keywords: Question formation, English writing, EFL learners, Oman

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The basic premise in this study is that English question formation constitutes a serious learning difficulty that Arab learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) face (Mukattash, 1981; Al-Mekhlafi, 1999; Umale, 2011). In the context of the present study, the issue under investigation becomes more relevant because the subjects selected for this study are those who will shoulder the responsibility of teaching/learning English in the Omani schools for years to come. A further impetus for the present investigation has come from the fact that question formation is essential in the training of EFL teachers as it is of practical value to the teacher (Thompson, 1997). In fact, questions are the corner-stone around which all interaction and activities between the teacher and his/her students take place at each and every stage of teaching.

   Arab EFL students often fail to produce correct questions in English. What aggravates the situation is the fact that even the trainee teachers of English at the Arab universities who are being prepared to be teachers of English are frequently heard misusing English questions. We hear and read such questions as:

1.   When they start the wedding?
2.   Why it is necessary to decorate the house?
3.   What is the wife put in her hand?
4.   These difficulties are attested in the researcher's experience of the English language learning/teaching. They are also documented by other researchers (cf. Mukattash, 1981; Al-Mekhlafi, 1999; Dyson, 2008 and Umale, 2011).

   Though 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 including the student teachers of EFL.

Literature review

When learning a second or foreign language, the learner is not only acquiring linguistic rules, but also using such rules together with certain strategies to perform L2 utterances. These strategies are defined by Selinker, Swain and Dumas (1975:141) as "cognitive activities relating to the processing of second language data in the attempt to express meaning." Selinker (1972) mentions five central learning processes of the latent psychological structure which are effective in determining the nature of a learner's IL. These five processes are language transfer, transfer of training, L_2 learning strategies, L_2 communication strategies and overgeneralization of TL rules. We will now attempt to briefly elaborate on the terms that are used to refer to the processes (strategies) above. The following headings introduce the theoretical aspects necessary to understand the issues discussed in this paper.

Language transfer

"Language transfer" involves items and rules in the learner's language being directly traceable to his/her mother tongue. Brown (2007:117) views transfer as "the interaction of previously acquired linguistic and/or conceptual knowledge with the present learning event to facilitate a new language learning task". Similarly, Odlin (2003) stated that language transfer is also known as cross-linguistic influence, language interference, the role of the mother tongue, native language influence and language mixing.

As Corder points out: "One explanation of "L$_2$ errors" is that the learner is carrying over the habits of his mother tongue into the second language" Corder (1971:169).

According to Lado (1957), L$_1$ interference can occur at the levels of production and reception as well. He states: Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture both productively and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practised by natives.

Thus, L1 can be a starting point in the learning of L2. This may benefit if the rules are similar or create difficulties if the rules of L2 are different (Umale, 2011). Furthermore, two types of transfer have been identified in language learning: positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer facilitates language learning. It may occur when the L1 and L2 have the same form. For example, both Arabic and English have the definite article "al" and "the" respectively. Therefore, the Arabic learners are expected to use the English article "the" correctly in expressions such as "the boy", "the book", etc. The second type is negative transfer which refers to a rule or pattern in the native language that leads to an error in the TL. For example, An Arab student may produce the inappropriate utterance "* This student" instead of the correct one "This is a student" due to the Arabic sentence "hatha talib" literally "this student."

In the earlier contrastive approaches (CA) of the 1950s and 1960s, language transfer was viewed as the sole factor that affects the learner's language. In other words, the errors that the learner may commit in the TL were, Contrastivists claimed, due to "the pull of the mother tongue". However, language transfer is now viewed differently. It is seen as a factor among others that may cause the learner's errors.

Transfer of training

In this process (strategy), the learner's errors are directly traceable to how and what they have been taught. That is the learners attempt to use rules learned from their textbooks and/or teachers. The results of their attempts can be either in accordance with the rules of the TL or sometimes they can be erroneous. For example, teachers or textbooks that explain the difference between the indefinite articles, "a" and "an", by stating that "an" is used with countable nouns that begin with vowels may lead the learners to produce erroneous utterances such as "* He is an university student" or "* Turkey is an European country".

