

An Analysis of the Production of English Questions by Chinese EFL Learners in Cross-linguistic Transfer

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Abstract:

As part of the most extensively used sentences, English questions are must-learn grammatical structures for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). There is, however, a common occurrence of ungrammatical English questions among English learners of all proficiency levels. In order to identify the cause of Chinese EFL preliminary learners' erroneous production, a written test to collect hands-on data is conducted. There is a similar difficulty in producing questions among learners from both higher and lower proficiency groups, according to achievement scores. Moreover, the statistics indicate that morphosyntactic inconsistencies are associated with auxiliary choice and tense variation in learners' production. Cross-linguistic transfer from the first language (L1) in English question acquisition for Chinese EFL learners is measured against the three dimensions of Jarvis' (2000) methodological model. There is a correlation between preliminary learners' morphosyntactic inconsistency and the learners' L1. A production-oriented task may be a useful tool for practitioners in an EFL context to help learners improve their morphosyntactic accuracy in forming English questions.

Keywords:

Chinese EFL Learners, English Question Acquisition, L1 Transfer, Morphosyntactic Errors

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Object

As one type of the most extensively used sentences, English questions are must-learn grammatical structures for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). However, it is commonly seen that English learners across proficiency levels produce ungrammatical English questions. To determine the source of learners' erroneous production, a written test to collect hands-on data on four types of English questions produced by 80 Chinese EFL preliminary learners is conducted.

In the present research, the author studies errors produced by learners in written form to see how cross-linguistic transfer may impact Chinese EFL learners' acquisition of English questions. Two major differences between Chinese and English questions are considered in the present study. The first one is the word order of question formation in the two languages. In Chinese questions, word order is quite stable concerning subject-verb sequence, so Chinese is a so-called WH-in-situ language, while in English, question formation involves the movement of the auxiliary to the initial position. The second difference is the function of the auxiliary in question formation. English largely relies on an operation of auxiliaries to form questions, while in Chinese, there is no auxiliary, and Chinese questions are formed by adding a particle (ma, ba, or ne) or null-particle at the end of the sentence.

1.2. Research Objective

This study aims to explore what errors young Chinese learners of English may produce in forming English questions and to find out, to what extent, the influence of cross-linguistic transfer underlies their morphosyntactic inconsistency. The study follows a quasi-experimental design, with participants randomly chosen by class from two schools. The data is analyzed to demonstrate specific morphosyntactic inconsistency in English question formation for Chinese secondary school learners; thereafter, the underlying influence of cross-linguistic transfer on their accuracy is discussed.

In this study, the author intends to further the research on question formation by (1) providing a fine-grained analysis of error distribution and error classification with hands-on data from EFL secondary school learners; (2) discussing how cross-linguistic transfer influences learners' acquisition of English questions; and (3) offering pedagogical implications

2. Literature Review

2.1. L1 Transfer

By investigating students' different preferences in selecting reference words, Jarvis observed that second/foreign language learners and bilinguals from different language backgrounds often refer to the same objects and events in conceptually different ways and in ways that are specific to their language backgrounds. [6]

For learners who learn an additional language other than their mother tongue, either in a foreign language (FL) classroom setting or in a semi-natural second language (L2) communicative context, the influence of their L1 cannot be ignored. As shown in the research of methodological issues in L1 transfer by Jarvis, the L1 influence may fluctuate as learners progress in their L2 proficiency. [7] Ellis also pointed out that L1 transfer does not always appear in a linear way; some errors appearing at initial developmental stages may continue to manifest at advanced stages. [5]

In the course of L2 learning, the L1 transfer can be triggered or retarded at certain points of the developmental axis, which exerts an unavoidable influence in acquiring a new language. Therefore, for a study investigating the learning process difficulty, it is imperative to include L1 transfer as an influential variable. Alloway & Corley proved that compared with English, the Chinese spend more time considering time concepts. [3] Zhang and Liu discover that beginners of Chinese are obviously influenced by the

features of Chinese grammatical metaphors, and the conceptual errors of learners are recurrent and systematic. [21]

2.2. Studies Related to Syntactic Transfer

Syntactic transfer refers to the phenomenon of L1 transfer at the syntactic level in the process of learners' learning a second language. At present, most of the transfer studies focus on one aspect of language, such as phonetic, grammatical, or pragmatic transfer, and there are relatively few syntactic transfer studies. [9][11][18][20] Previous studies have mainly investigated the output or understanding of sentences by second language learners and often compared them with native speakers.

