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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Omission of Auxiliaries in English Questions by Arab Learners: Syntactic Transfer, Feature Reassembly, and the Left Periphery

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the omission and incorrect placement of auxiliaries in the English questions produced by Arab learners. The problem is more apparent is form such as *Where he going?, where 'be' is absent, and *What you do?, where English do-support is not realized. It also includes incorrect auxiliary placement, as in *Where he is going?, where the auxiliary is pronounced but subject auxiliary inversion does not occurr (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1997; Smith, 2001). Studies of Omani and Saudi learners have reported similar cases involving auxiliary omission, auxiliary replacement, and failure of inversion (Al-Mekhlafi, 2013; Al-Hassaani, 2016; Alqahtani, 2022; Umale, 2011). However, most of these studies concentrate on describing and classifying the errors without explaining in sufficient syntactic details why they continue to occur. Drawing on the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995, 2000), Rizzi's (1997, 2001) analysis of the left periphery, and Lardiere's (2009) Feature Reassembly Hypothesis, this article attributes the problem to differences in how English and SA grammatically express interrogative force. Main clause questions in English require an overt auxiliary in complementizer position, while SA, by contrast, can form questions through interrogative particles or wh-fronting without using the English auxiliary style of movement or do-support. Accordingly, Arab learners may transfer the Arabic question configuration into English, which can result in the omission of the auxiliary or its retention below the subject. This article proposes a teaching method based on three stages that make the difference between the two linguistic systems explicit and gives learners controlled and communicative practice of the missing operation.

KEYWORDS

Auxiliary omission, Arab learners, subject-auxiliary inversion, question formation, syntactic transfer, feature reassembly, left periphery

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1. Introduction

Auxiliary omission is a recurrent problem in the English questions produced by Arab learners. Learners often place the wh-expression in the correct position and select the intended lexical verb, but fail to realize the auxiliary required by English. For example, they may produce *Where he going? instead of Where is he going?, or *What you study? instead of What do you study?. The auxiliary may also be pronounced without appearing in the correct position, as in *Where he is going?. Although these forms are related, they involve different surface errors. In the first example, auxiliary 'be' is omitted while the second lacks the do-support required in English. The third one, on the other hand, contains an auxiliary that has not undergone subject-auxiliary inversion. What these forms have in common is the absence of an auxiliary in the position required at the left edge of the relevant English interrogative clause.

The problem has been identified in research on the English of Arabic speaking learners for several decades. Kharma and Hajjaj (1997) and Smith (2001) describe auxiliaries and question formation as recurring sources of difficulty for Arabic speakers. In a study of Omani learners, Umale (2011) reports errors involving be, have, and do in interrogative clauses. Al-Mekhlafi (2013) also finds that auxiliary omission is the most frequent question formation error in his Omani data. It is followed by auxiliary replacement and errors related to agreement and inversion. Comparable patterns have also been found among Saudi learners. Al-Hassaani (2016) thinks that the problem is twofold, attributing difficulties with interrogative clauses partly to incomplete knowledge of English

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question formation and partly to First Language (L1) interference. Alqahtani (2022) similarly reports that wh-questions cause learners the greatest difficulty and that missing or incorrectly selecting auxiliaries are among the most frequent errors. Hence, auxiliary omission is a repeated pattern found among different groups of Arab learners and in different proficiency contexts.

These studies establish that the problem exists, but they do not provide a sufficiently detailed account of its syntactic source. Referring generally to L1 interference does not identify which property of Arabic is transferred into English. It also does not explain why the auxiliary is repeatedly omitted or placed incorrectly. The contrast between English and SA helps specify the source of the error. Both languages allow a wh-expression to occur at the left edge of the clause. However, English also requires an auxiliary before the subject in a main clause object question. SA has no equivalent of English do-support and does not form questions through the same type of auxiliary movement. Hence, Arab learners may acquire wh-fronting, which is visible in both languages, without acquiring the additional auxiliary operation required by English.

This article argues that auxiliary omission and failure of inversion are related consequences of a feature reassembly problem in the left periphery. Arab learners already possess an interrogative feature and can express interrogative force in their L1. The acquisition problem concerns the different lexical forms and syntactic operations associated with that feature in English. Following Lardiere's (2009) Feature Reassembly Hypothesis, learners must reorganize the formal features involved in question formation so that interrogative force becomes associated with an overt auxiliary, do-support, and T-to-C[1] movement in the English clauses that require them.

Section 2 reviews previous research on auxiliary omission and related question formation errors among Arab learners. Section 3 presents the syntactic assumptions related to English interrogative clauses and the left periphery. Section 4 compares English question formation with SA and develops a transfer account of the learner forms. Section 5 uses the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis to explain the persistence of these errors. Section 6 proposes a teaching procedure derived from the syntactic analysis. Section 7 discusses the implications and limitations of the proposed account.

2. The auxiliary problem in previous research

2.1 The central problem: omission and no inversion

The expression auxiliary omission is sometimes applied broadly in teaching and error analysis research. However, the learner forms placed under this label do not all have the same syntactic structure. Hence, they must be distinguished before a general explanation can be proposed. The main patterns are given in (1).

a. *Where he going?

b. *What you study?

c. *Where he is going?

d. Where is he going?

