

COMMON MISTAKES IN CONSTRUCTING QUESTIONS IN CONVERSATIONS

Common mistakes, Constructing Questions

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***Abstract** - As a foreign language, English is hardly ever used in daily practice at schools. It is only spoken fluently and actively in certain international schools in Indonesia, such as British International School and Jakarta Multicultural School, in which the medium of instruction is English. Indonesian learners are not familiar in English, so that they use it passively. As a consequence, more learners make mistakes in speaking, especially when they are constructing questions in conversations. Accordingly, this study aims at analyzing the common mistakes produced by students in constructing questions. This study employs descriptive qualitative methodology in which the writer describes the results of the analysis that show learners do make mistakes in constructing questions in declarative, yes/no interrogative, alternative interrogatives, wh-interrogatives, and double interrogatives form. It happens because they are not aware of the proper forms of questions, and also they do not practice English frequently. Therefore, mistakes appear due to these factors.*

***Keywords:** Common mistakes, Constructing Questions*

I. INTRODUCTION

Conversation can be found in social and real context, which makes the learning of this mode considered authentic. Students are encouraged to speak or converse to develop the communication skills – a key to successful relationship in the aspects of life (Carter, 2014). To engage in a conversation, both speakers must show interest in the topic being talked about. One of the ways to maintain conversation is by raising questions so that response can be elicited and a conversation will be sustained. Constructing questions is one of the skills needed to master for any levels of English as a second language learners. Not only does it involve language competence, but it also requires thinking skills to construct follow up questions. In terms of language competency, learners are to construct questions structured in such a way to elicit response from the hearer and at the same time sound grammatically correct.

Technically, sentence structure in speaking is difficult to maintain as once it is said, no correction can be made. Moreover, simple grammatical mistakes or sentence structure will not obstruct the meaning as long as the hearer responds as expected.

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Nevertheless, advanced ESL learners are expected not to have the grammatical mistakes in constructing questions, deliberating statements and even sharing simple thoughts in speaking. This learning goal is stated in the IGCSE English as a second language 0511/05 as ‘employ and control a variety of grammatical structures’.

Producing sentences in conversations; including questions are normally considered as a part of speech acts because it is formulated through words. The wordings are associated in the grammar through types of clause; the declarative is typically used to encode a statement, the interrogative a question, the imperative a directive and the exclamative an exclamation. These are the direct correspondences between form and function that we refer to as direct speech acts (Downing, 2006). Syntactically, questions in a conversation can be first classified according to whether they take an interrogative or a declarative form (Thornburry & Slade, 2006). As both are used to encode a question, or in other words, have an illocutionary force as a question, the first form is called a direct speech act while the second form is an indirect speech. Conversation is interactive, resembling human interaction in daily life which makes it possible for complexity to occur. This complexity triggers indirect speech acts which require the addressee to infer meaning.

The five clause types are distinguished by the presence or absence and the ordering of Subject (S) and a finite verb (F). The Finite is realized by a primary verb (*am, is, are, was, were, has, had*), a modal verb (*can, must, etc.*) or a tensed lexical verb (*sells, sold, etc.*), and is the first or only element of the verbal group (Downing, 2006). Declarative is the basic clause type with Subject and Finite ordering. In interrogative clauses, the Finite verb precedes the Subject, the rest remaining the same. The function of the finite operator in interrogative clauses is that they carry polarity, either negative or positive. Another type of interrogative is alternative interrogative started with an operator and gives more variants for hearers to choose from.

The most common type of questions for inquiry is *wh*-interrogatives. It contains an element of missing information embodied in the *wh*-word with the ordering of *wh*-word, Finite and Subject. There is one exception to the Finite-Subject order in *wh*-interrogative clauses. This is when the *wh*-element itself functions as subject or as part of a Nominal Group at subject. The last type of question which can be found in

a conversation is double interrogatives or questions within questions. A *wh*-interrogative can be embedded as a constituent of a polar interrogative, in which case the *wh*-interrogative has the order of a declarative clause (Downing, 2006).

Related to the viewpoint above, this paper had analyzed the common grammatical mistakes found when students constructed questions during a conversation. The analysis on the sentence structure for both declarative and interrogative forms were delineated based on the forms of questions in conversation: declarative, yes/no interrogative, alternative interrogatives, *wh*-interrogatives and double interrogatives. Conclusion of this study was drawn from the common mistakes found in each category; providing clear ground from which education practitioners and language users could cover and improve.

II. METHODS

Qualitative descriptive is employed in this study because the purpose of it is to explore, elaborate, and discuss the content of the results deeper (Given, 2008). Here, the writer has conducted qualitative flow; started from collecting data through observation sheets and field note which are the qualitative tools of data collection; analyzing the data by transcribing and generating them with the selected criteria (Cresswell, 2012); and finally discussing them in the discussion section by elaboration the results of data analysis (Cresswell, 2012). The participants were the students of Sekolah Tunas Bangsa who were selected by using random sampling technique. Random sampling was chosen to maintain credibility and objectivity of the participants.