L$_2$ learning strategies

Chamot (1987:71) defines learning strategies as the "techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information."
These strategies are often successful and therefore they help the learning process. On the other hand, they may fall short and errors are the result of such strategies.

Communication strategies

Learners utilize this strategy when they run short of a vocabulary item that is necessary to convey their meaning. Then they rely on communication strategies to get their message across. For example, if the learner wants to refer to a "watermelon" in English, but he/she does not know the exact lexical item. Then he may use his hands to show the shape of it along with the strategy of defining that is, it is like a ball. It is green and red inside. It is sweet and has black seeds in it."

Over generalization of TL rules

Over generalization is very common in both first language acquisition and second language learning. Learners create "ill-formed" utterances due to their partial learning of the TL rules. In other words, they always expect greater regularity in the rules of the TL than actually exists there. For example, the learner may use the past morpheme "-ed" with all English verbs. The result may be something like "* Yesterday I "goes" to the market." or "* He "spoke" to me."

Richards, (1971) states that Over generalization is associated with redundancy, reduction and simplification.

Taylor (1975:87) sums up the strategies involved when one learns a second language: the principal motivation behind the learning strategies which the learner brings to language acquisition is the desire to reduce his learning burden. Both the strategies of native language transfer and of overgeneralization will make the learner's task easier: when he relies on his native language he avoids learning the target language rule; when he over generalizes, he relies on a target language rule of great generality and which he already knows and avoids learning the appropriate rule.

A number of researchers have investigated various difficulties encountered by Arab EFL learners, e. g.; Rabab'ah (2003); Mourtaga (2004); Al-Jarf (2007); Jdetawy (2011). While others have investigated the syntactic errors made by Arab EFL learners, e.g, Abu Jarad (2008); Tahaineh (2010); Qaid and Ramamoorthy (2011); Crompton (2011). They state that Arab learners of English encounter problems in various syntactic structures. Consequently, the aim of this study is to offer a better insight into the different difficulties encountered by Omani EFL learners when forming questions in English.

Omani EFL student teachers are expected to commit many errors while forming English questions. Based on that, this study intends to explore the carry-over of syntactic structures from L1 to L2 by Omani student teachers. This warrants a discussion of Arabic and English syntactic structures with respect to question formation.

Question formation in Arabic and English

Whilst there is much research done on Arab EFL students' syntactic errors, the literature suggests that there is limited research on question formation. This is surprising given that question formation differences between Arabic and English is considered one of the problems faced by Arab students of English (Mukattash, 1980;

Mukattash, 1981 and Al-Mekhlafi, 1999). Furthermore, Al-Mekhlafi (2006) and Umale (2011) acknowledge the rarity of studies that address question formation as a major syntactic category in which errors are committed by Arab learners.

Forming questions in Arabic

There are two types of question formation in Arabic: Yes/No questions which are called "istifham at-tahqiq" and information questions which are called "istifham at-taswur".
Arabic Yes/No questions can be formed with a "harf istifham" (an interrogative particle) which can be either "a" or "hal" attached to a declarative sentence. There is no inversion or "do support" as in English (Al-Mekhlafi, 1999; Faynan, 1999 and Umale, 2011). The following example will illustrate this.
1.   darasa alingalisiah. (Studied-he English) He studied English.
2.   hal darasa alingalisiah? (Q word studied-he English?) Did he study English?
3.   a darasa alingalisiah? (Q word studied-he English?) Did he study English?
Arabic information questions are formed with the help of an "ism istifham" (interrogative pronoun) placed at the beginning of the sentence. The following interrogative pronouns are used in forming questions (Faynan, 1999 and Umale, 2011) "ma" (what), "maan" (who), "ayna" (where), "kayfa" (how), "limatha" (why), "mata" (when) and "ayyi" (which).
Unlike English, Arabic question formation does not involve any kind of auxiliary verb and therefore Arab learners are expected to face difficulties in inserting the right auxiliary verb. The following examples illustrate this point.
1.   Limatha taakhara alwaladu?   (Why late the boy?)   Why is the boy late?
2.   Mata wasalt ila almadrasah? (When arrived to the school?) When did you arrive to school?
3.   Maan hatha? (Who this) Who is this?

