

## English Question Formation: A Comparison of Errors Made by English-Dominant Versus Mandarin-Dominant Learners in a Chinese Medium Primary School

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### ABSTRACT

*Students from different language backgrounds may face distinct difficulties when learning English, particularly in learning complex language structures such as questions. Therefore, identifying differences between learner groups can inform teaching practice. This paper presents the findings from a study on the production of English questions by 56 Year 4 national-type Chinese primary school students, categorised as Dominant Speakers of English (n=28) or Dominant Speakers of Mandarin (n=28). The objectives of the study were 1) to identify common errors in English questions produced by the students in a translation task and 2) to compare the errors made by Mandarin-dominant and English-dominant learners. The researchers obtained data via written language elicitation tasks, to examine the kinds of errors made by the learners. Data was analysed using an adapted version of Rowland's error analysis framework. Comparison of data from a 10-item translation task showed that Mandarin-dominant learners made more than twice the errors of English-dominant learners. Common errors across both groups were auxiliary tenses errors and omission errors in WH-questions and auxiliary errors in Yes/No questions. Furthermore, Mandarin-dominant learners made visibly more auxiliary, omission, and position-of-question-word errors than English-dominant learners, while the latter had a higher proportion of double-marking errors. This study provides further evidence that learners from different backgrounds may face different challenges in acquiring features of English. Moreover, the findings could provide insights for English language teachers in Chinese-medium schools on how to better adapt the teaching of English questions to their students of different language backgrounds.*

*Keywords: English questions; English language learning; national-type Chinese primary school; dominant languages; common errors*

### INTRODUCTION

In Malaysian public primary schools, English is mostly taught in a one-size-fits-all classroom setting, where learners are grouped according to their class and enrollment year rather than according to individual learner characteristics such as proficiency level or language background. In Malaysia's multilingual society, this means that an English classroom could have learners with various first languages, including Malay, Tamil, English or Chinese dialects. This is also seen in national-type primary schools, where students of similar ethnocultural backgrounds may have different first languages. In Chinese medium primary schools, students are predominantly Chinese, yet their linguistic background is not homogenous. Among Malaysian Chinese, English and Mandarin have been noted as commonly used languages (Low et al. 2010, Vollman & Soon, 2018), with English valued for pragmatic reasons (Carstens, 2018) and Mandarin fast replacing dialects

such as Foochow and Hakka as the language of heritage and identity (Carstens, 2018; Ong & Troyer, 2022). Students in Chinese-medium national-type primary schools, therefore, may have different spoken languages at home such as Mandarin, English or their dialects such as Cantonese, Hakka, or Teochew. Increasing enrollment of students from non-Chinese backgrounds into Chinese medium schools (Wong & Wong, 2021) introduces further linguistic diversity.

Considering the role that the first language may play in a learner's acquisition of an additional language, the varying linguistic backgrounds of Chinese primary school students could present a challenge to English language teachers. Furthermore, in a bilingual or multilingual context, a learner's dominant language, or the language a person is exposed to the most and that they can access without hesitation (Dubiel, 2019), may be more relevant than their first language. Amidst various interpretations of language dominance, this study applies that provided by Snape and Kupisch (2017), who describe 'language dominance' as the strength of a bilingual's proficiency in one language compared to the other, with the more proficient or developed language considered the dominant language. Moreover, a multilingual learner gaining an additional language will approach the learning process differently and cross-linguistic influence will be more complex when three or more languages are involved (Cenoz, 2013). Differences between Mandarin and English may present additional challenges for these students. Therefore, students may require different teaching instruction to better acquire English, particularly challenging language structures such as questions for which significant cross-linguistic differences exist across languages. For example, Mandarin and English questions differ considerably in question word position, presence/absence of inversion and the addition of Mandarin question morphemes such as “吗” and “呀”. Moreover, in a multilingual context, additional complexities arise from differences in other languages, such as Malay, which, unlike English, does not allow direct formation of questions with a direct object (Wong, 2008).

Previous studies have found high error rates in English question formation among learners (Al-Hassaani & Mahboob, 2016; Lee, 2016; Zhang, 2016). Besides, question formation was the second highest type of grammatical error among Malaysian university students (Ting et.al, 2010). While researchers in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Singapore, and China have highlighted issues in young learners' production of simple WH-questions and Yes/No questions (Chen, 2013; Gao, 2009; Jiang, 2019; Lee, 2016; Zhang, 2016), few Malaysian studies have closely examined errors in questions among Malaysian learners of English. Further, there is limited research on English proficiency of Chinese national-type primary school students. This study was further motivated by the personal experiences of the first author (WAL), an English teacher at a Chinese-medium primary school who has witnessed students struggling to master English questions and experienced the challenges of catering to classrooms of learners with varying abilities and language backgrounds.

This paper reports on an investigation into the written production of English questions by Chinese-medium primary school students. In the main study, three types of written language elicitation tasks (simulation, transformation and translation) were administered to 56 Year 4 students, grouped according to their dominant language, namely Mandarin or English. The learners' questions were analysed to identify common errors. This paper discusses the types of errors made by participants on the translation task, to fulfil two objectives:

1. to identify the common errors made by Chinese primary school students in producing English questions on a translation task; and
2. to compare the types of errors made by Mandarin dominant learners versus English language learners.

The study aims to extend the literature on English language teaching in Malaysia, particularly in relation to question formation by Malaysian children in Chinese-medium primary schools. It is hoped that findings could be useful to English teachers at national-type primary schools by providing information that could help them better tailor language instruction to their students of varied language backgrounds. Moreover, since many Malaysian English teachers work in classrooms with students of varied linguistic backgrounds, the findings could be relevant to teachers across school mediums. Insights into students' difficulties could improve instructional practices, consequently promoting proficient use of questions by Malaysian students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While various sub-areas of the literature are relevant to this study, this literature review is limited to four areas due to space limitations. Starting with a brief explanation of Malaysia's national education system, the syntactic and structural features of English questions are discussed, followed by a comparison of English and Mandarin question formation. Finally an overview of research on question acquisition in first and second language learning is presented.