The syntactic transfer has long been controversial. On the one hand, research findings have shown less evidence of transfer in syntax than in pronunciation and lexis. Some researchers even claim that certain syntactic structure, such as word order, does not transfer from the first language to the target language in second language acquisition. [24] On the other hand, however, studies of relative clauses, word order, and negation have provided a great deal of evidence of transfer. The syntactic transfer is common in second language production, such as adverbial position, zero subject, zero object, overproduction, and underproduction. The pioneering research of Selinker has attracted people's attention to the adverbial position transfer. [17] Subsequently, Alonso found that the transfer of adverbial positions occurred in tasks with simple structures (such as dialogues), rather than tasks with more complex structures (such as guiding interviews), and it often occurs in elementary learners rather than advanced learners. [1] Syntactic transfer of overproduction and underproduction also occurs in other grammatical categories, including the use of articles, and the use of prepositions. [8] [10] Sometimes these two types of output, especially underproduction, do not involve grammatical errors.

In general, most of the previous studies on the transfer of mother tongue in a sentence pattern, include the use of relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and the use of conjunctions.[16] [22] However, few scholars take English questions as the research object.

2.3. Studies Related to Syntactic Errors

Since the syntactic error is one of the big obstacles for students, some studies tried to investigate possible causes of syntactic errors from the perspective of conceptual transfer.

Based on the categorization theory, Ren & Yang tried to explore conceptual differences between words and phrases between English and Chinese, and they concluded that different family resemblances, cognitive models, and cultural models are the main reasons to explain why foreign language learners may feel that it is difficult to categorize foreign lexical concepts. [14] Based on Conceptual Transfer Theory, Chai studied syntactic errors in English writings of Chinese college students. After analyzing three hundred writing samples, she revealed that there are ten kinds of syntactic errors in the compositions of college students, and among all the ten errors, the errors of disagreement and serial-verb construction are at a higher frequency. [2] Similarly, Qu investigated the syntactic errors of Chinese high school students by collecting and analyzing three hundred compositions of them. And she discovered that eight kinds of syntactic errors are commonly made by high school students in their English writings. [13] That is subject-predicate disagreement, lack of subject,

predicate, and object, run-on sentence, misuse of "there be" structure, and errors in number and word order.

2.4. Studies Related to English Question Production

Cowan claimed that learners, whether from the typologically far more different first language (L1) family as Chinese or Korean or from other European languages that share some similarities such as Portuguese and Spanish, displayed problems in English question production. [4] Extensive research has been done on English questions, studying the developmental sequence of question formation for learners of English as a second language, focusing on the acquisition of certain question types, or studying errors learners made in certain types of question. [12][23] As specified by Richards & Reppen, learners' errors in using a specific grammatical structure can be a useful source for teaching, and class activities can be designed around a collection of typical learner errors. [15]

2.5. Summary

In conclusion, most conceptual transfer studies focus on advanced learners. Under such conditions, the present study aims to explore the effects of existed Chinese conceptual system on middle school students' language learning. There is a dearth of in-depth research on the acquisition of English questions by secondary school learners in China's EFL context, despite the fact that the English question is one of the most frequently used structures in communication and one of the four basic sentence structures (statement, question, imperative and exclamation) to learn according to curriculum criteria (the 2017 version; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017) for preliminary Chinese EFL learners. To gain a clear view of why learners have problems in question formation and to what extent it might be related to cross-linguistic transfer from L1, the present study did a typological analysis of learners' basic errors in 4 typical types of English questions.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Questions:

- a. What are typical errors in English questions produced by preliminary Chinese EFL learners?
- b. How does crosslinguistic transfer from learners' L1 influence their production of English questions?

3.2. Data Collection

3.2.1. Participants

The empirical study is conducted with 80 participants from two secondary schools in China: a foreign language specialized secondary school (FLS School) and a rural public secondary school (RPS School). The FLS school represents the highest English teaching level in secondary schools in China, widely recognized for its high quality and specialization in foreign language teaching. The RPS school stands for the widely spread rural town secondary schools, in which English teaching does not seem adequate for creating a resourceful foreign language learning context.

