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TEACHING CHINESE STUDENTS TO ASK WH-QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH

XUE JIANG, ETTIEN KOFFI, AND CHAD KUEHN¹

ABSTRACT

The challenges of a second language are many: one of those challenges for Chinese students of English is asking WH questions. This paper will attempt to illuminate what makes WH-questions in English challenging for the Mandarin L1 speakers, and why. Negative transfer from Mandarin structure and its effect on word order are especially analyzed. The implications for ESL/EFL learners and possible teacher interventions will also be explored, including the sequence in which Wh-Question words are to be introduced to learners.

1.0 Introduction

Many studies acknowledge that language transfer plays a significant role in second language acquisition. There are two types of language transfer: positive and negative transfers, depending on the similarities and differences of language features. When L1 knowledge facilitates L2 learning, positive transfer occurs; when the L2 is different from the L1, the learner's L1 knowledge may interfere with L2 learning (Saville & Troike, 2006, p.50). There are some significant differences in syntactic structure between Mandarin and English. Asking WH-questions is one of the main areas where Chinese learners of English are very likely to make syntactic errors because of the aforementioned differences. Therefore, both Chinese learners of English and their teachers should pay attention to the syntactic differences of WH-questions between English and Mandarin.

2.0 WH-Question in English and Mandarin

Languages are generally categorized as WH-*in situ* or *movement* languages according to the position of WH-question words in sentences. Mandarin is a WH- *in situ* language, which means that WH-question words stay where they are generated in the deep structure (Gao, 2009, p.11). In other words, no movement of the WH-question words is required. English, on the other hand, is classified as a *movement* language, that is, WH-question words move to sentence-initial position even though in the deep structure of the sentence, they occur elsewhere (Huang, 1982). When WH-question words move to the beginning of the sentence, they bring about curious syntactic operations, subject-auxiliary inversion and DO-Support insertion (Koffi, 2015, p. 95-99).

WH-question words play a very important role in English sentences. There are eight of them: *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, *whose*, *which*, and *how*. They also cover different kinds of questions. These types of questions have been nick-named

¹**Authorship responsibilities:** This paper was originally written for the second author's graduate Pedagogical Grammar course. Author 1 and Author 3 wrote it as a term paper. Author 2 noticed that the paper had potential for publication and contributed to it to this end. Author 1 drew from her experience as a native speaker of Mandarin and an English teacher in China. She provided the tree diagrams and most of the examples in the paper. Author 2 beefed up the syntactic analyses, the argumentation, and the general outlook of the paper in its current format. He does not assume any responsibilities for errors in the Mandarin sentences, the Pinyin transliterations, or the idiomatic translations. He assumes full responsibility for errors in the syntactic analyses and grammatical terminology. Author 3 is a native speaker of English who has taught English in China.

“WH-questions” because they typically involve the use of a WH-interrogative word at the beginning the sentence. *How* is also classified as a WH-question word even though it does not begin with <wh>. The classification is warranted because it exhibits the same syntactic behavior as other members of this class (Curme 1931). Even so, WH-question words have their different grammatical functions. This makes WH-question sentences harder for Mandarin speakers of English to master. Zhang (2016) argues that in teaching Mandarin speakers, one should focus on the grammatical functions of these words. We have followed this suggestion in the discussions below. The sentences are first presented in Mandarin, then in pinyin, then glossed and translated into English.

2.1 Asking “Who” Questions

The WH-question word *Who* functions as an interrogative subject Pronoun, as illustrative in Sentence 1:

Sentence 1: 谁将会参加这门语法课?

Pinyin transliteration: *shui* jiang hui can jia zhe men yu fa ke?

Gloss: *Who* will take this syntax class?

Idiomatic translation: *Who* will take this syntax class?

In this sentence, we see that *Who* occurs in the same position in Mandarin and English. However, in other interrogative sentences, the position occupied by the WH word is different.

2.2 Asking “What” Questions

Questions with *What* call for a transitive verb. In Sentence 2, the direct object of the verb “say” is “what.”