Malaysia's national education system includes two major types of schools: national and national-type schools. Malay (Bahasa Malaysia) is the primary language of instruction in national schools, while in national-type schools, or vernacular schools, the medium of instruction is Mandarin or Tamil. Although English is a compulsory second language in national schools, in Chinese and Tamil national-type schools, English is the third language, after Mandarin/Tamil and Malay. Thus, tongue, English was only taught about 90 minutes per week in comparison to national school for about 210 minutes per week (Darus, 2009). Less exposure to English may hinder Chinese-medium school students' mastery of the English language, especially among students without any English language background.

## QUESTION TYPES IN ENGLISH

The expression of a question refers to a certain type of linguistic syntactic structure found in interrogative sentences. There are many ways to categorise English questions, from early models such as Karttunen's (1977) syntactic categorisation of direct, indirect or alternative questions and Huddleston's (1994) three categories of polar question, alternative question and variable questions, to more recent categorisations, such as Mohasseb et al.'s (2018) function-based question categorisation: causal, choice, confirmation, factoid, hypothetical, and list. Moreover, questions can be categorised based on based on intonation, the response type, function or syntactic structure. For the main study from which this paper draws its data, the researchers adopted the syntactic structural categorisation of English questions, as proposed by Karttunen (1977) and Huddleston (1994), categorising English questions into four types: direct questions, indirect questions, alternative questions and tag questions.

#### COMPARISON BETWEEN ENGLISH AND MANDARIN QUESTION FORMS

Since the study involves learners in Chinese-medium education, a brief comparison of the linguistic structure of English versus Mandarin question forms is relevant due to the potential influence of linguistic differences between the languages on language learning (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). When comparing English and Mandarin questions, two main differences can be seen in relation to the formation of WH-questions and Yes/No questions.

The fundamental syntactic distinctions among languages in the formation of WH-questions can be categorised into in-situ, movement language and optional fronting languages. Languages such as Mandarin and Japanese do not have to be displaced in overt syntax, which means that the WH-question words stay at the position where they are generated in the deep structure (Gao, 2009). In comparison, English is a movement language, where WH-question words requisitely move to Spec CP in overt syntax. Therefore, although the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order is the same in English and Mandarin, different methods are used to generate WH-questions in English and Mandarin.

Mandarin questions and declarative sentences have a similar structure. Comparatively, English questions, require inversion syntactic operations such subject-auxiliary inversion and Do-Support insertion (Koffi, 2015). In contrast to Mandarin, where WH-questions remain in situ, as in its declarative counterpart, WH-questions in English are the outcome of transformation in multiple stages such as WH-fronting, Do-Support Insertion, Subject-Auxiliary Inversion, and Affix Hopping. Chomsky (2014) suggested that Mandarin language WH-question words remain in-situ because the category C in the languages does not project specifier position and therefore there is no landing site for WH-words at surface structure. Moreover, Mandarin language does not need syntactic movement to form WH-questions as Mandarin does not have WH-words (Cheng, 2009). Instead, quantifiers undergo Quantifier Raising (QR), which occurs only due to logical structure. Chomsky (2014) contends that the wh/Q-feature/operator is formed differently in different languages: at the word level (e.g., English) and at the sentence level (e.g., Chinese) where English contains obligatory WH-movement in contrast to Chinese.

Differences between both languages can also be found in Yes/No questions. The main contrast between both languages is the existence of question particles or Q morpheme in Mandarin questions for example, ‘吗’ (*ma*). This question particle acts as an antecedent that turns declarative sentences into yes-no interrogative sentences (Zhu & Wu, 2011), for example, 她在吃 (She is eating), 她在吃吗? (Is she eating?). Therefore, the structure of Mandarin Yes/No questions is vastly different from those in English. In English, Yes/No question formation mainly involves the movement of an auxiliary or modal verb to a position preceding the subject, or subject-auxiliary inversion (Chomsky, 2014), for example ‘She was reading.’ to ‘Was she reading’. Further, insertion of ‘do- support’ into Inflection (I) and subsequently to Complementizer (C) is needed to satisfy the question feature [Q+] in English interrogative sentences with lexical primary verbs, for example, ‘She likes reading’, to ‘Does she like reading?’.

To summarise, while Mandarin and English have the same SVO syntactic pattern, speakers of the two languages use different methods to form WH and Yes/No questions. These cross-linguistic syntactic differences may cause numerous challenges to learners with different language backgrounds.

#### ACQUISITION OF QUESTION FORMS IN ENGLISH

Due to their relative difficulty, question formation in English has been studied widely in both first and second language research. Research on acquisition of questions in first language contexts indicates an unexpectedly high error rate, given the general assumption that children learn the rules of their mother tongue quickly. While the current study focuses on second or additional language learning, research on question acquisition in first language provides a ‘window’ into grammatical development in child language that may be relevant to the young learners in this study. Studies suggest that young learners are unable to raise tense and agreement out of verb phrase (VP) and inflectional Phrase (IP), in addition to omitting tenses or double marking them (e.g. Rowland & Pine et al., 2005). Some examples of such errors are questions such as ‘What she does do?’ and ‘What she doing?’. According to Pozzan and Valian (2017), the inability of young learners to invert subject and verb is due to limited transformation used in an utterance, where virtually no errors are reported in the placement of WH-words, in contrast with subject-auxiliary inversion.

Compared to first language learning, where children can learn the target language naturally by immersing themselves in a large amount of comprehensible language input, second language learners must learn and use linguistic rules in environments with comparatively limited opportunities for target language input and output. Moreover, the influence of the first language in second language learning is widely discussed, including that errors made by second language learners can be traced to interlingual and intralingual transfer (Heydari & Bagheri, 2012) and that learners often transfer forms of their native language into the target language, especially when it comes to complex structures among lower achievers. Therefore, the differences between English and Mandarin such as those described in the previous section may be relevant.

