Chief Wh-question Making Errors by the Undergraduate Level EFL Learners: An Analysis

Md. Arif Khan Pathan

Department of Languages, Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh, Bangladesh

Email address:
arifkhan_lang@bau.edu.bd

Abstract: Wh-questions play a significant role in improving a language learner's overall language development. The use of wh-questions not only helps build learners' vocabulary and develop their ability to produce contextually appropriate and meaningful sentences but also consequently helps improve their conversational and social skills. By stimulating complex responses from the learners, wh-questions also help promote their critical thinking and reasoning skills. Unfortunately, many EFL learners are unable to ask grammatically correct and contextually appropriate wh-questions during conversations that prevent them from developing their communication skills and eventually negatively affect their overall language learning process. The goal of the present study was to find out the major wh-question making errors by the EFL learners at the undergraduate level. With a wh-question generating instrument, the study collected and analyzed samples from 50 undergraduate students at Bangladesh Agricultural University. Each student was instructed to make 10 wh-questions and hence the total number of questions analyzed by the researcher was 500. A total of 341 errors were identified inclusively where the majority of errors (155 out of 341) was marked in the auxiliary verb category. The second large number of errors consisted of a total of 88 wh-questions that were incompatible with the given answers/contexts. A considerable number of errors were also found in the wh-word (50 out of 341) and content word (37 out of 341) categories. However, a very insignificant number of errors were identified in the preposition category (11 out of 341) whereas no errors were found at all in the determiner category. The study basically attempted to make the learners aware of their major wh-question making errors, so that, they can minimize the errors in their conversations, and can better develop their communication skills, and improve their overall language development.

Keywords: Wh-questions, Wh-words, Wh-question Making Errors, Communication Skills, Undergraduate EFL Learners

1. Introduction

There are different ways to ask questions in English e.g. yes/no questions, wh-questions, tag questions, echo questions, etc. Among them, wh-questions are considered to be the most effective and comprehensive way of asking questions. As the title suggests, wh-questions are questions that begin with wh-words including what, when, where, who, whom, which, whose, and how (exceptional). They are an indispensable part of oral and written communication in English. No meaningful conversation can occur without asking wh-questions. They serve many different purposes in a conversation. First of all, wh-questions enable the questioner to seek information about people, places, things, qualities, facts, ideas, time, actions, reasons, manner, etc. They help the questioner to collect precise and specific information about anything since these questions cannot be answered by simply saying yes/no. They require explicit information. In other words, wh-questions serve the purposes of seeking reasons, obtaining knowledge, getting clarifications, receiving directions, identifying locations, recognizing ownership, denoting time, exposing manners, making comparison, and so forth. For example, wh-questions beginning with 'why' wh-word are used to ask about reasons (Why have you done it?), 'where' is used to question about locations (Where is he going?), etc. Wh-questions are, indeed, a significant part of oral and written communication that build the foundation for effective and successful social interactions.

On the other hand, the importance of using wh-questions in language learning is massive. Asking and answering wh-

questions is a key part of language development (Grace Adams, 2021) [1]. According to the study of Rowe, Leech, & Cabrera (2017) [2], wh-questions help build children's vocabulary and develop their verbal reasoning skills. The study found that asking wh-questions to children is a challenging type of input that stimulates complex verbal responses from them and consequently promote their vocabulary development and verbal reasoning skills. For example, posing wh-questions like 'What/who is that?' may elicit new vocabulary from the children, or questions like 'Why/how did you do it?' may stimulate their verbal reasoning abilities. The use of wh-questions in language learning can, moreover, develop the learners' ability to construct complete sentences and their ability to use the sentences in meaningful contexts. Because wh-questions often require the learners to answer in detail with some full sentences in appropriate contexts according to the questions. They also help improve the conversation skills and simultaneously develop the social skills of the learners since any inter-personal or social communications greatly depend on asking and answering wh-questions. In addition, wh-questions can significantly facilitate language learning by actively engaging the learners into conversations. Since they require complex responses with some solid information in the reply instead of just saying yes/no, the learners are required to have active participation in the conversation. The significance of using wh-questions in language learning has also nicely been described by MeriBeth Plankers (2021) [3] in the following words:

"Asking or answering "Wh" questions (who, what, where, when, and why?) is the basis for the exchange of interactive communication. But these questions also serve to engage greater learning and facilitate the exchange of information among communication partners. It is evident that "Wh" questions and their answers are reflective of each student's expressive and receptive language skills. In turn, they are supportive of the language gains one can make when targeting "Wh" questions."

