

Internalization of the Structural Properties of WH-Questions:

A Remedial Programme through Curricular Intervention

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Abstract

Teaching of a second or foreign language has always had grammar at its controversial core and the numerable issues arising out of it usually dominate theory, research and practice. Still, teaching of second language grammar evades the triangular network of theory-research-practice. This paper singles out one hard spot for beginners (may be of primary level, but found in advanced learners, as well), namely the presence/absence of the auxiliary verb *do* in its past and present tense forms in WH-questions. The paper identifies the source and nature of the hard spot, presents it in terms of metalinguistic (grammatical) competence for teachers and communicative competence for learners. The paper has its theoretical basis on the fusion of three pedagogic constructs namely, curricular intervention, instructed learning and learner autonomy. It has also tried to establish the author's conviction, though indirectly, that instead of waiting for a new method to come or trying any single method of the past, a judicious selection and fusion of elements from the practised methods of the past may work better in terms of learning outcomes.

Keywords: Instructed learning, Learner autonomy, Conversation skills, Learning outcome, WH-questions, Auxiliary verbs.

Contribution/Originality: The paper suggests a discourse task type along with examples, and offers guidelines on carrying out that task in the classroom.

Introduction

Results of research in Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA) of the 1960s and 70s got reflected in an aversion to learner errors in applied linguistics in general and second

language instruction in particular. “How to avoid errors” was the main concern of second language teachers. However, studies on interlanguage initiated by Larry Selinker in the seventies shed new light on the deviant forms in learner’s production--speech and writing. The term ‘interlanguage’ was first introduced into the SLA literature by Selinker, in 1972. He was inspired by S. Pit Corder, with whom he had been working closely, and whose paper "The significance of learners' errors" appeared in 1967 (Firth, M. B.1978) followed by more studies of his own. Firth elaborates: The interlanguage theory, that assumes that an active and independent learning mind makes its own generalizations upon grappling with a new language, argues that the errors that a learner makes in the rules of the target language are often in fact "correct" by the rules of an "interlanguage" invented by the learner as a provisional and sufficiently workable substitute (p.155).

This paper follows the positive line of thinking on learner errors and justifies the occurrence of a particular deviant form not only in beginners but even in adult second language learners. The instance of deviant form chosen here for study is the presence/absence of the auxiliary verb *do* in its present and past tense forms (*do*, *does* and *did*) in wh-questions.

Corpus of the study

Most of us may have noticed the occurrence of the deviant form mentioned above in our own production or in other’s. Just a few of such instances have been cited below:

- “Why you are late?”
- “Why did you wrote the letter?”
- “How does she manages all alone?”
- “Who did tell you about their divorce?”
- “Who did broke the window pane?”

These are some of the deviant forms picked from the undergraduate learners’ spoken and written productions. Conventional remedial measures taken by sincere teachers have not been found quite effective, since the focus was on the form and the procedure followed was that of explicit prescription which did not go well into internalization of the rules in abstraction. For an intensive study, more spoken utterances and written texts were collected and grouped under

various wh-questions. Samples selected from the fairly large corpus have been presented below, with representative nature.

1. When did you come? When do you want the money?
2. Why did they go there? Why do they behave like this?
3. Where did she stay those days? Where does she work now?
4. How did he manage all alone? How does he spend so lavishly?
5. How many people did they invite? How do they accommodate all?

Which train did they catch? Which hotel do they stay in?

6. How often did you withdraw money from the bank? How often do you repay the loan?
7. Who did you meet at the gate? Who do you keep your cabin keys with, usually?
8. Who offered you a lift? Who takes you to hospital for your monthly check up?

Analysis from a pedagogical perspective

In all the pairs of interrogative sentences above, except the last one, we can see the structure of the underlined verb phrase as Auxiliary + Noun+ Main Verb. The first in each pair is in the past tense, whereas the second, in present tense. In the last pair, the presence of the auxiliary is ‘invisible’, as far as the non-native speaker or second language learner is concerned. For the teacher, the past tense is there in the form of a morpheme, either annexed to the stem (e.g., walked =walk +Past) or embedded in the stem (e.g., read = read +past). In informal second language learning, as in the case of peer interaction, this absence-presence distinction of the auxiliary does not create any problem since the learner is not going by rules of ‘usage’, but by meaning through ‘use’. But, in formal classroom learning, for both the teacher and the learner, this is a stumbling block, and as result, the following types of deviant constructions or interlanguage variations are quite natural.