Example (1a) lacks the progressive auxiliary be. In (1b), the corresponding declarative sentence contains only a lexical verb, but the formation of the English question requires do-support. As a result, the sentence is deemed ungrammatical because 'do' has not been inserted. Example (1c) presents a different pattern, where the auxiliary 'is' is overtly realized, but remains after the subject in the position associated with the declarative order. The problem in this example is failure of subject-auxiliary inversion instead of auxiliary omission. Accordingly, the grammatical structure in (1d), where the auxiliary occurs before the subject, provides the target form.

These structural differences place limits on an analysis based on only one operation. An account that treats the problem exclusively as failure to pronounce an auxiliary may explain the absence of be in (1a), but it cannot explain why the overt auxiliary remains after the subject in (1c). Conversely, an account concerned only with auxiliary movement cannot explain why no overt auxiliary appears in (1a) or why do-support fails to apply in (1b). Hence, I treat the three ungrammatical patterns as distinct manifestations of a more general acquisition problem, meaning that the learner has not fully associated English interrogative C with the overt auxiliary requirements of the relevant question structures.

2.2 Descriptive evidence from Arab learners

Following Corder's (1967) error analysis approach, early descriptive studies identify English auxiliaries as a recurring problem for Arab learners. Kharma and Hajjaj (1997) survey common English errors among Arabic speakers and explain many syntactic errors in terms of differences between Arabic and English. Smith (2001) similarly argues that English auxiliaries and question formation are difficult for Arabic speakers because Arabic lacks a directly comparable system of primary auxiliaries and subject-auxiliary inversion. These works provide broad descriptions of learner errors instead of experimental investigations of a single grammatical

[1] Movement from T(ense) head to C(omplemtizer) head.

construction. These investigations are especially because they show that the auxiliary problem occurs among different groups of Arabic speaking learners and is not confined to one educational setting.

Later research provides more focused evidence, especially Umale's (2011) examination of the question formation errors of 25 Omani students before and after a consciousness raising activity. Her discussion connects the omission of forms such as *am, is, are, do*, and *did* to structural differences between English and Arabic questions. The amount of improvement was limited even if the activity reduced some errors, which is not a satisfactory result since our ultimate goal is to maximize the learning and production processes. Her results confirm that auxiliary omission occurs in actual learner production and also indicate that making learners briefly aware of the correct structure does not necessarily result in stable acquisition/the desirable outcome.

Al-Mekhlafi (2013) reaches a similar conclusion investigating written questions produced by Omani student teachers. The errors in his data contain several types of errors, including auxiliary omission, replacement of one auxiliary with another, absence of subject-auxiliary agreement, incorrect verb forms, failure of inversion, and unnecessary auxiliary insertion. Most importantly, auxiliary omission was reported as the most frequent error category. Al-Mekhlafi attributes these errors to differences between the learners' first and Second Language (L2). Accordingly, his analysis treats omission as a systematic response to a grammatical mismatch instead being portrayed as an accidental performance mistake.

Evidence from Saudi learners follows the same direction as previous account. In this regards, Al-Hassaani (2016) finds that learners at Bisha University experience difficulty with several English question types and attributes these errors to incomplete knowledge of English question formation rules and strong influence from the learners' L1. Alqahtani (2022), as one of the most recent studies, examines the syntactic structure of English questions made by Saudi EFL learners, and her results were striking, indicating that wh-questions are especially difficult and that auxiliary omission and incorrect auxiliary selection are main sources of the problem. It is worth noting until this point of our discussion that even if these studies use different participants and research tasks, they still provide consistent evidence that Arab learners often fail to produce the auxiliary structure required in English questions.

More general error analysis lends further support to L1 transfer accounts. In this regard, AbiSamra (2003) and Sabbah (2015) identify L1 influence influence in the English production of Arabic speaking learners, even if their studies have addressed several errors instead of question formation just by itself. These investigations prove that the nature of SA syntax and grammar are strong deciding factor in the making of such errors. When we combine this observation along with the focused studies devoted to question formation in SA, auxiliary omission can be treated as specific of a wide transfer process.

2.3 Formal accounts and the remaining gap

A smaller group of generative studies examines the underlying representation of auxiliaries and verb movement in the English of Arab learners. Muftah and Wong (2011a) investigate constructions containing auxiliary 'be' and thematic verbs in the oral production of 77 adult Arab learners. They find that errors involving forms of 'be' occur more frequently than errors involving agreement morphology on thematic verbs. Following Prévost and White's (2000) Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis, they argue that variable pronunciation of the auxiliary does not necessarily indicate that the corresponding functional structure is absent from the learner's grammar. In this regard, learners may possess the relevant tense and agreement features but experience difficulty supplying the appropriate surface form, which is the issue that this article tries to both explain and account for syntactically.

In a related investigation, Muftah and Wong (2011b) examine English verb placement among 240 Arabic speaking learners by basing their analysis on the verb movement parameter associated with Pollock (1989). The findings support Hawkins and Chan's (1997) Failed Functional Features Hypothesis according to which adult learners may be unable to acquire an uninterpretable formal feature[2] that is not selected in their L1. Muftah and Wong (2014) report comparable difficulty with the English verb movement parameter and conclude that the L1 setting continues to affect learner grammar even at advanced proficiency levels. These studies are not concerned specifically with T-to-C movement in English questions. However, their findings indicate that the problem cannot be explained solely as failure to memorize individual auxiliary forms but also involves the relationship between functional features and overt syntactic movement.