2. Literature Review

A lot of researches have been conducted to find out the chief wh-question making errors of the EFL learners. Different types of errors in different areas are pointed out by the researchers. Silalahi (2017) [4], for example, examined the common wh-question making errors of 60 university students and found out that students' most common mistakes were inappropriate choice of wh-word to form the wh-question and faulty word order in the question while the other mistakes were related to the right use of article, demonstrative, auxiliary and main verb, and the less common mistakes were related to diction and making meaningful questions. According to Swan (1980) [5] as in Silalahi (2017), the typical mistakes that the students make while making wh-questions are placing subject in wrong position, putting auxiliary verb in wrong position, and using unnecessary auxiliary verb specially with the wh-words 'who' & 'what'.

Zhang (2016) [6] investigated the wh-question making errors of 30 sixth grade primary school students and found out that subject-auxiliary inversion errors, lack of do-support, lack of articles, and lack of key vocabulary were the four main types of errors, and ambiguity in questions was the special type of error that existed in the process of acquiring English wh-questions by the Chinese English beginning learners. Masruddin & Karmila (2018) [7] also investigated wh-question making errors committed by 28 high school students and identified different categories of errors including omission, addition, archi-form, alternating form, misordering, and misselection. Similarly, Jasi (2013) [8] explored different kinds of wh-question errors like wh-word errors, auxiliary verb & main verb errors, subject & object errors, adverb & other errors, etc. and categorized them into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering categories. Addaibani (2017) [9] likewise analyzed wh-question formation errors in English made by EFL majors at Najran University, KSA, and identified various categories of errors, e.g., auxiliary omission, wrong question word, auxiliary-subject inversion, wrong auxiliary, and many others. Some other studies, for example, Al-Hassaani (2016) [10], Nurjanah, Anggoro, & Dwiastuty (2017) [11], Al-Mekhlafi (2013) [12], Lee (20123) [13], Rowland, Pine, Lieven, & Theakston (2005) [14], Hwayed (2014) [15], etc. also analyzed the typical wh-question making errors in English and figured out more or less the same types of errors mentioned above. However, from the previously conducted studies on wh-question making errors, we can make a comprehensive list of error categories like the one given below to carry out our research.

Table 1. Categories of wh-question making errors.

Sl. No.	Categories of Errors
1	Missing/misplaced/incorrect use of 'Wh-word'
2	Missing/misplaced/incorrect use of auxiliary verb
3	Missing/misplaced/incorrect use of determiner
4	Missing/misplaced/incorrect use of preposition
5	Missing/misplaced/incorrect use of content word
6	Wh-questions incompatible with contexts

3. Research Purpose

Despite knowing the significance of wh-questions in oral/written conversations, many EFL learners are unable to make grammatically correct and contextually appropriate wh-questions. It is one of the most challenging areas in English grammar where a lot of mistakes are typically made by the EFL learners. Here, the weaknesses that the learners show and the errors they make in wh-questions formation, all these clearly impede their acquisition of speaking and writing skills, and eventually adversely affect their language learning process. It is, therefore, undeniably essential to find out the mistakes that the learners usually make in wh-questions formation, and make them conscious of all those mistakes to help them develop their speaking and writing skills. That will, in return, help students to improve their overall language competence, and the achieved findings will also contribute to

the more effective teaching and learning of wh-questions formation in the language classroom.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Participants

The participants of the present study were the undergraduate level EFL students belonging to Faculty of Agricultural Economics & Rural Sociology at Bangladesh Agricultural University. A total of 50 students participated in the study. All the participants were the level-1, semester-1 students who studied English Language as a compulsory subject in their B. Sc. in Agricultural Economics (Honors) course.