*Why did you went there, all alone?

* Who did tell you all this nonsense?

This paper tries to examine the nature of that interlanguage and tries to offer a few pedagogic strategies either to prevent the occurrence of the deviant form or for remediation, once the error occurred.

Back to theory: (a) Instructed learning

As a backlash of the wide popularity of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology, there happened to be a felt need on the part of teachers to go back to the formal teaching of grammar, of course with less focus on pattern practice and drill. Simultaneously, discussions were initiated on the effectiveness of instructed learning as opposed to natural learning (Ellis, 2005). The ten prerequisites for instructed language learning to be successful, according to Ellis have been summarized below by Mai, et.al. 2013.

1. Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence.
2. Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning.
3. Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form.
4. Instruction needs to be predominantly directed at developing implicit knowledge of the L2 while not neglecting explicit knowledge.
5. Instruction needs to take into account the learner's built-in syllabus.
6. Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input.
7. Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output.
8. The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency.
9. Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners.
10. In assessing learner's L2 proficiency it is important to examine free as well as controlled production. (p.605).

Surprisingly, Ellis does not mention teacher competency directly in his otherwise comprehensive list. However, all the ten prerequisites have been joined by an underlying current, and that current surfaces in the sixth one wherein it has been pointed out as ‘extensive L2 input’. Extensive L2 input for the learner obviously demands extensively L2 production on the part of the teacher. In the case of an acquisition-poor environment as in the case of ESL classrooms in India, the statement is equal to insisting that the L2 teacher must be competent in terms of the accuracy of usage and conversant in language use in terms of fluency. Ellis also suggests that learners should “also focus on form” (No.3 above), in addition to the suggestion that “learners focus predominantly on meaning’ No.2 above). These two statements put together tells us indirectly that the teacher’s knowledge *of* the language (use) and her knowledge *about* the language should be fairly above average. While the former indicates communicative competence which includes sociocultural competence, the latter suggests grammatical competence or metalinguistic knowledge.

(b) Overgeneralization

With these prescriptions of Ellis in our mind, let us once again approach the hardspot of ‘the visible-invisible presence of the auxiliaries’ in the structure of ‘Wh-‘questions. First, the hard spot will be identified and analysed, then the source of the deviant forms will be traced, and finally a set of remedial activities will be formulated. This remedial programme is expected to be non-traditional, in the sense that it will be learner-engaged, cognitively and linguistically placed within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), it demands adult-peer interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) and the process of learning is likely to follow that of ‘social learning’ (Wenger, 1998).

Where and how do ESL learners deviate from the norm in the following Wh- questions?

*Why did you went there, all alone?

* Who did tell you all this nonsense?

The basic source can easily be identified as overgeneralization. Generalization is one of the main cognitive processes of learning. The term has been defined as ‘the process of deriving a

concept, judgment, principle, or theory from a limited number of specific cases and applying it more widely, often to an entire class of objects, events, or people.’ (APA Dictionary).

All species of the animal kingdom acquire the skills and competencies mainly through predicting using their ability of generalizing. Thus a goat or a cow knows which leaves or plants are edible, which ones poisonous; which compound or pasture is permissible to enter which not and so on. This generalization, which is based on the accumulated past experience leads life forward.

At the same time, there is the danger of overgeneralization as well, which is quite common in all fields of perception. The term has been defined as ‘the process of extending something beyond the circumstances to which it actually applies. It is a common linguistic tendency of young children to generalize standard grammatical rules to apply to irregular words (e.g., pluralizing *foot* to *foots*)’ (APA Dictionary). Therefore, the source of the hard spot in this case, namely the presence/absence of forms of ‘do’ as helping verb, can easily be traced to overgeneralization.

Next, the hard spot needs to be analysed. In the last pair, the question word is *who* and the expected answer is a noun phrase (formal label) which functions as the subject of the sentence (functional label). In all other pairs, the expected answers are (i) direct objects of the transitive verbs, (ii) adverbial phrases of place, time, manner, frequency etc.