Hence, two conclusions can be drawn from the previous research. First, descriptive studies show that auxiliary omission and inversion errors occur frequently in the English questions of Arab learners. Second, generative studies show that auxiliary realization and verb movement can remain difficult even among learners with higher levels of proficiency. However, these two bodies of research are hardly ever brought together since descriptive studies normally identify and classify the errors before offering general recommendations for further practice. Generative studies are usually concerned with whether particular parameters or formal features remain available to adult L2 learners. The present article connects these approaches by locating the learner error in the left periphery and then considering what this syntactic diagnosis requires from teaching.

[2] An uninterpretable feature is a formal syntactic feature that participates in grammatical operations but does not contribute meaning at the semantic interface (Chomsky, 2000, 2001). In the present analysis, an example would be the feature on interrogative C that attracts a finite auxiliary from T-to-C.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 The left periphery

The analysis adopts the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995, 2000) together with Rizzi's (1997, 2001) cartographic analysis of the CP domain. Clause structure, as instantiated in (3), contains three principal domains. The lexical domain introduces the predicate and its arguments, and the inflectional domain contains tense and agreement. Above TP is the complementizer (C) domain, which contains information concerning clause type, interrogative force, topic, and focus. Rizzi (1997) proposes that the C domain is internally articulated instead of being represented as a single CP projection. Its simplified structure is given in (2).

ForceP > TopP* > FocP > TopP* > FinP > TP

ForceP indicates the type of clause, whereas FinP connects the C layer with the inflectional domain below it. Topic and focus projections are located between ForceP and FinP. Rizzi (2001) further proposes an interrogative position associated with elements that mark yes-no questions and with certain higher interrogative expressions. The precise name of the projection that hosts interrogative material is not necessary for the present analysis. The relevant point is that question formation activates the left periphery and that languages use different syntactic operations to activate this domain.

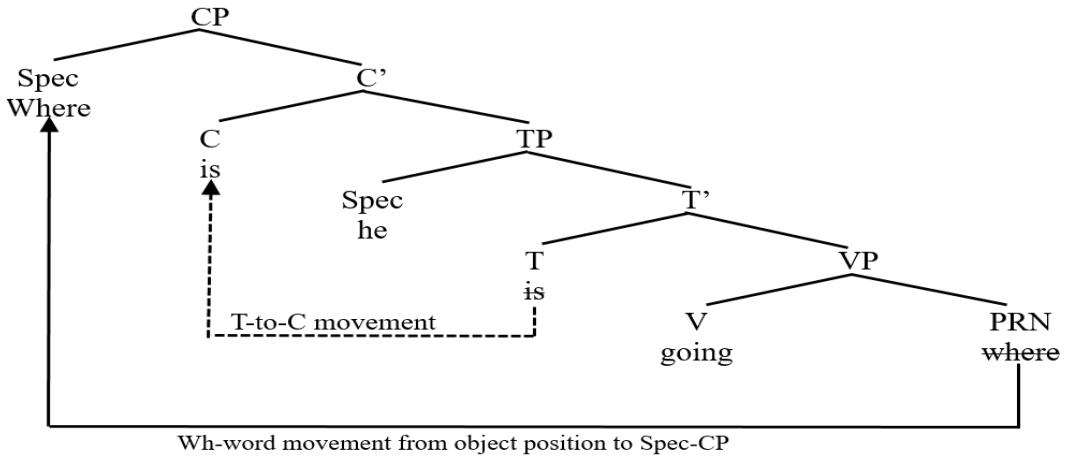
3.2 Agree, movement, and English questions

Within the Minimalist Program, movement applies when a syntactic object must meet a formal requirement. A probe searches its c-command domain for a goal with matching features, and Agree establishes a relation between the two elements. If the probing head also requires an overt element at its edge, the goal moves to the relevant position. In our instance, English main clause wh-questions involve two movement operations. First, the wh-expression undergoes phrasal movement to the left periphery and then the finite auxiliary undergoes head movement from T to C.

Following Rizzi's (1996) Wh-Criterion, an interrogative operator must establish a local relation with a corresponding interrogative head. This head bears an unvalued question feature, represented as [uQ]. A wh-expression values this feature through Agree and moves to the specifier of the relevant CP projection. In the relevant main clause questions, the finite auxiliary also moves from T to C. The two operations are illustrated in (3) in addition to the tree diagram in (4) based on Radford (2004).

a. Where is he going?