Moreover, research involving Mandarin-speaking young learners has identified specific patterns in the learning of English questions. For example, Chen (2013) found that subject questions are less demanding for Mandarin-speaking learners than object questions, which require subject-auxiliary inversion. This is corroborated by similar results from studies by Lee (2016) and Zhang (2016). Another syntactic restriction in Mandarin that makes it challenging for speakers to learn WH-questions in English is flexibility of placement of the Mandarin locative and directive prepositions in comparison to English (Jiang et al., 2019), where the Mandarin question “你今天在哪吃午餐?” translates directly into English as ‘You today at where eat lunch?’. While much of the existing research involving the learning of questions by Mandarin-speaking children has been conducted in countries like Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong and China, there may be some similarities observed among children in Chinese-medium schools in Malaysia, such as those in the current study.

In summary, the literature indicates that differences between Mandarin and English can make certain question structures more challenging for some learners compared to others. Research involving Chinese-speaking learners has identified certain common errors in question formation, possibly attributable to differences between Mandarin and English. Moreover, the literature indicates that question structures may be challenging for children to acquire in first language contexts too. Further, studies on English question formation by Mandarin speakers have largely involved Mandarin speakers in monolingual contexts; thus, their findings might not apply wholly to Mandarin speakers in the multilingual Malaysian context. Children in national-type Chinese schools are exposed to three languages, Chinese, Malay and English, which they are learning simultaneously, albeit at different rates depending on their language backgrounds. An examination of these learners’ errors in English questions, including a comparison across learners of different

language backgrounds, would be a suitable starting point to begin understanding how instruction can be better tailored to meet their needs.

## METHODOLOGY

This study applied a cross-sectional quantitative design to investigate errors in questions produced in written translation tasks by students at a national-type Chinese-medium primary school in the Klang Valley, Malaysia, where the first author (WAL) worked as an English language teacher. Since there is limited literature on English question production by young Chinese learners in Malaysia, a cross-sectional design was considered suitable to provide a snapshot of the types of errors produced by the learners at a given time. Moreover, as we intended to compare the language of learners from different language backgrounds, a quantitative approach was deemed preferable, to enable identification and comparison of error frequencies and allow for more participants to be included in each learner group. This enabled a larger set of data to be analysed, facilitating pattern identification. Permission was obtained from the School Principal before the researcher began recruiting students from Year 4 English classes of other teachers. A participant information sheet was provided to potential participants and informed consent was obtained from the guardian and the participating student.

## PARTICIPANTS

The convenience sample comprised 56 year-four participants aged 11, enrolled in a national-type Chinese school. The students' participation was on a voluntary basis, with a total of 120 participants invited from four classes. The researcher recruited the participants by describing the nature of the study in each class while encouraging the participants to challenge themselves regarding their ability to produce English questions.

The 56 participants were categorised into two groups based on their dominant language, via a combination of two methods:

1. Administration of Birdsong et al.'s (2012) Bilingual Language Profile (BLP) instrument; and
2. Individual interviews with each student to obtain information about their home language use and their perceptions of their dominant language.

Based on the above, the participants were then categorised as English dominant (n=28) or Mandarin dominant (n=28), resulting in two equally-sized groups. The categorisation was further validated via follow-up interviews with the guardian/parent and English language teacher of seven (7) randomly selected participants, indicating that the initial categorisation was aligned with the perspectives of both parents and teacher.

## INSTRUMENT

Data was obtained via language elicitation tasks, comprising three different tasks: a simulation/prompt task, a sentence transformation task and translation task. The tasks were developed based on the Year Four Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

(CEFR) English syllabus (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2019). This paper reports the findings from the data obtained via the translation task.

The inclusion of the translation task as a language elicitation instrument for this study was motivated by the shift away from ‘English only’ teaching and learning activities towards ‘translanguaging’ or using students’ first and other languages as a resource in language learning (Daniel et al., 2019; Shin et al., 2022) and the growing trend of using translation tasks as a pedagogical approach for language teaching (Pintado Gutiérrez, 2021). Since the students were learning English within a Chinese-medium school setting, we aimed to explore their English question production when required to translate a question from Mandarin. The translation task presented participants with ten (10) Mandarin questions, made up of six WH-questions and four Yes/No questions (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. Translation Task Items

No	Mandarin Questions	WH Question word	Yes/No Auxiliary/ Modal Verb	Tenses
1	你最喜欢的老师是谁? [You most like teacher who?] Who is your favourite teacher?	Who	Is	Simple Present Tense
2	他们住在哪里? [They live at where?] Where do you live?	Where	Do	Simple Present Tense
3	这是谁的铅笔? [This is who (particle) pencil?] Whose pencil is this?	Whose	Is	Simple Present Tense
4	你昨天为什么迟到学校? [You yesterday why late reach school?] Why were you late yesterday?	Why	Were	Simple Past Tense
5	你昨天在家里做什么? [You yesterday at home do what?] What did you do at home?	What	Are	Simple Past Tense
6	什么时候下雨了的? [When rained?] When did it rain?	When	Did	Simple Past Tense
7	你遇到过他们吗? [You seen before them ma?] Have you seen them before?	-	Have	Present Perfect Tense
8	她是美国人吗? [She is American ma?] Is she an American?	-	Is	Simple Present Tense
9	他每天走路上学吗? [He everyday walks to school ma?] Does He walk to school every day?	-	Does	Simple Present Tense
10	她会不会跳舞? She can or cannot dance? [Can she dance?]	-	Can	Simple Present Tense

Note: Two lines of English translations are provided under the Mandarin questions. Square brackets [word] indicate a word-for-word translation, which may not be grammatical in English, while the second line is a grammatically correct translation.

In addition, to minimise the possibility that the learners' production of English questions would be affected by their limited knowledge of vocabulary, words were selected from their learned vocabulary based on their syllabus.

#### RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Following a small pilot study involving three participants to refine the instruments, analytical framework and research procedures, the data collection commenced with the administration of the written language elicitation tasks to the 56 participants. The translation task was conducted in a classroom at the school outside of regular class hours. In-person data collection was considered suitable to prevent the participants from using other applications and translation tools to complete the tasks. The students were given the task on a printed sheet, and participants were allowed to inquire the meaning of words that they did not understand. As the translation task had only ten items, the maximum time given to participants to complete the task was 30 minutes.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The completed translation tasks, comprising ten English questions for each of the 56 participants, were then typed into an Excel sheet to be used for analysis. The Excel sheet was cross-checked against the original documents to ensure accuracy in the data.

#### ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The data was analysed using an adapted version of Rowland's (2007) error coding framework, where seven additional error categories (numbers 1-7 in Table 2) were added to Rowland's original framework for a total of 13 error categories.

TABLE 2. Adaptation of Rowland's (2007) Error Coding Framework

No	Error Coding	Explanation & Sample		
		Elements	WH Questions	Yes/ No Questions
1	Placement of question word errors (PQW)*	Interrogative morpheme incorrectly placed in a question	You are going where?	-
2	Question word error (QW-L)*	Selection of QW does not match the statements given but syntactically accurate	What colour is his dog?	-
3	Question word error (QW-S)*	Selection of QW that causes sentence structure errors	What does Jack go home by?	-
4	Auxiliary Errors (AUX-S)*	Selection of wrong auxiliary verb that caused sentence structure errors	When <u>is</u> dinner be ready? Why <u>did they</u> <u>been</u> told to be silent?	<u>Are</u> she live here for 3 years?
5	Auxiliary Errors (AUX-T)*	Selection of wrong tenses	What <u>do</u> librarian tell them?	<u>Are</u> they told to be silent by the librarian?



6	Auxiliary Errors (AUX-L)*	Select a different auxiliary from the given statements but syntactically accurate.	Who <u>is</u> going to speak to her?	<u>Did</u> the librarian tell them to be silent?
7	Alternative Questions (ALT)*	i. To indicate variation in participants questions that used either different QW or tenses from given statements, but questions formed are syntactically accurate and able to correspond with the statements given well.	i. How can Mary improve her English? ii. <u>What does Mary do to improve her English?</u>	Should he speak to her? i. <u>Must he speak to her?</u>
8.	Inversion Errors (IV)	i. Do- support inversion errors ii. Non- inversion errors	i. Where <u>  </u> he works? ii. Where <u>he does</u> work?	i. <u>  </u> He does work? ii. -
9.	Agreement Errors (AG)	Errors in which an auxiliary was present but did not agree with the subject	Where <u>does you</u> work?	<u>Is you</u> working? <u>Does you</u> work?
10.	Omission Errors (OM)	i. Auxiliary ii. Subject iii. Subject and Auxiliary	i. Where <u>      </u> he going? ii. Where is <u>      </u> going? iii. Where <u>      </u> going?	i. <u>  </u> He going to school? ii. Is <u>  </u> going to school? iii. <u>  </u> Going to school?
11.	Case Errors (CS)	Errors in which the subject had incorrect non-nominative case	Where does <u>his</u> work?	Does <u>her</u> work? Has <u>her</u> work?
12	Double Marking Errors (DM)	i. Doubling of auxiliary ii. Errors in marking on tense and agreement in auxiliary and main verb iii. Errors with two auxiliaries present	i. Where <u>does</u> he <u>does</u> work? ii. Where <u>does</u> he <u>works</u> ?/ Where <u>do</u> he <u>works</u> -	i. <u>Does</u> he <u>does</u> work? ii. <u>Does</u> he <u>works</u> / <u>Do</u> he <u>works</u> iii. <u>Does</u> he <u>can</u> work?
13.	Other errors of commision (OT)	Errors that could not be categorized according to the scheme above or where the type of error could not be reliably identified.	What he work does work?	Does work he works?

Note-Asterisk\* indicates additional error codes added in this study

While there are various error coding frameworks, Rowland's (2007) framework was considered most suitable for this study as it presented a comprehensive list of codes to distinguish different types of errors. Rowland's framework has been utilised in three consecutive studies, which are Rowland et al. (2005); Rowland (2007) and Ambridge and Rowland (2009), to investigate incidence and patterning of errors in children production of English questions. This framework also displays a high level of coder agreement at 97.5%. However, our pilot study indicated that more detailed coding was needed to distinguish particular types of errors made by participants. For example, the researchers found that several questions produced by participants were grammatically correct, but the selected question word was wrong in terms of meaning or context, which is indicated by the Question Word (QW-L) code to contrast against question word errors within structurally incorrect questions (QW-S). In comparison to Rowland's (2007) single code for auxiliary errors (AUX), it was also deemed necessary to have three auxiliary error codes to provide a more accurate description of the students' errors with auxiliaries, namely auxiliary selection errors (AUX-S), wrong tense used for the auxiliary (AUX-T) and auxiliary selection errors in grammatically correct questions (AUX-L). Moreover, the placement of question word error (PQW) code was added to provide more details about the type of inversion errors made by participants. Finally, the alternative questions (ALT) code was added to indicate variations of grammatically accurate questions that corresponded well with the statements given but were not the expected responses for the task. To ensure consistency in applying the framework, both authors analysed the data independently, with inconsistencies discussed and resolved via consensus.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 560 questions produced by participants in the translation task, we identified a total of 345 errors, comprising 112 errors made among English-dominant participants and 233 errors made by Mandarin-dominant participants.

### TYPES OF ERRORS IN ENGLISH QUESTIONS BY CHINESE PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Figure 1 shows the frequency of errors made by both groups of participants, according to the 13 error types. Overall, it was evident that Mandarin dominant learners' errors in the translation task were consistently higher than those of English dominant participants across all error types. However, as Figure 1 shows, the most frequent types of errors were different in both groups, where the English-dominant learners made the most errors with auxiliary tenses (AUX-T) while Mandarin-dominant language learners' most common error type was omission errors (OM). Both groups made a relatively lower number of errors in errors related to question words, specifically the usage of question words (QW) and position of question words (PQW). These differences will be discussed further later in this paper.