3.2.2. Test material

The written tests were conducted in a 40-minute self-study session in the classroom, with their English teacher supervising the test. The test paper was designed to test learners' production into building 5 categories of English questions, namely, Y/N questions, WH- questions, Tag questions, Embedded questions, and Choice questions.

Eighty students' test results are analyzed. The test paper was reviewed by two coordinators of the junior secondary school English teaching groups and two teachers with more than 15 years of secondary school English teaching. They confirmed that test items conformed to the criteria for the test of their teaching syllabus used nationwide.

3.3. Data Analysis

In the present study, learner production was classified into: (1a) correct questions, (1b) questions with auxiliary errors, (1c) sentences without creating an obligatory context (for example, producing the wrong type of questions), or production failure (learners left the answer blank).

Questions with auxiliary errors produced by learners are sub-categorized with annotation. Annotations of errors were created partially referring to Thewissen, who followed the 2008 version of Louvain Error Tagging Manual. [19]

4. Discussion

This study intends to enlighten teachers on what kinds of questions Chinese EFL learners would have difficulties in the acquisition and tries to explain the possible reasons why Chinese students make such errors. Moreover, it gives English teachers a profound understanding of the importance of English auxiliary verbs so that they will shed light on students' learning difficulties and then help students with effective methods and strategies to handle these difficulties.

4.1. Findings

This study shows that preliminary learners have difficulty choosing correct auxiliaries and dealing with the inflectional variation of tense in making questions. Learners display a highly identical contour of accuracy rate among the types of questions under investigation, which, to some extent, lend support to the intra-L1-group homogeneity. In this study, learners from two groups of learners with highly different proficiency displayed intra-L1-group homogeneity in three aspects: (1) the same ranking of accuracy regarding question type as a variable; (2) congregation of errors in auxiliary choice and tense; (3) high frequency of word order errors in embedded questions.

The results in this study also correspond to Lee's (2016) finding that learners may produce errors in WH-questions that required do support and inflectional changes in verbs. In the present study, with elaborate sub-categorization of auxiliary errors, it is found that extensive auxiliary errors in auxiliary choice (GAUXC) and tense of auxiliary (GAUXT) appeared in learners' production of Y/N questions, WH-questions, and Tag questions, plus errors in auxiliary order produced in embedded questions.

The outcomes of this study pose questions that need to be investigated further. First, if the errors that arose at the preliminary EFL stage will go away permanently, or whether any specific flaws will persist as learners improve their English skills. Second, more research is needed to see if EFL students can achieve native-like accuracy in

English question creation. Studies should be undertaken in a variety of EFL contexts to see if learners from different L1 languages have different levels of difficulty in forming English questions, which could provide more evidence of how L1 affects the acquisition of L2 language structure. The data also imply that grammatical information awareness may be an essential factor influencing learners' accuracy in creating English queries.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Implications

The research findings of the study provide some implications for foreign language teaching, especially in teaching English questions. The morphosyntactic inconsistency in learners' production, on the one hand, stems from the discrepancy between Chinese and English question formation, and on the other hand, it also results from lacking enough facilitative language context for learners to use and practice their language skills, which seems to favor a stronger influence from learners' L1. To reduce the impact of cross-linguistic influence sourced from L1–L2 differences, raising learners' consciousness of the structure, and providing learners with adequate context to produce what they have learned is significant in teaching practice.

5.2. Limitations

This study is a preliminary attempt to explore Chinese English learners' conceptual transfer in the formation of English questions. There are some limitations in the current study, and some suggestions will be put forward. The influence of conceptual transfer is only one of the reasons that affect the formation of English questions in middle school students. Due to the limitation of time, this research focuses on the influence of conceptual transfer on the formation of English questions. Suggestions for future research can expand the scope of research to focus on other reasons that affect the formation of English questions. The analysis of possible causes also lacks clarity since some errors may be caused by more than two reasons at the same time and using the conceptual transfer theory to explain why students make these errors is a tentative discussion that needs further amendment.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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