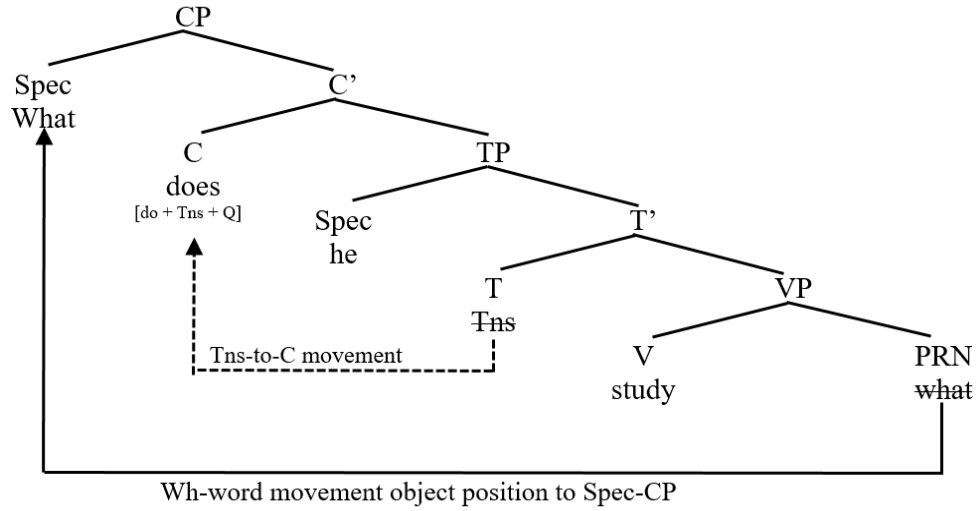
b. [CP where$_i$ [C is$_j$] [TP he t_j going t_i]]



In (3b and 4), 'where' occupies the specifier of the interrogative projection, while 'is' occupies its head. The movement of the auxiliary to C places it before the subject. If the corresponding declarative clause does not contain an auxiliary, English introduces 'do' (referred to as do-support in technical terms) to provide the finite element required in the interrogative structure, as instantiated in the tree diagram. Radford (2004) analyzes this syntactic phenomenon as a PF[3] operation that provides a host for an unattached tense affix (Tns)[4]. In a main clause question containing no auxiliary, interrogative C attracts the tense affix from T, while the lexical verb remains within VP. Hence, the dummy auxiliary 'do' is inserted to carry tense and agreement, producing do, does, or did. The lexical verb consequently appears in its base form, as in (5).

[3] PF (Phonetic Form) is the interface where a syntactic structure receives the morphological and phomologican from required for pronunciation(Radford, 2004)..

[4] The attachment of the affix happens through Affix Hopping, which is a PF operation that lowers an attached tense affix from T onto the nearest suitable overt verb. However, when the affix cannot attach to a such verb, the auxiliary 'do' is inserted to provide it with a verbal host (Radford, 2004).



a. He studies English.

b. What does he study?

c. *What he studies?

d. *What he study?

Although the declarative sentence in (6a) has no independent auxiliary, the grammatical question in (b) contains 'does'. Hence, English question formation requires more than movement of the wh-expression since a finite element must also occur in the interrogative head. Example (6c) is ungrammatical because subject-auxiliary inversion has not applied. Example (6d) is ungrammatical because do-support has not applied and tense has not been expressed in the form required by English.

3.3 Why functional features create a bottleneck

Slabakova's (2008) Bottleneck Hypothesis explains why difficulty with English auxiliaries may continue after learners have acquired interrogative meaning and a substantial English vocabulary. The hypothesis identifies functional morphology and its formal features as the main source of difficulty in L2 acquisition. These features are difficult to acquire because in addition to often being expressed as abstract meanings, they have different phonological forms and operate differently according to the syntactic context.

The English auxiliary system illustrates this problem since learners must choose the appropriate form of 'be', 'have', 'do', or a modal auxiliary. They must associate the selected form with tense and agreement and move it before the subject in the relevant main clause questions. However, the same auxiliary placement is normally prohibited in embedded questions and is not visibly expressed in ordinary subject questions. Hence, the acquisition problem cannot be reduced to learning one auxiliary or memorizing one word order. Learners must acquire the feature system that determines whether an auxiliary must be overtly realized and where it must occur.

4. English and SA question formation

4.1 The SA configuration

The English configuration can be summarized as follows. In a main clause object wh-question, the wh-expression moves to the left periphery and the finite auxiliary moves above the subject. If no auxiliary is present in the declarative structure, do is inserted. A yes-no question also requires the auxiliary before the subject even if no wh-expression is fronted. Hence, both types of questions show an overt dependency between interrogative C and the finite auxiliary. SA, on the other hand, forms questions through a different system (Benmamoun, 2000; Fassi Fehri, 1993; Ouhalla, 1999). A polar question can be introduced by the particle *hal* or by the proclitic *ʔa-*. These elements are merged in the CP domain, while the clause below them can retain an available declarative order. Example (5) illustrates a question introduced by *hal*.

hal ya-drus-u zayd-un?

Q 3SG.M-study-IND Zayd-NOM

'Does Zayd study?'

The interrogative particle in (7) marks the clause as a question. Arabic does not insert an element corresponding to English 'do,' and the formation of the question does not require an English type auxiliary to move across the subject. Accordingly, the interrogative force is overtly expressed but it is expressed through a particle rather than through subject auxiliary inversion. This

means that just the addition these kinds of particles renders the a declarative sentence interrogative without any extra syntactic operation.

Content questions normally place the wh-expression at the left edge in SA. However, this movement is not accompanied by the typical auxiliary movement found in English. Example (8) illustrates the relevant order.