Forming questions in English

English Yes/No questions involve inversion of the subject and the auxiliary verb (Greenbaum and Quirck, 1990). The following examples illustrate this point.
1.   He is a teacher. Is he a teacher?
2.   They will arrive tomorrow. Will they arrive tomorrow?
They also require "do" support (do, does, did) when the verb phrase does not include any auxiliary verb (Leech and Svartvik, 1994), e.g.
1.   They live in Sohar.   Do they live in Sohar?
2.   She studies English?   Does she study English?
English Wh- questions begin with c a Wh- word such as: what, where, when, why, how, who, which (Leech and Svartvik, 1994).
1.   They study at Sohar University.   Where do they study?
2.   He was born in 2004.   When was he born?
 As outlined above, English and Arabic differ in a number of aspects as far as question formation is concerned. The main differences are that Arabic does not involve any addition of auxiliary verb and it does not involve any change in the word order (lack of inversion).

The present study

The present study will try to find out the reasons that cause difficulties in forming correct English questions which will lead to suggestions and recommendations for improving the teaching/learning of English question formation. The study also aims at raising the Omani student teachers' awareness of the difficulties in mastering the structures of English question formation and work towards identifying appropriate solutions for minimizing their repeated occurrence.

Research questions

The present study attempted to answer the following research questions:
1.   How common are question formation errors in Omani EFL student teachers?
2.   Which grammatical category received the highest number of errors?
3.   To what extent are these errors likely to have been caused by L1 interference?

Data collection

A sample of written work was collected from 46 female Omani EFL student teachers. Those students were in Level One of the Department of English Education at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Sohar University in the Sultanate of Oman during the academic year 2009/2010. During an Advanced Writing class, the students were provided with the following task: "Questions give us new ways of approaching a topic and suggest ideas that we can explore further. Write your own questions (at least 10) on the topic of "Wedding in the Sultanate of Oman". The students of this study had a homogenous pre-university and university background. They had almost the same type of education before joining Sohar University where they studied English for 8 years at the school level. They also studied and passed a one year university preparation program before joining the Department of English. To get a complete picture of the grammatical competence of the students, data were collected at the beginning of the first semester of the academic year 2009/2010. After the data required for this study were collected, the 460 questions were examined and prepared for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The subjects of the present study made 460 questions which were used to answer the research questions as outlined below. The student teachers produced 43 (9.35%) Yes/No questions and 417 (90.65%) Wh- questions. They were classified in the following manner:

1. Grammatical questions: This set of questions contains sequences which are well formed and, thus, follow the rules of standard English grammar, e.g.,
Where does the wedding party take place?
What does the bride wear for the wedding party?

2. Ungrammatical questions: This set of questions contains utterances which do not follow the rules of standard English grammar, e.g.:
*What are the bride and groom wear?
 *Why we can't take our cameras to the wedding party?
Thus, for the purpose of this study, an error is any question which violates any rule of Standard English grammar and usage.

Question #1:

How common are question formation errors in Omani EFL student teachers?
This question was investigated through calculating the number and percentages of grammatical and ungrammatical questions which were identified in the written task of first level student teachers. The results are presented in Table (1) below.

Table1. Number and percentages of grammatical and ungrammatical questions

Grammatical questions	Percent	Ungrammatical questions	Percent
367	79.78 %	93	20.22 %

The results displayed in Table (1) above indicate that 20.22% of the questions produced by level one student teachers at Sohar University are ungrammatical and contain various errors. They will be classified into different categories below. Do the error rates suggest that these Omani EFL student teachers have acquired the English question formation system? Taking Cromptont's (2011) accuracy rate (after Dulay and Burt, 1974) of 90% or higher as a sign of acquisition, the answer would be "no". They have acquired 79.78%. That means only 79.78% of all the 460 questions are used correctly. The spread of the errors was checked in order to ascertain that the errors were not produced by a few low proficiency student teachers and the result was that 89.13% (41/46) produced ungrammatical questions at least once. The median number of ungrammatical questions per student teacher was 2. From the data presented above perhaps we can tentatively conclude that a number of student teachers find it difficult to produce grammatical questions in English.