4.2. Data Collection

The data for the present study were collected through a data collection instrument containing 10 fill-in-the-gap type exercises (See the Appendix). Each exercise was basically a 3-sentence dialogue where the 1st sentence signaled the context, the 2nd sentence was the wh-question that the participants were asked to write, and the 3rd sentence was the answer of that question. Keeping in mind the particular context, given answer, and other grammatical issues, the participants filled-in the gaps with suitable wh-questions. The researcher, afterwards, pointed out the errors made by the participants in their questions, and categorized them in the specific categories.

4.3. Data Presentation

Table 2. Wh-question making errors by the EFL learners at undergraduate level (Data in figures with percentage).

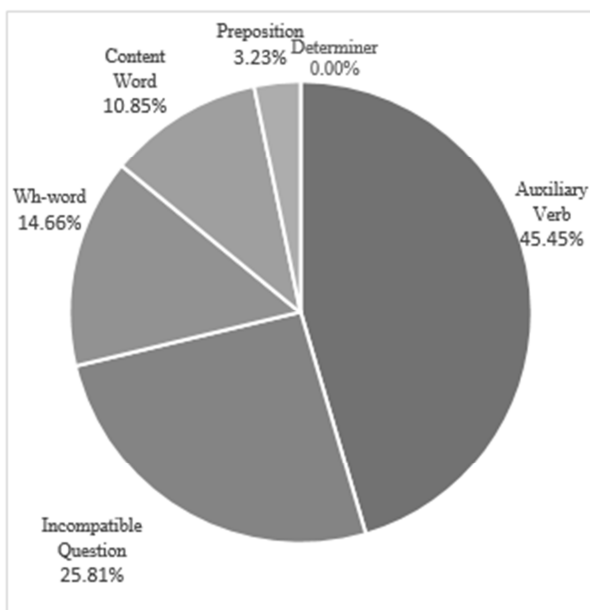| Sl. No.	Categories of Errors	Number of Responses	Percentage
1	Missing/misplaced/incorrect use of 'Wh-word'	50	14.66%
2	Missing/misplaced/incorrect use of auxiliary verb	155	45.45%
3	Missing/misplaced/incorrect use of determiner	0	0.00%
4	Missing/misplaced/incorrect use of preposition	11	03.23%
5	Missing/misplaced/incorrect use of content word	37	10.85%
6	Wh-questions incompatible with contexts/answers	88	25.81%
	Total Number of errors	341	

Figure 1. Wh-question making errors by the EFL learners at undergraduate level (Data in graph).

4.4. Data Analysis

A total of 500 wh-questions were analyzed by the researcher and inclusively 341 errors were identified. Among them, the majority of the errors (155 out of 341) was marked in the auxiliary verb category. All the 50 participants made total 155 mistakes in this category. That means, each participant made 3 mistakes on average. 45.45% of the total errors was made in this category which has made it the biggest error making category. Regarding the use of auxiliary verbs in wh-questions, the participants made verities of mistakes. Some participants couldn't use the correct auxiliary verb, some could choose the correct one but couldn't use in proper position, and some even didn't use any auxiliary verb. Following are the examples of some typical mistakes made by the participants in this category.

a. How many languages your grandfather speak?
b. How many languages do your grandfather used to speak?
c. Whom she was married to?
d. With whom Tom played tennis yesterday?
e. How much sugar are needed for coffee?
f. Whose these are?
g. Whose pen is these?
h. When Olympic Games held?
i. When does it held?
j. How it becomes very tender?
k. From where I can collect it?

The second large number of errors was found in the incompatible question category. A total of 88 wh-questions were identified incompatible with the given contexts/answers. It indicates that 25.81% of the total errors was made in this category. Although most of the wh-questions made by the participants were found grammatically correct, but they were not fitting to the provided contexts/answers. Given below are some examples of wh-questions that were marked incompatible with the particular contexts/answers.

A: Tomorrow is Mary's first marriage anniversary.
B: *Where will they celebrate their marriage anniversary?*
A: To Milton.

A: There is a bus every ten minutes.
B: *How many buses go every ten minutes?*
A: Only the local one.

A: You can't make a cup of delightful coffee without sugar.
B: *What is the taste of a cup of coffee?*
A: It varies from person to person.

A: These are my pens.
B: *Who needs pen?*
A: Hers.