ʔayna ya-dhhab-u zayd-un?

where 3SG.M-go-IND Zayd-NOM

'Where does Zayd go?'

The wh-expression *ʔayna* 'where' occurs initially but no auxiliary equivalent to English 'do' is inserted. The finite lexical verb, unlike English, follows the wh-expression and precedes the subject because VSO is independently available in Arabic. Accordingly, the surface adjacency between the wh-expression and the verb does not show that Arabic has English T-to-C movement. It follows from the ordinary position of the Arabic verb together with wh-fronting. Arabic varieties also allow strategies such as wh-in-situ[5] and resumption in contexts where English requires overt wh-movement (Shlonsky, 2002). These facts further show that the two languages activate the interrogative domain differently.

Another difference concerns present tense predication. SA can form a present tense verbless clause without an overt copula, while English requires a form of 'be'. Hence, an Arabic speaking learner faces the auxiliary difference in both declarative and interrogative structures. The question **Where he going?* may reflect the absence of English 'be' at the inflectional level while **Where he is going?* shows that the learner has acquired 'be' but not its movement in a main clause question. This distinction explains why omission and no inversion can occur at different stages of development.

4.2 The transfer analysis

The contrast between the two languages identifies the source of the learner pattern, resulting in a better understand of how we can approach these errors. English and SA share the possibility of placing a wh-expression at the left, so Arab learners can transfer wh-fronting without producing an obvious error. However, the languages differ in the realization of the interrogative head, meaning that English uses an auxiliary in C and introduces 'do' when necessary, while Arabic can use a merged particle or a fronted wh-expression without the same auxiliary operation.

The derivation of **Where he is going?* can now be explained. The learner first merges the English lexical items and constructs the TP *he is going where*. The wh-expression then moves to the left periphery, an operation compatible with both languages. However, the auxiliary remains in T because the learner's transferred interrogative feature does not require the typical English overt head movement. The resulting representation is given in (9), compare it with (4). The representation in (9) contains a fronted operator but an empty interrogative head. From the perspective of the transferred Arabic system, this structure is sufficient to form a question. But from the perspective of English, it is ungrammatical because the auxiliary has not moved to C. The regularity of the error, as a result, follows from the grammar available to the learner.

[CP where$_i$ [C Ø] [TP he is going t_i]]

The omission in **What you study?* has a related source. Arabic does not use a dummy auxiliary corresponding to English 'do.' This means that if the learner fronts 'what' but does not associate interrogative C with the requirement for a finite auxiliary, 'do' is never inserted. By the same token, in **Where he going?*, the learner fails to realize 'be' and also fails to establish the required auxiliary position at the left edge. Hence, the three errors in (1) arise at different points, but each involves an incomplete English mapping between interrogative C, tense, and the auxiliary system.

5. Auxiliary omission as a feature reassembly problem

5.1 From parameter resetting to feature reassembly

Earlier generative accounts frequently described L2 development in terms of parameter resetting (White, 2003). According to Schwartz and Sprouse's (1996) Full Transfer/Full Access model, the learner's initial L2 grammar is based on the grammar of the L1. However, Universal Grammar still remains accessible, allowing the learner to restructure the initial representation as the acquisition proceeds. Hawkins and Chan's (1997) Failed Functional Features Hypothesis offers a more restrictive account, proposing that an uninterpretable formal feature that is not selected in the learner's L1 may no longer be available after the critical period (generally associated with the end of childhood or puberty). According to them, adults may no longer be able to acquire an uninterpretable formal feature that is not selected in L1. In this regard, Muftah and Wong's (2011b, 2014) findings related to English verb placement among adult Arabic speakers are consistent with this more restrictive position.

However, the acquisition problem cannot be fully expressed as the resetting of a single binary parameter. In this regard, in addition to identifying the functional head with which a feature is associated, learners must also determine which lexical form expresses

[5] In-situ means that the syntactic object remains in the position where it was first base generated (Radford, 2004)

that feature and acquire the syntactic conditions under which it causes movement. Lardiere's (2009) Feature Reassembly Hypothesis addresses these relations, so under this account, acquiring an L2 does not consist only of changing one parameter value. Instead, learners must separate features that are grouped together in the L1 and recombine them according to the grammatical organization of the L2.

5.2 Reassembling the English auxiliary system

Arab learners already possess interrogative meaning and a grammatical tool to express it in their L1. Hence, their difficulty cannot be attributed simply to the absence of an interrogative feature since the problem concerns how this feature is grammatically expressed in English. SA can associate interrogative force with the particles *hal* and *ʔa-* or with a fronted wh-expression. English main clause questions additionally require an overt finite auxiliary in C, and if the clause at hand contains no auxiliary, English introduces 'do'.

Acquiring the English system consequently requires the reassembly of several grammatical relations. Learners must associate the interrogative feature with the English C-domain and acquire the finite auxiliary as the overt element that satisfies the head movement (T-to-C) requirement. They must also restrict this operation to the appropriate clause types, and this includes distinguishing main clause questions from embedded questions and object questions from subject questions. Knowledge of forms such as 'is', 'has', 'can', and 'does' does not ensure by itself that learners know where these auxiliaries occur in English interrogative clauses. Accordingly, there must be, especially among teachers, a dissociation between observing that students know about the existence of the aforementioned auxiliaries and observing whether they actually use them.