Sentence 2: 其他学生将会说什么?

Pinyin transliteration: qi ta xue sheng jiang hui shuo *shen me*?

Gloss: Other students will say *what*?

Idiomatic translation: *What* will other students say?

2.3 Asking “When” Questions

The question word *When* is a temporal adverb. In Sentence 3, it inquires about the time when an action will take place.

Sentence 3: 你什么时候完成了你的作业?

Pinyin transliteration: ni *shen me shi hou* wan cheng le ni de zuo ye?

Gloss: You *when* finish-ed your project?

Idiomatic translation: *When* did you finish your project?

2.4 Asking “Where” Questions

The interrogative word *Where* is a locative adverb. In Sentence 4, it specifies the location where an event is to occur.

Sentence 4: 你是从**哪里**来的?

Pinyin transliteration: ni shi cong **na li** lai de?

Gloss: You are from **where** come?

Idiomatic translation: **Where** are you from?

2.5 Asking “Why” Questions

The interrogative word *Why* is also an adverb. When it is used in a sentence, as in Sentence 5 below, the one asking the questions is looking for an explanation.

Sentence 5: 你**为什么**能完成这个难的作业?

Pinyin transliteration: ni **wei shen me** neng wan cheng zhe ge nan de zuo ye?

Gloss: You **why** can finish the tough project?

Idiomatic translation: **Why** can you finish the tough project?

2.6 Asking “Whose” Questions

The grammatical functions of *Whose* depends on the sentence where it occurs. In some sentences, it is a relative pronoun. In others, such as the one in Sentence 6, it is an interrogative possessive adjective.

Sentence 6: **谁的**书落在桌子上了?

Pinyin transliteration: **shui de** shu la zai zhuo zi shang le?

Gloss: **Whose** book left desk on?

Idiomatic translation: **Whose** book is left on the desk?

2.7 Asking “Which” Questions

Like *Whose*, the grammatical function of *Which* can be elicited in the context of the sentence where it occurs. In Sentence 7, it is an interrogative adjective since it modifies “book.” However, *Which* can also function as a relative pronoun or an interrogative pronoun.

Sentence 7: **哪本**书是这个男孩应该读的?

Pinyin transliteration: **na ben** shu shi zhe ge nan hai ying gai du de?

Gloss: **Which** book is the boy should read?

Idiomatic translation: **Which** book should the boy read?

2.8 Asking “How” Questions

As noted previously, even though *How* is not written with the grapheme WH, it still belongs to WH-question words because it behaves syntactically like the rest of them. It usually functions as a modality adverb, as can be seen in Sentence 8, where it asks for the methods or ways in which people accomplish tasks.

Sentence 8: 你是**怎么**做的这个美味的蛋糕的?

Pinyin transliteration: ni **zen me** zuo zhe ge mei wei de dan gao ?

Gloss: You **how** cook this delicious cake?

Idiomatic translation: **How** do you cook this delicious cake?

As can be seen by the examples above, English WH-words are always at the beginning of a sentence. The Mandarin WH-word, however, does not move to the beginning of the sentence, but stays *in situ*. When it functions as a subject, as in

Sentence 1, it occupies the position before the verb. When the question word *what* occurs in a sentence in Mandarin, as in Sentence 2, it occupies the position after the verb. In adverbial clauses, as in Sentences 3, 4, 5, and 8, it is more likely to follow the subject but precede the verb. When it functions as an interrogative possessive adjective, its position is before nouns. In two syntactic positions, positive transfer from Mandarin to English is likely. This is the case when the WH-word is a subject pronoun or a possessive adjective. In these positions, beginning and intermediate Mandarin speakers of English are not likely to make mistakes. However, in other positions, especially when the WH-word functions as an adverb, negative transfers do occur. These are the constructions to which teachers should pay most attention to.