Question #2:

Which grammatical category received the highest number of errors?
To answer this question the 93 errors that we found in the 46 essays written by level one student teachers were analyzed. Here they are, in Table (2) below, divided according to the eight different categories. As the number of the errors is very large, only one example for the sake of illustration to the different categories will be given and discussed.

Table2. Number of Errors according to the Different Categories

Category	No of Errors	%	Example
Auxiliary omission	43	46.24	What they cook for the wedding?
Auxiliary replacement	21	22.58	Where is the wedding party taken place?
Aux. subject agreement	10	10.75	How do Omani people celebrate the wedding?
Verbal form concord	7	7.53	Who go with the bride?
Aux. Subject inversion	5	5.37	Why it is necessary to decorate the house?
Aux. redundant	4	4.30	Is the wedding in Oman is different from that in other countries?
Wrong question word	2	2.16	Who does the man choose the woman?
Verb inverted	1	1.07	How much cost the wedding?
Total	93	100	

 The examination of data collected from 46 essays written by student teachers gave information about which error category received the highest number of errors and which category received the least. Table (2) above answers question # 2, ordering errors from most to least common. It shows that the category "Auxiliary omission" is the highest, i.e., 46.24%. The category of "Auxiliary replacement" comes next, i.e., 22.58%. Questions in which the auxiliary verb does not agree with the subject, e.g., *How does Omani people celebrate the wedding? account for 10.75%. The other categories account for relatively less percentages.

Question #3:

To what extent are these errors likely to have been caused by L1 interference?
As Arabic and English differ considerably with respect to question formation as outlined above, the use of Arabic structures is likely to result in L1 interference errors. Learners tend to use conscious plans for solving what to them presents itself as a problem in attaining a particular communicative goal.

Soundaraj (1994:31) records the following observation: "Second language learning is mostly a process of negotiating new skills in terms of the familiar linguistic skills of the mother tongue".

Our subjects used a large number of Arabic structures while trying to construct English questions. The following deviant questions illustrate the point:

*How choose the man his wife?
*Where they make the wedding?
*What they do before the wedding?
*How much cost the wedding?
*Who go to ask for the bride?

The above questions make us conclude that there is a strong likelihood that Arabic interference is a major factor in causing most of the errors made by Arab learners while forming questions in English. They are also evidence of unsystematic variation and therefore evidence that acquisition has not taken place.

Study limitations

This study is limited in that it used only one elicitation task in collecting the data. Results would have been favorable if more elicitation tasks would have been used. Ellis (1994) argues that results vary when different methods of data collection are used. Furthermore, the population of this study is limited to the First Level student teachers in the Department of English, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Sohar University in the Sultanate of Oman during the academic year 2009/2010. The subjects were not chosen randomly, and therefore, caution should be taken in making generalizations from the results to other contexts.

Study implications

Learners from languages that do not require auxiliary insertion or inversion, such as Arabic, may face significant difficulties in L2 question formation and these difficulties may survive until advanced stages of learning. The trainers of the student teachers should try to drive home in them an awareness of the importance of question formation in their future career as early during the training program as possible. The common practice in the ongoing EFL classroom discourse is that the teacher is the one who asks the questions and the students answer such questions. Some room must be made for the students' questions. Furthermore, it would be worth spending class time explicitly pointing out the English question formation rules.

CONCLUSION

The present study has explored the difficulties that the Omani EFL student teachers at Sohar University face while forming questions in English. The analysis of the data has highlighted the difficulties that they face while forming questions in English. Auxiliary omission, auxiliary replacement, auxiliary subject agreement, verbal form concord, auxiliary subject inversion, auxiliary redundant, wrong question word and verb inverted are the major difficulties that the student teachers have faced in a descending order of difficulty. This classification can serve as a starting for planning teaching activities and constructing relevant remedial materials. It is assumed that when the teachers know the kinds of difficulties their students actually face, they will concentrate on such difficulties and use the frequency scale to establish priorities of teaching activities.

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