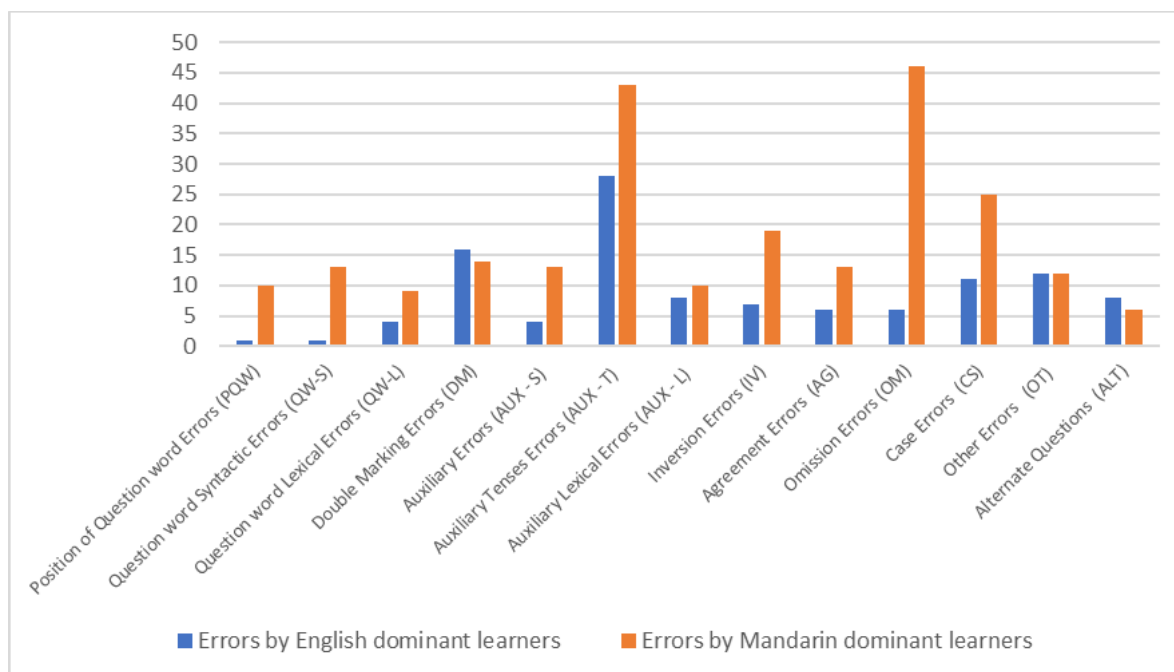


FIGURE 1. Distribution of Error Types in English Questions by English-Dominant versus Mandarin-Dominant Learners

Of interest is a type of ‘error’ categorised as alternative questions (ALT). These are not technically errors as the questions produced are grammatical as can be seen in the examples in Table 3. Yet, these errors indicate instances in which participants used alternative questions to complete the translation task in a different way than expected.

TABLE 3. Examples of Alternative Questions

<i>Mandarin question</i>	<i>Sample English Question</i>	<i>Participants’ Questions</i>	<i>Error</i>
你每天喝多少水? <i>You every day drink how much water?</i>	<i>How much water do you drink every day?</i>	<i>How many cups of water do you drink every day?</i>	ALT
你昨天为什么迟到学校? <i>You yesterday why late to school?</i>	<i>Why were you late to school?</i>	<i>How come you are late to school?</i>	ALT

The instructions required participants to translate questions according to the Mandarin question given (left-most column), but they completed the task by modifying the translated question slightly. For example, in the first example, the participant has changed the question to ‘How many cups...?’ instead of using the uncountable version ‘How much water...?’, which would be a direct translation of the Chinese question. In the second example, the participant used the more informal ‘How come’, rather than ‘Why’ to produce a question with a similar meaning. While the frequency of alternative questions was relatively low across both participant groups, this was an additional error type added to the analytical framework after we observed these kinds of questions in the pilot data.

Although the study focused on identifying language errors, it is often said that learners may avoid producing challenging structures by applying avoidance strategy, where a speaker avoids using a difficult word or structure by using other words as replacement (Richards, et al., 1992).

Such avoidance has been identified by learners when forming WH-questions which required long-distance movement (Slavkov, 2015). Therefore, instances in which the participants used alternate question forms could indicate structures which they may find difficult or reflect attempts to adapt English structures to be close to those they are accustomed to in Mandarin. These could reflect language transfer strategies which may be part of the learners' developmental patterns or explicitly used learning strategies.

Since question structure differs between WH and Yes/No questions, both within English and between English and Mandarin, we performed further analysis of the errors according to question type, as described in the following sub-sections.

COMMON ERRORS IN WH-QUESTIONS

Figure 2 shows the proportion of error types in the WH-questions produced by the participants in the translation task. Auxiliary tenses errors (AUX-T) and omission errors (OM) made up the largest proportions of errors found in WH-questions at 19% each, with Case Errors (CS) and Other Errors (OT), accounting for 14% and 13% respectively. These four error types combined made up over half of all the errors observed in the WH-questions.