3.0 Transformations

When WH words function as adverbs, the teacher must draw on his/her knowledge of syntactic transformations to help Mandarin students ask grammatically well-formed sentences in English. Because Mandarin WH words occur *in situ*, they are close to what WH sentences are in English. Koffi (2015, p. 81) notes that in the deep structure of sentences in English, there are no questions, no negation and no passive voice. Most WH-sentences in English are the result of transformations. Such sentences undergo various derivational stages, some which are highlighted here:

1. WH word fronting
2. DO-Support Insertion
3. Subject-Auxiliary Inversion
4. Affix Hopping stages.

Again, since WH interrogative sentences occur *in-situ*, none of these derivations are needed when speaking Mandarin. Therefore, when teaching English to Mandarin speakers, the above-mentioned derivational steps become very important. All this is illustrated by the transformations in Table 1. The illustration is based on Sentence 3.

Derivations	English	Mandarin
Deep structure	You past finish your project when	Ni <i>shen me shi hou</i> past wan chengni de zuo ye
Interrogation	Q You past finish your project <i>when</i>	Q Ni <i>shen me shi hou</i> past wan chengni de zuo ye
Do- insertion:	Q You past <i>DO</i> finish your project when	
Subject-Aux Inversion	Q <i>Do</i> You past___ finish your project when	
WH Fronting:	Q <i>When</i> Do You past___ finish your project ___	
Affix Hopping	Q When Do <i>past</i> You ___ ___ finish your project ___	Ni <i>shen me shi hou</i> ___wan cheng past ni de zuo ye
Spell out rule	When did you finish your project?	Ni <i>shen me shi hou</i> wan cheng <i>le</i> ni de zuo ye?
Surface structure	When did you finish your project?	Ni <i>shen me shi hou</i> wan cheng <i>le</i> ni de zuo ye?

Table 1: Derivational Steps

In the Mandarin sentence, we see that the WH-question word/phrase “*shen me shi hou*” remains in the same position throughout the derivation. We also see that the

“*wang cheng*” verb remains unchanged except for the presence of the morpheme “*le*” which was not part of the deep structure. This morpheme is a tense/aspect marker. In other words, whereas Sentence 3 undergoes six derivational steps, the Mandarin sentence undergoes only one, namely, the addition of the morpheme “*le*.” Conspicuously missing in Mandarin are WH-fronting, Do-Insertion, Subject-Auxiliary Inversion, and Affix Hopping.

Tree diagrams illustrating the deep structure forms of the English and Mandarin Sentence 7 are shown in Figure 1:

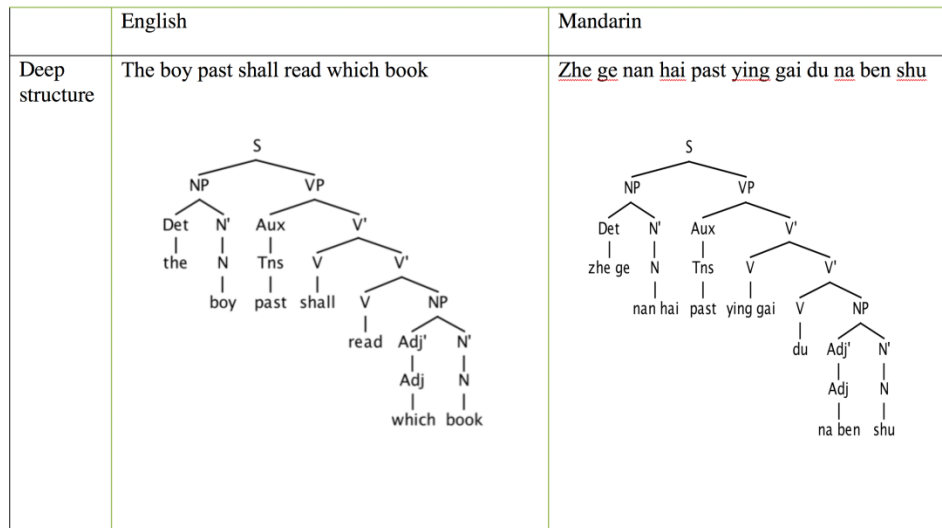


Figure 1: Deep Structure of Sentence 7 in English and Mandarin

When transformations occur, we see all kinds of things happening to the deep structure form of the sentence in English. The arrows highlight the derivational steps needed to generate the well-formed surface structure in English. Contrast this with the Mandarin version of the same sentence. The surface structure form is nearly the exact replica of the deep structure form of the sentence:

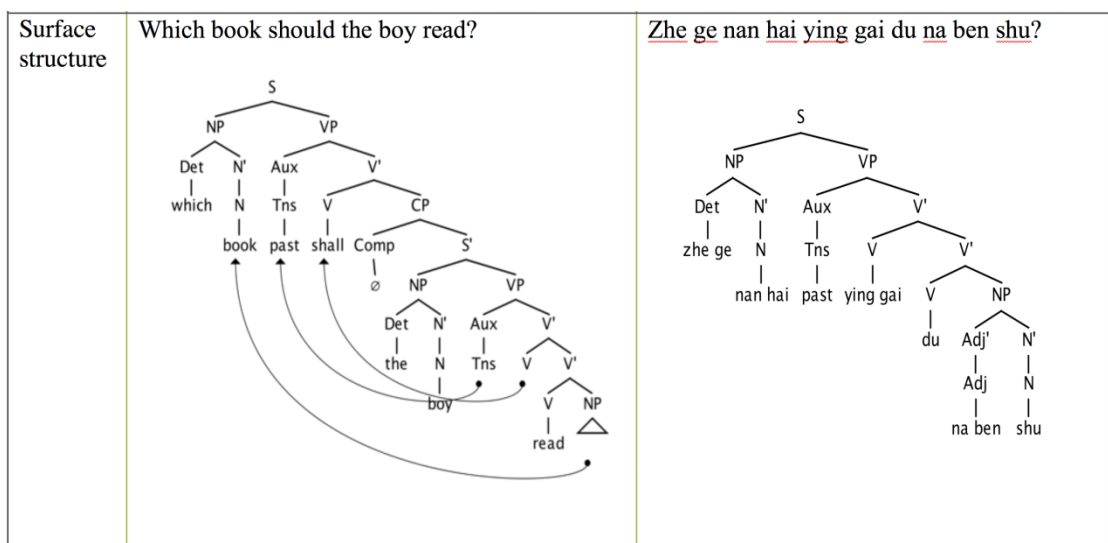


Figure 2: Surface Structure of Sentence 7 in English and Mandarin

4.0 A Case Study

We tested out the claims in the previous sections by asking Xing Zhang (not his real name) to ask questions to his Chinese instructor about America. He could ask whatever questions he wanted, but the questions had to be asked in English. Zhang is a middle school student. He has been learning English since he was 9 years old for five hours a week. Zhang asked the four questions below:

Sentence 9: 你喜欢美国吗?

Pinyin transliteration: Ni xi huan mei guo *ma*?²

Gloss: Do you like America?

Idiomatic translation: Do you like America?

Sentence 10: 你喜欢中国还是美国?

Pinyin transliteration: Ni xi huan Zhong guo hai shi mei guo?

Gloss: You like China or America?

Idiomatic translation: Which country do you like, China or America?

Sentence 11: 美国有什么好吃的吗?

Pinyin transliteration: Mei guo you *shen me* hao chi de *ma*?

Gloss: America have what good food ma?

Idiomatic translation: What good foods does America have?

Sentence 12: 美国哪里有海滩?

Pinyin transliteration: Mei guo *na li* you hai tan?

Gloss: America where have beach?

Idiomatic translation: Where are the beaches located in America?

Xing's first question is a Yes/No question. These types of questions in Mandarin are structurally similar to their counterparts in English. The remaining questions, Xing produced the following sentences in English:

Sentence 10: You like China or America?

Sentence 11: America has what good foods?

Sentence 12: America's beaches are located where?

These are clearly examples of negative transfers from Mandarin WH-question formation into English.