This account also distinguishes the availability of a syntactic representation just from the pronunciation of its morphology. Following Prévost and White's (2000) Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis, Muftah and Wong (2011a) argue that some omissions may result from difficulty realizing the required morphology even when the corresponding functional structure is present in the learner's grammar. In other words, the absence of an overt auxiliary does not necessarily mean that the learner the ability to project head that would host tense and agreement. Instead, the learner may construct the progressive structure correctly but fails to pronounce the appropriate form of 'be.' This explanation may apply to **Where he going?*, where 'be' is absent from the pronounced form.

The Missing Surface account, however, cannot fully explain **Where he is going?*. In this example, the auxiliary is overtly produced with the correct inflection but remains in the same position (after the subject) as it would normally in a declarative clause. This placement indicates that T-to-C movement has either not been acquired by the learner or it not applied consistently/correctly. Hence, a compendious account of learners question formation must explain both the morphological realization of auxiliaries along with their syntactic position.

5.3 Why memorization is insufficient

A learner may produce *Where is he going?* correctly during a controlled classroom exercise because the entire question has been stored as a fixed expression. Such production does not necessarily show that the relevant features have been systematically reassembled or that the learner can extend the structure to unfamiliar subjects, auxiliaries, tenses, and wh-expressions. The limitation of memorization may become apparent during spontaneous communication, when the learner must construct a question that has not been practiced previously. Under these conditions, the transferred Arabic question structure may become active again. The learner may move the wh-expression to the beginning while omitting 'be' or 'do' or may even produce the auxiliary without moving it before the subject.

Repetition and controlled practice can support acquisition when they direct attention to the grammatical difference between Arabic and English and require learners to apply the relevant operation repeatedly. Practice should vary both the auxiliary and the clause type while maintaining attention on the relation between the interrogative head and the finite auxiliary. The aim is to establish a productive rule that can be extended to unfamiliar questions instead of teaching learners to retrieve a fixed sequence.

6. A syntactically based teaching procedure

6.1 Translating the analysis into classroom language

The syntactic analysis can be translated into classroom instruction without requiring learners to study the technical vocabulary of the Minimalist Program. Labels such as ForceP, FinP, and [uQ] do not need to be introduced, instead, all of the foregoing was intended for the instructors to better understand the root cause of the problem. What learners need is a simple representation of the operation required in English but absent from Arabic. The teacher can begin with the contrast in (10).

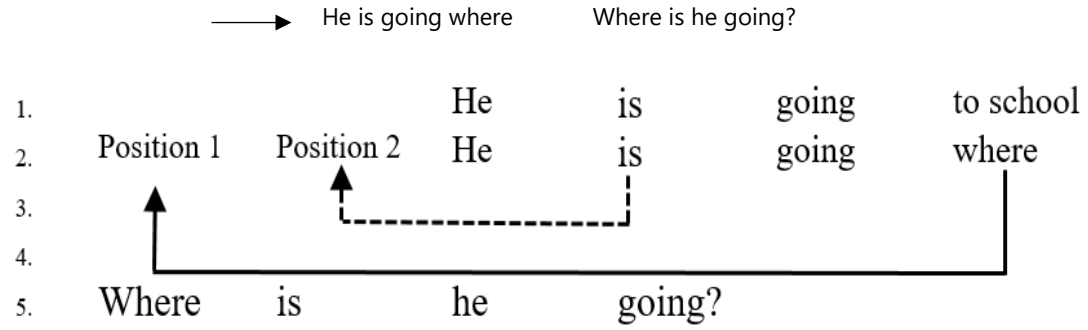
a. Arabic pattern: question marker/wh-word + clause

b. English main question: wh-word + auxiliary + subject + verb

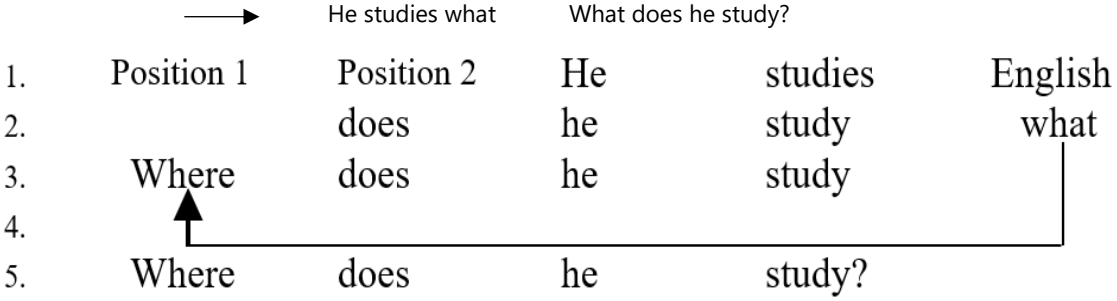
The teacher can then explain that the formation of an English object wh-question involves the movement of two elements. The wh-expression moves to the beginning of the clause, while the helping verb moves to a position before the subject. If the sentence contains no auxiliary, English introduces 'do' (in the simple resent as a case in point) to express tense and agreement. This

explanation retains the main syntactic difference between the two languages but presents it in terms that learners can understand and use. It also draws the students attention to fact there is a difference in wh-question formation between English and Arabic.