In Pair 7 though the question word is *who*, and the expected answer is a noun phrase, that NP functions as the object of the transitive verb; not as the subject of the sentence as in the last pair. Therefore, it may be concluded that wh-questions, while seeking for information about actions in the past or present take the auxiliary verbs *do*, *does* or *did* between the wh-question word and the NP which functions as the subject of the sentence. But, the wh-question, of which the answer is an NP which functions as the subject, does not take *do*, *does* or *did*. Examples: Who goes to buy fish today? (Mom.) What made him sell the new house? (Debt.) Which school won the trophy? (St. Joseph’s.)

(c) Curricular intervention

But, this type of an explanation is not at all feasible in a second language class, because it neither motivates the learner, nor does it sustain any interest in learning. But, at the same time, this metalinguistic knowledge or the knowledge about the language is essential for the teacher, teacher trainee and teacher trainer, without which they can't plan a remedial programme. That does not mean that they will be quoting the rules mentioned above in the class. There exists a phase in which the teacher internalizes these rules and processes them for relaying them to the learners without using any of these metalinguistic terms such as subject, object, adverbial of place and so on.

The next stage is that of actual remediation with the help of teacher-made materials, by way of teacher intervention in the curriculum. Though remediation is an integral part of teaching and plays a crucial role in learning, neither its psychological relevance nor its cognitive potentials are fully addressed in ordinary classes. The usual remediation is teaching the *same* thing by the *same* person, the *same* way, using the *same* materials, with added stress on practice and drill and aiming at examination. There is no need to say that it is a futile exercise. Instead, remediation may be perceived as teaching the same thing (the syllabus specifications have to be followed), but in a different way, using different classroom strategies and learning materials. The teacher too, must be 'a changed person' because remediation needs more individual attention on the learners, compassion to them and tolerance towards errors. Above all, the materials and activities must be learner-inviting and engaging.

Here it will be pertinent to suggest how remediation can be made optimally productive through teacher intervention in the curriculum. Teacher intervention is not only possible, but inevitable too, especially in a foreign language learning situation. Teachers must have the pedagogic awareness to intervene at any stage of the curriculum from framing to implementing and evaluating. In the classroom, it can happen at any stage—ranging from re-stating the objective to assessing learner performance. The inquiry of how teachers can intervene in developing indigenous materials to suit the taste and needs of the learners has been of recent interest among researchers (Fullan, 1991; Register, 2001; Handler, 2010; and Merfat, 2016).

Fullan (1991) identifies teacher involvement as the ‘centre of curriculum development’ which may lead to effective achievement of educational reform. Collaborative contribution of teachers in terms of material development has been cited as an effective practice by Handler (2010). Summing up the earlier findings, Merfat strongly argues for space for teachers in negotiating the curriculum based on the learner need and interest.

Merfat (2016) asserts: The teachers’ involvement in the curriculum development process is essential in meeting the needs of society. The process of curriculum development requires teachers to act and reflect on society's needs in each stage of the development process. I think that there should be major advances in teacher development in order for teachers to actively reflect on society's needs in each stage of the curriculum development process (p.106).

(d) Learner autonomy

One way of getting children engaged in learning is to assign them responsibilities along with the autonomy to fulfil the tasks assigned. It was only in recent times, we started seriously thinking of learner autonomy in terms of learning outcomes. Holec (1981) has been identified as the first researcher to use the term ‘learner autonomy’ as it is currently being used in the language learning contexts (Neupane, M. 2010:114). Naturally, the concept of learner autonomy in educational psychology derived from the construct of autonomy in infancy, as pointed out in child psychology. Hamachek (1988) quotes Erik Erikson’s statement in his classic text *Childhood and Society* (1963) as follows: ‘ The age of two or three ...is the key stage in a person’s life where the foundations of a feeling of self-competence are set and where appropriate actions by caregivers can help to establish a basic attitude of ‘I can do it’ (p.31).