A: I am going to perform in the next Olympic Games.
B: *Where are you going to perform?*
A: Every four years.

A: This meat is really very tender.
B: *How is this meat?*
A: On high heat.

A: Linda got very upset last night.
B: *Why did Linda get upset last night?*
A: Something awful!

According to the survey, the third large number of errors was found in the wh-word category. Choosing an appropriate wh-word is one of the basic criteria to make an appropriate wh-question. However, a total of 50 responses were identified where either inappropriate wh-words were used or they were placed in wrong positions. It specifies that 14.66% of the total errors was made in this category. Typical examples of errors in wh-word category include the following.
   a. How many years the Olympic Games held?
   b. Whom are those pens?
   c. Those are whose pens?
A considerable number of errors were also found in the content word category. Content words include nouns/pronouns, main verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. A total of 37 responses were marked with either missing or misplaced or incorrect use of content words. It specifies that 10.85% of the total errors was made in this category. Following are the examples of some typical mistakes made by the participants in content word category.
   a. How many language could he speak?
   b. Whom did Tom plays tennis?
   c. Whose pen are those?
   d. How often the Olympic Games are hold?
A very insignificant number of errors were identified in the preposition category. Only 11 out of 341 responses were found with either missing or misplaced or incorrect use of prepositions. It shows that 3.23% of the total errors was made in this category. Typical examples of prepositional errors include the following.

   a. How many languages could your grandfather speak in?
   b. Whom did she marry to?
   c. What temperature should meat be cooked?
   d. What happened with her?
Finally, no errors were found at all in the determiner category.

5. Conclusion

Asking grammatically correct and contextually fit wh-questions in oral/written conversations is one of the most challenging tasks for the EFL learners. Grammatically inaccurate and contextually unfitting wh-questions are, in fact, the mostly occurred and witnessed errors in students' oral/written communications that evidently obstruct their overall language development. Most of the students are even found unaware of and indifferent to the correct forms and uses of wh-questions, and consequently make repeated errors in this area. The present study attempted to find out the chief wh-question making errors of the EFL learners at the undergraduate level to make them aware of their weaknesses in making wh-questions. It is to be hoped that the findings of the study will help the learners improve their ability to make precise wh-questions, and subsequently develop their overall communication skills.

Limitations & Recommendations

Although the present study has brought some useful results, it has got some limitations as well. First of all, the study could not incorporate all the wh-words and their uses in all possible situations/contexts. It provided only 10 situations with only a few varieties of wh-word use. Further, some situations/contexts could not be designed that way to compel the participants to produce exactly the same responses as demanded by the situations/contexts or anticipated by the author. Next, the study could not cover all the grammatical items in detail. For example, in the determiner category, no errors were identified at all whereas only 11 errors were identified in preposition category analyzing a total of 500 wh-questions. Here the question may arise how many determiners and prepositions did the study cover. Certainly, it could not incorporate all the determiners and prepositions, nor even many. Finally, the study was conducted in a small settings with a limited number of participants. The participants' prior knowledge of the topic was also unidentified. Therefore, it is highly recommended that to get the whole picture of major wh-question making errors of the undergraduate level EFL learners, extensive studies should be carried out in large settings with a large number of diverse participants. The prospective researchers should also incorporate all the wh-words with their different uses in different situations and other related grammatical items in their studies. However, this incorporation should be made separately in different studies to avoid complexities.

Appendix

Fill-in-the-gaps with suitable wh-questions:

A: My grandfather used to speak in Arabic.

1. B:

A: Five languages.

A: Tomorrow is Mary's first marriage anniversary.

2. B:

A: To Milton.

A: Tom played excellent tennis yesterday.

3. B:

A: With Tony

A: There is a bus every ten minutes.

4. B:

A: Only the local one.

A: You can't make a cup of delightful coffee without sugar.

5. B:

A: It varies from person to person.

A: These are my pens.

6. B:

A: Hers.

A: I am going to perform in the next Olympic Games.

7. B:

A: Every four years.

A: This meat is really very tender.

8. B:

A: On high heat.

A: Linda got very upset last night.

9. B:

A: Something awful!

A: That's really a very useful thing!

10. B:

A: From any electronic shop.

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