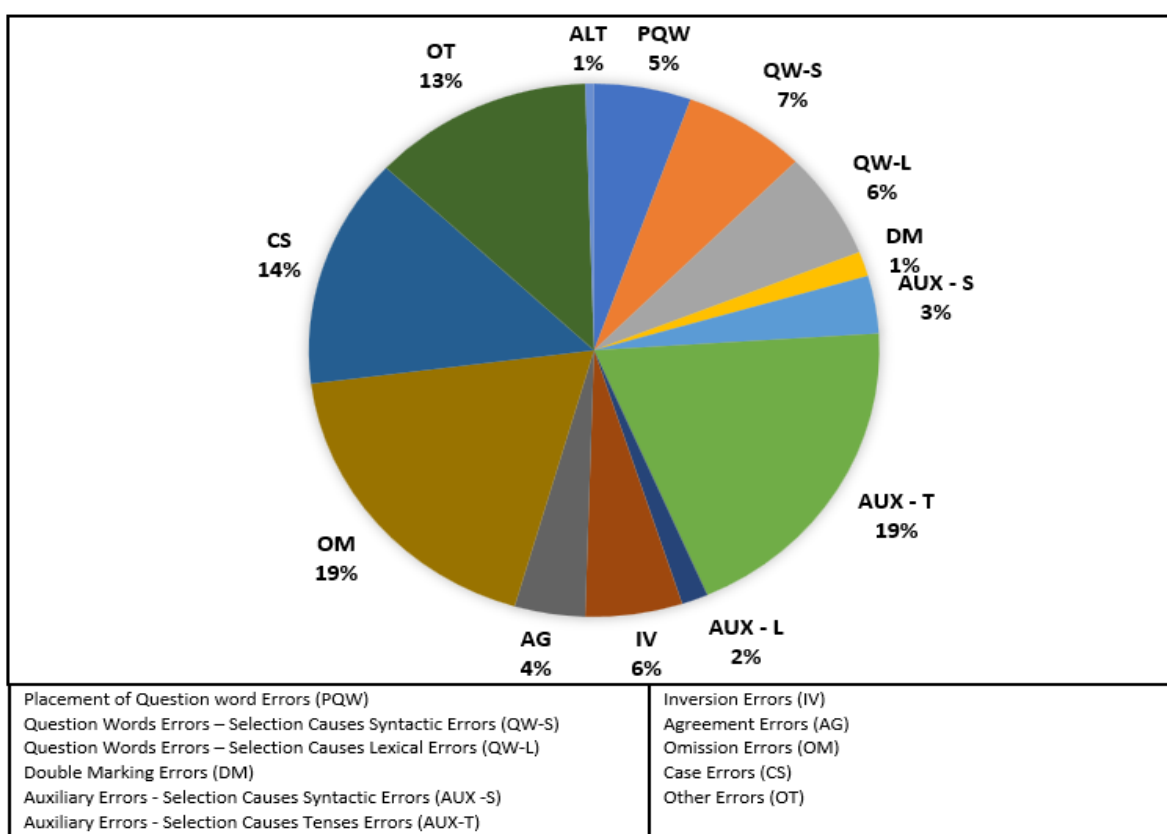


FIGURE 2. Error Types in WH-questions (both groups)

Analysis of these four error types indicate certain challenges faced by the participants in acquiring WH-questions, as shown in the examples presented in Table 4. The high proportion of auxiliary tense errors could be linked to differences between English and Mandarin, where Mandarin does not mark for tenses in verbs but uses time words such as ‘yesterday’ to talk about past events. Learners in Chinese-medium schools may therefore find it difficult to indicate the tense change when translating the questions as shown in the first row of examples. It could also indicate that participants have a weak command of tenses as participants used present tense to produce questions even when the question indicated past tense as shown in the examples.

TABLE 4. Examples of Common Error-Types in WH-questions

<i>Mandarin question</i>	<i>Sample English Question</i>	<i>Participants' Questions</i>	<i>Error</i>
他们为什么昨天迟到学校? They why yesterday late to school?	Why were they late to school yesterday?	Why do they come late to school? Why are you late to school? Why did he come to school late? Why were them late to school?	AUX-S AUX-T, CS AUX-L, CS CS
他们住在那里? They live at where?	Where do they live?	Where does he live? Where do them live? Where _ he live?/ Where _ he stay? _ They live at there?	CS CS OM OT

Moreover, case errors were quite common especially when given the pronoun ‘they’, where participants used ‘he’ instead. This could be due to carelessness as the ‘he’ case in Mandarin (他 *ta*) is quite similar to the ‘they’ case (他们 *ta men*), with the addition of 们 *men* to change the case. Participants also appeared to face difficulty in differentiating between subject and object pronouns such as ‘they’ and ‘them’ as shown in fourth example, ‘Why were them late to school?’. Furthermore, omission errors in WH questions occurred more frequently in do-support questions.

#### COMMON ERRORS IN YES/NO QUESTIONS

Analysis of error types in Yes/No questions across both groups showed that auxiliary errors make up over 40% of the errors (see Figure 3).

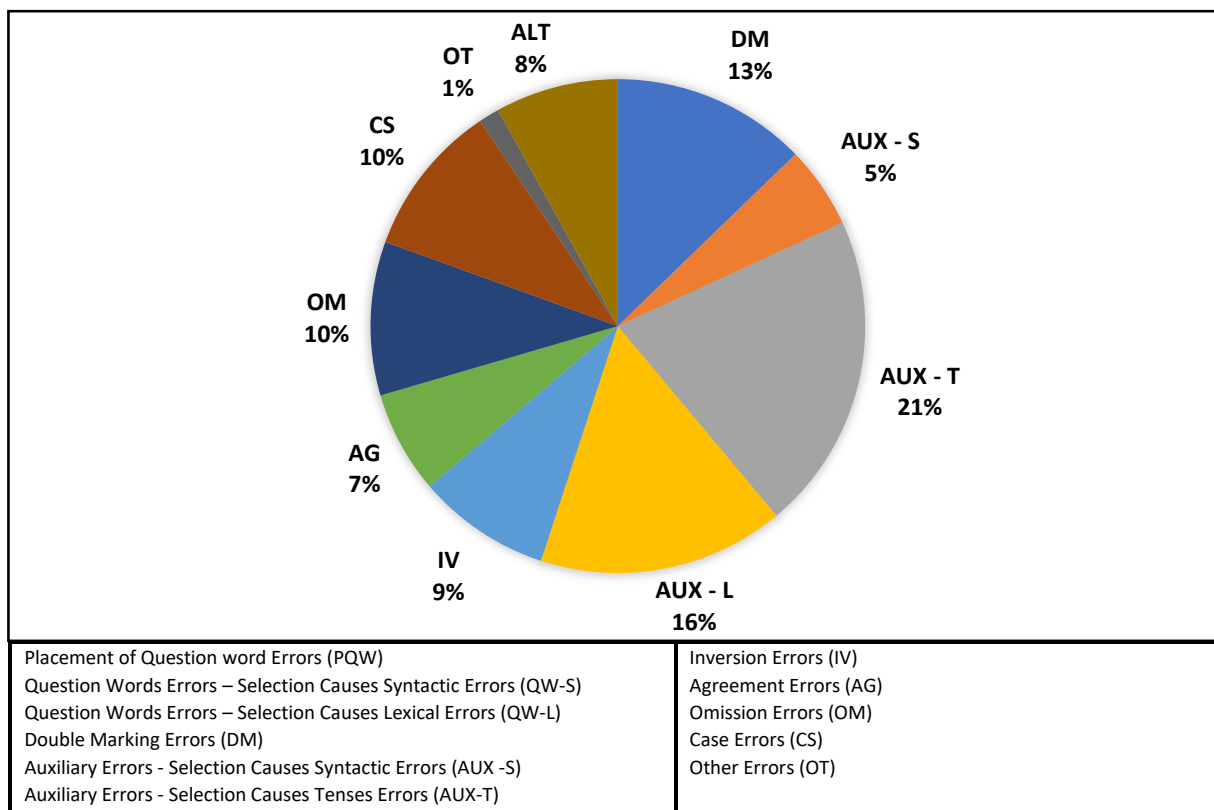


FIGURE 3. Error types in Yes/No questions (both groups)