III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The data were collected through giving tasks in form of dialogs in role – plays activities. Tasks are activities that people do, and in language-learning contexts, tasks are usually defined in terms of language use (Luoma, 2004). For this particular discussion, the task here refers to a guided conversation with daily-life topics. Students were to work in pairs to role-play a conversation based on the situation given. There was only one role-play card for eleven pairs and each pair was only given 10 minutes to prepare before they present their role play. Below is the speaking

prompt that the students use for their speaking activity. The challenge was that the students must sustain a well-developed conversation in 5-7 minutes.

Electronic Games

Playing electronic games is very popular among children and adults.

Discuss this topic with your partner.

Use the following prompts, in the order given below, to develop the conversation:

- Electronic games you like to play or ones that you know about
- Electronic games that other people play and why they enjoy them
- Positive and negative aspects of this type of game-playing
- Reasons why such games are played by adults as well as children
- The suggestion that electronic games for children should be banned

You may introduce related ideas of your own to expand on these prompts.

The speaking task was assessed in terms of structure, vocabulary, and development and fluency. At a glance, the students were expected to perform a dialogue or speaking activities as follows:

- Structure: the candidate demonstrates ability to use a variety of structures accurately and consistently. The candidate is confidently in control of the structures used.*
- Vocabulary: the candidate shows enough command of vocabulary to respond with precision. Shades of meaning are achieved and some sophisticated ideas are communicated.*
- Development and Fluency: the candidate shows sustained ability to maintain a conversation and to contribute at some length. The candidate can respond to change in direction of the conversation. Pronunciation and intonation are clear (Examinations, 2014).*

During the role-play, teachers recorded and assessed the students' speaking skills based on the rubric elaborated from the above standards. The recording was used as the tool to get the data of students' sentence structure based on the standard

set and the syntactic ordering. The excerpts of some dialogues are presented to provide evidence on the syntactic ordering of the question forms used by the students: declarative, yes/no interrogative, alternative interrogatives, *wh*-interrogatives and double interrogatives.

a. Declarative

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Indirect correspondences are common in English, making it possible that a declarative is used to ask questions (Downing, 2006). Thus, its illocutionary force is different from the basic one, which is making a statement, providing that there is a shared situation between the speaker and hearer in a dialogue. It can also be indicated by rising or appropriate intonation. Syntactic variation consists in the presence or absence of Subject and the ordering of two elements i.e. Subject and Finite. The declarative is the basic clause type with Subject-Finite ordering. The finite element relates to either a time reference, by tense or speaker's judgment by means of modality. The latter point is discussed in semantic view by indicating the meaning of the utterance. There are two extracts of dialogues for this analysis:

A. *Hmmm...*online games is make me bored!¹

B. I don't think so. There are lots of games you can choose.

A. They are so expensive, too *haaaahh*.

B. Some are cheap if you play in groups.

C. I think children cannot play electronic games.²

D. I don't think it is a good idea. They can improve their thinking skills.³

C. Well, they must be get addicted to it.⁴

D. Parents should supervise, then.⁵

In the first dialogue, the first speaker poses a question in a form of declarative to elicit response towards his opinion. However, in a positive declarative clause, finite and predicator fuse in the present or past tensed form. Therefore, "online games is make me bored"¹ is grammatically incorrect as it should be 'online games make me bored'.

The second dialogue mostly uses modal verbs to express the utterance's meaning. Syntactically, it has followed the ordering of subject and finite in a

declarative form. Modals are in semantics of verbs to express modality of main verb; providing information about necessity, ability, permission, possibility, volition, etc. In utterance ², the speaker intends to show his opinion to show prohibition, but he uses the modal ‘can’ which refers to ability. While the modals in utterances ³, ⁴, and ⁵ are appropriately used to show the meaning of each utterance which show ability, certainty, and necessity respectively. In addition, in ⁴, the verb phrase ‘must be get addicted⁴’ should exist without the presence of ‘be’ as the word ‘get’ serves as the auxiliary verb of the main verb to form a passive voice.

b. Yes/No Interrogatives

In interrogative clause, the finite verb precedes the subject. When no operator in is available in the clause, a form of do, does, did or what so called ‘dummy operator’ is used. It has no meaning but to function syntactically in sentence as a finite operator. The function of the operator is to indicate that the clause is interrogative and they carry polarity which is either negative or positive proposition (Downing, 2006). The following extracts show how students construct yes/no interrogatives in a conversation.

A. Do you like play electronic games?⁶

B. Yes, I do. I play it all day on weekends. You like?⁷

A. No, I don’t. My parents confiscate all my gadgets. *Huhhh*

B. Do you fine with that?⁸

C. Does your friends play electronic games?⁹

D. Yes, they like playing games. We share the same hobbies. What about you?

C. I do like, too.

Question ⁶ has followed the ordering of yes/no interrogatives with dummy operator ‘do’ which carries the polarity whether one likes playing electronic games or not. While in ⁷, dummy operator and the polarity do not exist. It has not completed the syntactic functions although it can elicit response as expected. It is also called abbreviated clause, where the speakers abbreviate the clause for both

participants shared the same context. While in question 8, no dummy operator is needed as it has its finite 'are' which should precede the subject 'you'. In question 9, the appropriate dummy operator is 'do' as it serves to accommodate the plural noun of 'your friends'.

c. Alternative Interrogatives

Alternative interrogatives start with an operator as in yes/no interrogatives but with the alternatives for the hearer to choose from. One extract is given for this type of interrogative.