Back to the classroom

Coming back to the classroom strategy suggested for internalizing the structural patterns of wh-questions, this paper suggests a role reversal between the teacher and the learners, by way of giving autonomy to learners. Traditionally, learners are expected to answer the questions of teachers, textbook writers and examiners. This classroom activity reserves the right of asking questions for learners, and teachers are supposed to answer them. Making use of the freedom which the pedagogical notion of teacher intervention in the curriculum, teachers can prepare the

following type of discourse for promoting interaction in the classroom, and thereby the subconscious assimilation of the rules that govern the particular language structure, in abstraction.

Treating curriculum intervention as a privilege as well as a pedagogic obligation, this paper offers a few guidelines for remediation in the mastery of one of the basic rules of English syntax, namely the use and position of the auxiliary in wh-questions. It is used for operational and official purposes (John, 2021). A few real life situations have been identified and conversational situations have been outlined for getting the learners engaged, and thereby subconscious internalization the ‘rules in abstraction’ may be made possible, instead of the conventional, explicit teaching-learning of the grammar rules. Such a version follows, which again needs to be refined. Those metalinguistic terms given in brackets are exclusively for the teacher; never meant for learners.

Applying for a two-wheeler loan

“Why **did** you apply for a loan?”

“For buying a scooter.”(Adverbial of reason)

“When **did** you go to the bank?”

“Last week.” (Adverbial of time)

“How much did they promise?”

“ Fifty thousand.”(Direct object)

“Who **did** you give the application to?”

“ Mr. Sankar, the Deputy General Manger.” (Indirect object)

“ Which dealer **offers** the cheapest rate?”

“ ABC Motors.” (Subject)

“Who **owns** it?”

“Mr. Hashim, my neighbor.” (Subject)

“ You used to say, you would never go for a two wheeler; your preferred walking to work. Now, what **changed** your mind, all of a sudden?”

“My daughter’s early morning tuition class”.(Subject)

In this discourse, learners get ample opportunities for using (not merely practicing) the confusing structures in meaningful situations. The larger context is buying a two wheeler, and the specific situation is getting a bank loan. (‘Context of situation’ is a term coined by Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist in 1923.) Exchanges are natural, and they can be made more natural by inserting more comments, other types of questions such as Yes/No type, tag questions etc. When their responses too are incorporated, it becomes a lively conversation. Such a version follows, hoping the conversation activity which is open ended, may promote not only the mastery of the grammar rules, but also may enhance oral communication skills.

Context of the discourse: An Inter-school Scouts and Guides camp held in a nearby school in which a few students of the class participated.

Situation: Reporting the details to the class

After introducing the topic to the class, the learners are asked to make queries about the details of the camp to which the teacher and a few selected students (who were supposed to have attended the camp) are expected to answer. The transcript of the expected classroom interaction may read as follows?

Query by the class: Where was the camp?

Reply by the team which participated in the camp, including the escorting teacher: At Govt. Senior Secondary School Evilore.

Q: How many from our school participated?

R: Thirty four

Q: How many were from our class?

R: We, seven—three boys and four girls.

Q: Where did you stay?

R: We, girls stayed in the classrooms on the second floor of a new building. Boys stayed on the ground floor of another bigger building.

Q: Who cooked food for you?

R: We ourselves. We cooked, we served and we ate.

Q: What did you do the whole day?

[This conversation can be extended to any length, and the next day another topic of learner interest and experience can be chosen. There it would be another small team who was part of another not so common experience answering the queries of the class.]

The curiosity in making inquiries related to real life experience, the pride and thrill in answering the queries, the collaborative work behind them—all lead to self-actualization, as suggested by the famous psychologist Abraham Maslow. The distance between the learner and the prescribed study materials has been reduced on the remediation programme since the lived experience is closer to the learner's life.

Conclusion

A close reading of the history of second language instruction all over the world, (Kelly, 1969), that of English language teaching across continents (Howatt, 1986), or the brief history of Indian ELT (Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy) may tell us two facts: No method has been perfect, and secondly all methods had something or other which worked in the classroom. Therefore, instead of endlessly waiting for a new method to come that suits our learners, a selection of those transactional strategies which ignited learner motivation in the past, sustained interest and extended language usage from classroom learning to language use in real life may be fused together so that a new methodology of the individual teacher may emerge. Even though its name may not be seen in the history, nor will it be mentioned in research, that indigenous methodology may live in the learner, in the classroom and consequently in the future career and life of the learner.

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