As Figure 3 shows, auxiliary tense (AUX-T) and auxiliary errors which did not affect grammatical correctness (AUX-L) made up the largest proportion of errors in Yes/No questions, at 21% and 16% respectively. Double marking (DM) errors accounted for 13% of the errors. Table 5 shows examples of the common error types in Yes/No questions.

TABLE 5: Examples of Common Error-Types in Yes/No questions

<i>Mandarin question</i>	<i>Sample English Question</i>	<i>Participants' Questions</i>	<i>Error</i>
你遇到过他们吗?	Have you met them before?	Did you meet them?	AUX-S
You met them before ma?		Do you meet them before?	AUX-T
		Have you meet them before?	DM
		Do you see anot them?	AUX-T, OT
他每天走路上学吗?	Does he walk to school every day?	Is he walk to school every day?	AUX-S
He every day walk school ma?		Did he walked to school every day?	AUX-T, DM
		Does he walked to school every day?	DM
		Do he walk to school every day?	AG
		He walk to school every day?	OM

As the examples indicate, participants tended to confuse the present and past tenses when translating the questions, which may indicate their inability to distinguish between present and past tenses. This could reflect interlanguage differences, mentioned earlier, where Mandarin verbs are not marked by tense. Participants also placed the BE auxiliary verb 'is' in questions that did not require it, for example, 'Is he walk to school every day?'. The error patterns indicate that these

participants were aware of the need to apply inversion and do-support in forming Yes-No questions, but were unable select suitable tense marking and auxiliaries.

Double marking errors, for example, ‘Did he walked?’, were the third most frequent mistake made when translating yes-no questions and were commonly found in do-support questions. According to Lee (2016), do-support errors are unsurprising higher as it is more cognitively taxing for Mandarin speaking learners given the absence of do-support and inflected verb forms in the Chinese language. This could also indicate the learners’ awareness of certain rules in English although they may be overapplying them, for example, by applying both do-insertion and tense marking.

#### COMPARISON OF ERRORS BETWEEN ENGLISH-DOMINANT AND MANDARIN-DOMINANT LEARNERS

Comparison of error types between English-dominant and Mandarin-dominant learners showed some distinct error types made by learners of different language backgrounds when translating Mandarin questions into English. As Table 6 shows, the number of errors made by Mandarin-dominant learners (n=233) was considerably higher, more than twice the number of errors made by English-dominant learners (n=112). One similarity that was noted, however, was in relation to errors involving auxiliary tenses (AUX)-T, which was the most frequent error category for English-dominant learners and the second most frequent error type for Mandarin-dominant learners. Although the number of auxiliary tenses errors (AUX-T) made by Mandarin-dominant language participants at 43, was higher than the number of AUX-T errors made by English-dominant participants at 27, the results showed that the learners in both groups may find it difficult to select correct tenses when translating questions into English. Other than the AUX-T errors, the error patterns across both groups were quite different, where the top three most frequent error types by English-dominant learners were auxiliary tense errors, double-marking errors and other errors, compared to the top three errors among Mandarin-dominant learners of omission errors, auxiliary tense errors and case errors.

TABLE 6. Comparison of Errors between English-Dominant and Mandarin-Dominant Learners

Type of Errors	English-Dominant Learners		Mandarin-Dominant Learners	
	Number of Errors	%	Number of Errors	%
Position of Question word Errors (PQW)	1	1%	10	4%
Question word Syntactic Errors (QW-S)	1	1%	13	6%
Question word Lexical Errors (QW-L)	4	4%	9	4%
Double Marking Errors (DM)	16	14%	14	6%
Auxiliary Syntactic Errors (AUX - S)	4	4%	13	6%
Auxiliary Tenses Errors (AUX - T)	28	25%	43	18%
Auxiliary Lexical Errors (AUX - L)	8	7%	10	4%
Inversion Errors (IV)	7	6%	19	8%
Agreement Errors (AG)	6	5%	13	6%
Omission Errors (OM)	6	5%	46	20%
Case Errors (CS)	11	10%	25	11%
Other Errors (OT)	12	11%	12	5%
Alternative Questions	8	7%	6	3%
TOTAL ERRORS	112	100%	233	100%

Another notable difference is that learners whose dominant language was Mandarin made a significantly higher number of omission errors (OM) at 46 errors, in comparison with English-dominant participants, who only made 6 omission errors. Moreover, omission of tenses and question words occurred more frequently among Mandarin-dominant learners when translating certain questions, specifically those which require insertion of the DO verb (see Table 7).

TABLE 7. Comparison of Errors between English-Dominant and Mandarin-Dominant Learners

Example Items	Errors by English-Dominant Learners	Errors by Mandarin-Dominant Learners
他们住在那里? (They live at where?) Where do they live?	Where does they live?– (AG)	Where _ their home?– (OM) Where _ they live? – (OM) _ They live at where?– PQW
他每天走路上学吗? (He every day walk school ma?) Does he walk to school every day?	Does he walks to school everyday? – (DM)	_ He walk to school everyday?– (OM) _ He everyday walk to school?– (OM), (IV), (AG) _ He always go to school by foot?– (OM), (AG)

Mandarin-dominant participants also made more errors with question word selection (QW-L & QW-S) and placement (PQW) compared to English-dominant participants. As shown in Table 6 earlier, the frequency of errors with question word selection and placement for Mandarin-dominant learners was 13 and 10, respectively, while only one (1) error each was observed in the same categories among English-dominant participants. Examples of the errors made by participants can be seen in Table 8.