- A. Does your friends play online games or free games?¹⁰
- B. Free games. They play them for free.

In question 10, it has followed the order with dummy operator preceding the Subject and alternatives presented in the question. However, 'does' is not the appropriate dummy operator for the clause as the subject is a plural noun which requires operator 'do' instead.

d. Wh-Interrogatives

Wh-interrogatives have the ordering of *wh*-word, finite, and subject with the exception that if *wh*-element functions as a subject, it is then followed with finite. In this type of task, students mostly use *wh*-interrogatives which are more easily transformed from the prompts given. Moreover, this type of clause can elicit more response which will sustain the conversation. Below are some extracts of the conversations which give clues on how students construct questions based on the prompts given.

- A. What kinds of games do you play?¹¹
- B. *Ehmmm...* Candy Crush Saga. But I don't play it often.
- A. Who do you play with you?¹²
- B. My friends usually invite me to play.
- C. Why children play electronic games?¹³
- D. *Uhhmmm...* maybe it's fun.

- C. Why it should be banned for children?¹⁴
- D. I don't agree. They love playing games. That is good for them.
- A. When you usually play games?¹⁵
- B. Everyday after school. You?
- A. Only on weekends. Who play with you?¹⁶
- B. My little brother. We both love playing games.

Question ¹¹ has followed the syntactic ordering of a *wh*-interrogative which consists of *wh*-element, finite, subject and predicate (verbal group), while question ¹² seems to have redundancy for having two subjects in one question. There are two alternatives for latter sample question. First, it can follow the structure as in question ¹¹ with the order of *wh*-word, finite, subject, and predicate (verbal group) which sounds as: 'who do you play with?'. Another alternative can be used when the *wh*-element functions as a subject or nominal group at subject as found in question ¹⁶.

Basically, *wh*-interrogatives contain a missing element in its *wh*-word. Hence, although question ¹³ sounds ungrammatical, it has successfully elicited response from the hearer as he could encode the missing element questioned which refers to the reason why children play electronic games. However, it does not follow the syntactic order of a *wh*-interrogative. The question needs finite 'do' which makes it grammatically correct as: why do children play electronic games? It also applies to question ¹⁵ in which it misses finite 'do' preceding its subject and following its *wh*-word.

Different from question ¹³, question ¹⁴ has a modal which functions as a finite. However, its position follows the subject which may resemble a syntactic order of a declarative. The question should follow the order of a *wh*-interrogative as in 'why should it be banned for children?'

e. Double Interrogatives

Double interrogatives are also called questions within questions. A *wh*-interrogative can serve as a part of a polar interrogative or yes/no interrogatives and has the ordering as a declarative.

- A. Do you know why are they play games?¹⁷
B.....*hmmm*...I think they just want to relieve stress
- C. Do you know what game do they play?¹⁸
D. War games. What games do you play?

Question ¹⁷ and question ¹⁸ are both double interrogatives with the polar question: ‘do you...?’. Question ¹⁷ has *wh*-interrogative within the polar question. However, its question should follow the syntactic order of a declarative and does not require finite ‘are’ as *wh*-word is followed by subject and finite. Finite and predicator are fused in the present tense form of lexical verb ‘play’. It will sound grammatical as in ‘do you know why they play games?’ *Wh*-interrogative in question ¹⁸ does not require finite ‘do’ as its order should follow a declarative: *wh*-word, subject, finite and predicate fused in lexical verb ‘play’.

IV. CONCLUSION

Conversation is an unplanned speech whose topics can be derived from daily life. A conversation typically involves two speakers and is usually informal. Both speakers can maintain a conversation as long as there is a shared thought and situation, making the ideas fairly exchanged. It can be done though posing questions. Questions in conversation can be in forms of declarative or interrogatives with *wh*-interrogatives as the most common type of questions speakers use to sustain a conversation.

Nonetheless, second language learners still make mistakes in constructing questions especially in terms of syntactic order. In a declarative form, the students’ common mistake is that they are not aware that finite and predicator fuse. They also tend to put finite such as “is”, “am”, or “are” although the lexical verb exists. Another

problem is that the students confuse the semantic propositions of some modals. In constructing yes/no interrogatives, students tend to use abbreviated clause and they have sometimes mixed whether to put dummy operator or finite operator. This also applies when they construct alternative interrogatives.

In posing *wh*-interrogatives, mistakes are found in the order of finite and subject/predicator or the omission of finite operator in the question. For double interrogatives, students are unaware that *wh*-interrogative order contained in the polar questions changes to declarative form. That mistake results in a question form within a polar question.

Overall, students mostly use questions in declarative or interrogative forms which have successfully sustained conversation. Room for improvement is needed particularly in syntactic order of the declarative and interrogative forms.

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