The two operations can also be represented with arrows as instantiated in example (11). Starting with *He is going where*, one arrow moves 'where' to the beginning of the question, while another moves 'is' from its position after the subject to a position before it.



With *He studies what,* the teacher first introduces 'does', places it before the subject, and keeps the lexical verb in its base form as illustrated in the example below:



This representation also explains the ungrammaticality of *What does he studies?. Once does carries tense and third person singular agreement, the lexical verb cannot retain the agreement suffix –s, and as a result, must appear in its base form, 'study.'

6.2 Diagnosing the source of the error

Incorrect English questions can result from different grammatical problems. Hence, the teacher must determine the type of error before deciding how to correct it. The contrasts in (12) this purpose as a great case in point.

a. Auxiliary omitted: *Where he going? / *What you study?

b. Auxiliary not inverted: *Where he is going?

c. Auxiliary selected incorrectly: *Where does he going?

d. Agreement or verb form error: *Where do he study? / *Where does he studies?

e. Wh-word error: *When do you live? for a question about place

Examples (12a) and (12b) provide the clearest evidence for the problem involving the left periphery. In (9a), the auxiliary required in the English question is absent, while in (12b), the learner produces the auxiliary but does not move it to the position before the subject. Example (12c) presents a different problem, where the learner selects 'does' but combines it incorrectly with the progressive form going. The two forms in (12d) involve mistakes related agreement and the distribution of tense morphology. In **Where do he study?,* the auxiliary does not agree with the third person singular subject, while inn **Where does he studies?,* tense and agreement are expressed on both the auxiliary and the lexical verb. Example (12e) involves the lexical selection of the wh-expression but the wrong one. All the foregoing errors may appear together in the production of one learner, but they do not necessarily require the same type of instruction.

The source of an error can be determined partly by examining how often it occurs and the structures in which it appears. If a learner normally produces English questions correctly but occasionally omits an auxiliary when using unfamiliar or difficult vocabulary, the omission may reflect a temporary performance problem. However, if auxiliary omission or no inversion occurs repeatedly with 'be', 'have', modal auxiliaries, and do-support and appears in both yes/no questions and wh-questions, it may indicate that the learner has not fully acquired the auxiliary structure associated with the left periphery. Hence, in this particular instance, an instructor's correcting a single question would not be enough to address the underlying grammatical problem, and that is why diagnosing the source of error is vital.

6.3 The three-stage movement procedure

The teaching procedure proposed here is divided into three stages that are designed to help students with the problem at hand. Learners first need to become aware of the difference between Arabic and English question formation. They then practice the required auxiliary operation in controlled exercises before applying it in communication. This sequence is consistent with research on focus on form and explicit instruction (Lightbown, 1998; Spada & Tomita, 2010). It also addresses Umale's (2011) finding that a single consciousness raising activity results in only limited improvement. Hence, awareness must be supported by repeated practice involving different forms and contexts.

Stage 1: Awareness

The teacher presents an Arabic question structure beside its English equivalent and asks learners to identify what English adds or moves. For instance, SA *hal tadrusu?* can be compared with English *Do you study?*. A fronted Arabic wh-question can similarly be compared with *Where does Zayd study?*. These comparisons allow learners to see the structure that may be transferred from Arabic and differentiate what require in both languages. The teacher can then state the main difference in accessible language, pointing out that in this type of question, English requires a helping verb before the subject.

Stage 2: Controlled movement

At this stage, learners concentrate on the form and position of the auxiliary. They convert declarative sentences into questions while retaining the same lexical material. The exercise may include the following transformations:

a. She is reading the article → What is she reading?

b. Yes, they have finished the task → Have they finished the task?

c. He works in Rabat → Where does he work?

The teacher should vary the auxiliaries and include both yes/no questions and object wh-questions because both structures require the finite auxiliary to precede the subject. Subject wh-questions and embedded questions can then be introduced as contrasting structures in which the same visible inversion does not occur but these must be delayed until have mastered the types of questions at hand. This contrast prevents learners from over generalizing the learnt rule by applying subject-auxiliary inversion to every question indiscriminately.

Stage 3: Communicative use

Learners apply the same question structures in information gap activities, interviews, problem solving tasks, or brief conversations. The questions should remain partly unpredictable so that learners must construct them during the interaction instead of retrieving complete questions from memory. Feedback, in this regard, should focus on the auxiliary without unnecessarily interrupting communication. For example, the teacher can point to the position before the subject as a signal that allows the learner to identify and correct the error. This stage is especially important for learners since it examines whether the reassembled pattern is available under the processing demands of spontaneous communication.

Free practice in the form of free communication activities are important because they require learners to use the target structure/language while focusing their attention on meaning and this puts them in contexts that resemble real life situations. Swain and Lapkin (1995) argue that producing the target language can make learners notice gaps in their linguistics knowledge and modify their output accordingly, hence, the importance of free practice. In addition, Mackey (1999) provides more direct evidence from English question formation, finding that active participation in conversations can improve grammatical accuracy. Lyster and Ranta (1997) show in their research that feedback which elicits a learner response encourages self-correction without interrupting the interaction. Accordingly, the foregoing activities allow learners to examine whether the auxiliary pattern developed during practice can be applied in new communication context, all by being aware of the target language they have to produce.