TABLE 8. Comparison of Errors between English-Dominant and Mandarin-Dominant Learners

Example Items	Errors by English-Dominant Learners	Errors by Mandarin-Dominant Learners
你每天喝多少水? (You everyday drink how much water?) How much water do you drink every day?	How many water you drink per day? – (QW-S)	_ You everyday drink how many water? – (QW-S), (PQW) _ You today drinks how many water? – (QW-S), (PQW), (AG) _ Everyday you drink how much water? – (PQW)
这是谁的铅笔? (This is who de pencil) Whose pencil is this?	Who's pencil is this? – (OT)	_ This is who pencil? – (QW-S), (PQW) _ This pencil is who? – (QW-S), (PQW) Who's pencil is this? – (OT)

Besides, while the Mandarin-dominant learners made more inversion errors than the English-dominant learners, the proportion of inversion errors across both groups is similar, at 8%, indicating a potential trouble spot for these learners albeit relatively minor compared to other error types. Dekeyser (2003) explained that the inconsistency in the application of inversion rules may be attributed to learners' recognition of the requirement to follow subject-operator inversion but lack of 'automatisation of the rules.' Moreover, Brown (1986, as cited in Tsvetkova, 2017) proposed that the inability to invert subject and verb is due to learners' limitations in their utterance transformations, where learners may understand the rules for using the inversion subject-auxiliary



at the starting placement of the WH word in questions, but they are unable to combine the two rules in a single sentence.

Comparatively, the lower number of errors made by English-dominant participant indicates that this group faces fewer difficulties in acquiring English questions, perhaps due to their language backgrounds. Interestingly, our data showed that double marking errors were more prevalent among English-dominant participants, with 15 such errors noted accounting for 16 percent of the errors among this group. While Mandarin-dominant participants made a similar number of errors (n=14), these errors only made up 7% of their errors in the translation task. The lower proportion of double marking errors could be because the Mandarin dominant participants in this study often did not change the marking on tense and agreement in the auxiliary and main verb when needed. This could have led to fewer double-marking errors among this group in comparison to English dominant language participants but may also indicate that they have not yet acquired the rules for changing tense and agreement markings when using English verbs in questions.

To sum up, there were notable differences across both groups, in terms of both frequency and type of errors made in the sentence translation task. While it can be said that Mandarin dominant language participants faced far more difficulties in constructing English questions accurately, the findings also point towards specific challenges faced by English dominant learners.

Overall, our findings provide further evidence that the language background of a learner influenced their practice of the second language, which could be a reflection of language transfer from the learner's native language, contrastive interference from the target language, or overgeneralisation of newly acquired rules. Furthermore, in the context of child language learning in multilingual communities, it may be more relevant to consider a learner's dominant language, that is the language they are exposed to the most at home. This is because a learner's dominant language may not necessarily be their first language or 'mother tongue'.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study investigated errors made in English questions by primary school students in a language elicitation task that required participants to translate Mandarin questions into English questions. The data was collected as part of a larger study on the formation of questions by national-type Chinese medium primary school students, categorised by their linguistic background as either English dominant or Mandarin dominant. Analysis of learner errors showed that both groups of participants encountered difficulty in using tenses correctly, particularly in the use of auxiliary verbs and tenses. Distinguishing between the groups of learners, the English-dominant learners made more double marking errors. Comparatively, the Mandarin-dominant learners made more omission errors (OM) and errors related to structure, order and insertion of "do".

## LIMITATIONS

While we have highlighted some areas of difficulty in producing English questions for learners with language backgrounds, the small sample of 56 students and limited items on the translation task limit the findings. As few studies examine English questions of primary school students in Malaysia, future studies can include different medium schools and locations for more representative findings, with a wider variety of language elicitation tasks used.

#### PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study could be applied to improve teaching practice, particularly for teachers in National-Type Chinese schools. This study demonstrated that errors involving structural features of interrogative sentences were more prevalent among Mandarin dominant language speakers. Failure to invert auxiliary verbs and wrong placement of question words in the sentence were more common among Mandarin-dominant language participants. In line with the communicative language teaching approach used in Malaysian classrooms, however, the teaching of WH-questions often focuses on understanding the meaning of WH-question words while neglecting sentence structures and movements in forming questions. Apart from guiding students to use interrogative words correctly, teachers can also help these students perceive and consciously identify distinctions between English and Mandarin question structures, at the same time emphasising these two common errors. Moreover, teachers can demonstrate the transformation of English questions from declarative sentences and how this varies from Mandarin interrogative sentences.

In addition, teachers can incorporate these findings to design teaching materials that accommodate learner differences, for example, by highlighting challenging structures or common errors in worksheets. Since Mandarin-dominant learners appear to confuse rules governing use of English auxiliaries in questions, discovery-type grammar activities could raise learners' grammatical awareness about English auxiliaries, particularly the DO verb. For English-dominant language participants who made fewer auxiliary errors but proportionately more tense errors, teachers could provide focused instruction on English tenses. Also, since English-dominant learners may avoid using certain auxiliary verbs and tenses, for example, using the simple past tense instead of present perfect tense, tasks that enable learners to notice the links between tense structures and meanings could be useful. Our findings also point towards directions teachers can take to improve their students' command of English questions, regardless of dominant language. For instance, the frequency and variety of errors across both groups indicates the need for more instruction and practice, including explicitly highlighting grammatical formation of questions and communicative activities to enable fluency development.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our study explored errors in English questions produced by young learners in national-type Chinese schools in Malaysia, contributing to the limited data on learner language in this context. Beyond English language teaching in Malaysia's multilingual context, identification of error types attributed to Mandarin-speaking learners add to the broader literature and support previous findings while also indicating that cross-linguistic transfer remains a consideration in language development. While research on learner errors is criticised for highlighting negative aspects rather than what learners can achieve, we propose that there remains utility in exploring learner errors as a window towards understanding learners' difficulties and helping them overcome them.

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