5.0 Challenges for Chinese Students Learning English

The analysis has shown that the syntactic differences between English and Mandarin WH-question formation are enough to cause problems for Mandarin learners. The various transformational steps outlined previously indicate WH-questions in English are rather complex. We will focus on the issue of word order. Lee (2016) concurs and adds that such sentences are “formally complex, requiring learners to know metalinguistic terms to formulate the rules of its formation and a number of critical grammatical features that are different from the normative Chinese

² The Mandarin word transliterated as “ma” is an interrogative particle. It has no direct equivalent in English.

interrogative structure.” (p. 307).³ Recurrent problems for Mandarin speakers are the following:

1. The lack of “do” or “be” inversion.
2. The lack or misuse of Subject-Auxiliary inversion.
3. The inability to move the WH word to its proper position.

Mandarin has another syntactic constraint that makes it difficult for speakers to acquire WH-questions. Symonds (2007, pp. 209, 212) notes that as a matter of syntactic requirements, in Mandarin locative prepositions, directional prepositions, as well as prepositions denoting motion must precede the main verb even in declarative clauses such as the following:

Sentence 12: 我今天在校园里吃午餐
 Pinyin Transliteration: Wo jin tian zai xiao yuan li chi wu can.
 Gloss: I today on campus eat lunch.
 Idiomatic translation: I’m eating lunch on campus today

Because of the above-mentioned syntactic requirements, Mandarin speakers of English are likely to place the adverb “today” and the locative prepositional phrase “on campus” before the main verb “eat.” This is exactly what we have in Sentence 12. Similarly, if the sentence calls for a WH-question in English, a Mandarin speaker may produce as sentence such as 13:

Sentence 13: 你今天在哪吃午餐?
 Pinyin Transliteration: Ni jin tian zai na chi wu can?
 Gloss: You today *where* eat lunch?
 Idiomatic translation: *Where* are you eating lunch today?

From the standpoint of word order, English and Mandarin are both SVO languages. However, Kempf (1975, pp. 7, 9) contends that Mandarin is more flexible than English, noting that word order is not primarily positional, but contextual.

6.0 Implications for Teachers and Students

Teachers will do well to highlight the syntactic differences between English and Mandarin in WH-question. Chen (1986, p. 85-86) suggests that WH-questions should be taught following three important steps. First, students should be taught the Subject-Auxiliary Inversion transformation because all interrogative sentences call for this transformation. Secondly, teachers should differentiate between interrogative sentences involving *who* and *whose* from the other types of WH words for reasons discussed throughout the paper. Thirdly, teachers should draw students’ attention to WH-Fronting transformations. In Mandarin, all WH words are *in situ*, whereas in English, they are moved to the beginning of the sentence. Proceeding systematically in the steps outlined is likely to be helpful to learners. Last but not least, WH-sentence formation should be taught communicatively. Lee (2016, pp. 296, 308) encourages teachers to consider natural language input and communication opportunities when designing lesson plans. In addition to grammar drills, students

³Lee’s research was conducted in areas where Cantonese is dominant (as opposed to Mandarin). However, Pozzan and Quirk (2012, p. 1079) note that these varieties of Chinese do not differ vis-à-vis interrogative syntax.

should be given the opportunity to practice asking WH-questions in role plays. Furthermore, they should listen to interviews where questions are asked and answered.

7.0 Summary

Developing proficiency in asking well-formed WH-questions in English is not out of reach for beginning or intermediate students. However, the topic should be approached systematically. First, a distinction has to be made between English WH words that call for *in situ* constructions and those that require syntactic transformations. Mandarin students can easily acquire interrogative sentences with *in situ* WH words because they are similar to those in their native language. At other levels, the two languages differ. The differences include the fact that WH-questions are *in situ* constructions in Mandarin, whereas they move to sentence-initial position in English. Students and teachers will do well to focus on the systematic introduction of question formation in their lessons, creating a metalinguistic understanding of the differences between the languages, and seeking ample opportunities for communicative practice in addition to explicit grammar lessons and drills.

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