All stages discussed above intertwine in a complementary was since each one of them addresses a different part of the acquisition problem. While the awareness stage makes the difference between Arabic and English question formation conspicuous to students, controlled practice, on other hand, helps establish the relation between the auxiliary form and its syntactic position through drilling activities. Communicative use then tests whether learners can apply this relation without relying on a prepared sentence. This teaching sequence, as a result, follows directly from the syntactic analysis of the error.

7. Discussion

7.1 Relation to previous pedagogical work

Our proposed method is consistent with earlier research showing that explicit attention can help learners notice difficult grammatical forms. Umale (2011) finds that consciousness raising reduces certain question formation errors even if the overall improvement is marginal and does not occur to the same extent across all structures. Lightbown (1998) also argues that attention to form must be introduced at an appropriate point during instruction. Spada and Tomita's (2010) meta-analysis also reports an advantage for explicit instruction, especially in the acquisition of complex linguistic features.

The present proposal, however, provides a more precise diagnosis of the learner's error. Learners are not simply informed that their questions are ungrammatical but instead are shown which syntactic operation has failed to apply and why the Arabic question system does not provide an equivalent model. This distinguishes the proposal from error analysis studies that recommend additional practice without specifying the grammatical relation that the practice should address. If the error results from an incomplete relation between interrogative C and the finite auxiliary, then, in addition to the auxiliaries, instruction should preserve this relation while varying lexical verbs and surface forms used in the exercises.

7.2 Implications for teachers and L2 theory

A detailed diagnosis of learner production allows teachers to distinguish auxiliary omission from errors involving lexical selection, agreement, or even tense. Hence, these errors should not automatically receive the same correction. Muftah and Wong's (2011b, 2014) findings suggest that adult Arabic speaking learners may have difficulty acquiring the verb movement system of English since it different from Arabic's. The Feature Reassembly Hypothesis describes this difficulty as a gradual process in which learners must reorganize froma features and associate them with the appropriate auxiliaries and syntactic operations in specific English context. In this regard, it is obvious that different properties of the English auxiliary system may be acquired at different stages. For example, a learner may acquire the use of **'**be**'** in declarative clauses before acquiring subject auxiliary inversion. By the same token, the learner may then learn inversion with **'**be**'** before he has mastered do-support.

If auxiliary omission persists, this does not necessarily mean that the relevant syntactic feature is permanently lost. The error may result from incomplete feature reassembly, inconsistent access to the required auxiliary from or just difficulty using an acquired structure under pressure especially when the learners does not have enough time to process the output. This articles aims to bring the instructor**'**s attention to investigate the foregoing explanations separately because even if they produce similar surface errors, they correspond to different grammatical problems. Our proposed teaching procedure cannot determine by itself which explanation is correct. But, it can be utilized to examine whether instruction focused on the relation between interrogative C and the finite auxiliary allows learners to apply and generalize their knowledge across different manifold auxiliaries and question types.

8. Conclusion

This article has investigated auxiliary omission and incorrect auxiliary placement as two related problems in the English questions of Arab learners. These problems, even if do not contain the same surface error, appear in forms such as **Where he going?*, **What you study?*, and **Where he is going?*. Wile the first lacks **'**be**'**, the second lacks do-support and the third contains an auxiliary that has not undergone subject-auxiliary inversion. However, the three patterns point to a shared acquisition problem, meaning that the English auxiliary system has not been fully associated with the interrogative structure in the left periphery.

A manifold of previous research both pointed out to and supported the existence of these problems among Arabic speaking learners. Kharma and Hajjaj (1997) and Smith (2001) identify auxiliaries and question formation as recurring sources of difficulty for Arabic speakers, while Umale (2011) and Al-Mekhlafi (2013) report auxiliary omission and related question formation errors among Omani learners. Al-Hassaani (2016) and Alqahtani (2022) also find comparable difficulties among Saudi learners, whereas Muftah and Wong (2011a, 2011b, 2014) further show that the realization of **'**be**'** and the acquisition of English verb placement can remain difficult at higher proficiency levels. Hence, the auxiliary problem is supported by both descriptive error studies and formal acquisition research.

The comparison between English and SA provides both an explanation for the repeated auxiliary errors and a clear syntactic overview for the instructors. SA can express interrogative force through question particles and wh-fronting without using the equivalent of English do-support or subject-auxiliary inversion. Arab learners may consequently transfer a question structure in which the wh-expression is fronted but the English auxiliary is absent or remains below the subject. From the perspective of the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis, learners must reorganize an interrogative feature already available in their L1 and associate it with the English auxiliary system and the movement operations required in particular clause types.

This analysis also determines what instruction should address since correction cannot be limited to repetition of one grammatical sentence. Learners must first be aware of the difference between Arabic and English question formation and then must practice auxiliary insertion and movement across different auxiliaries and sentence structures before applying these operations in communication. This procedure addresses the grammatical relation underlying the errors instead of correcting only their individual surface forms.

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