

Production of interrogatives with “what” plus a noun by university students¹

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Abstract

When they ask a question, university students who are beginner to pre-intermediate English learners often keep apart “what” and the noun that should follow right after it. For example, some ask **“What do you like sports?”* Therefore, we examined how many students make this kind of error and whether the percentage of students who do not understand how to form this type of question differs from when speaking to writing. We found that 25-40% of the students in speaking and 15-25% of them in writing kept “what” and a noun apart. Consequently, English teachers need to emphasize that “what” and a noun should not be kept apart when forming this type of interrogatives and they should be vigilant for errors made by students and correct them immediately. Moreover, teachers have to put their efforts on helping their students acquire a good command of basic English.

Keywords: English Education, interrogatives, word order

大学生による “what” + 名詞疑問文の生成

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要旨

初級～初中級レベルの英語力を持つ大学生が “what” + 名詞の疑問文を使って質問するとき、**“What do you like sports?”* など、whatと名詞を離す文が毎年必ず聞かれる。そのため、どのくらいの学生が what + 名詞疑問文の語順を理解しているのかを調査した。さらに、これまでの英語学習が話すことよりも文法を学ぶことに重点が置かれていることを踏まえ、話すときだけではなく、書くときも whatと名詞を離すのかどうかを調べた。その結果、話すときには25～40%の学生が、書くときには15～25%の学生が what と名詞を離していた。中学校の初期の段階で what + 名詞疑問文を学ぶことを考えると、この数字は小さいとは考えられず、より一層英語の基礎から指導していく必要があることを痛感させられる結果となった。

キーワード：英語教育，疑問文，語順

I. Introduction

On the first day of the English class, we made the students introduce themselves, and other students asked them some questions about themselves. At that time, we realized that, when forming questions, many students keep apart

“what” and the noun that should follow right after it. For example, the students asked **“What do you like sports?”* or **“What do you like food?”* We did not point out the students’ error to avoid discouraging them from speaking up in class for fear of making mistakes. However, many students commit the same error every year despite learning the word order of *wh*-questions in junior high schoolⁱⁱ. Therefore, measures to correct this persistent error may be necessary. In light of this, we decided to examine the frequency of students’ erroneous word order when forming interrogatives with “what” plus a noun. If the frequency of the error is high, English teachers should correct the error immediately and instruct all students that they should not keep “what” and a noun apart in these types of questions. To complicate matters, even if students separate “what” and a noun in speech, they may produce the correct order in writing. Therefore, we will examine the frequency of the error in students’ writing as well. Finally, we will analyze the relation, if any, between the error in speaking and writing.

II. Methods

1. Research subjects

In order to investigate the frequency of errors in the word order of interrogatives with “what” plus a noun, we asked 39 students at University A to participate in the study. The English ability of 20 out of the 39 students was fairly low; some of them did not understand the appropriate use of the verb *to be* and other general verbs. The remaining 19 students’ English ability was slightly higher, and their motivation to learn English was evident from their taking an elective English class.

2. Methods and interrogatives used in the investigation

The interrogatives that we asked the 39 students to produce were as follows:

1. What sport(s) do you like?
2. What color(s) do you like?
3. What fruit(s) do you like?
4. What subject(s) do you like?
5. What book(s) did you read yesterday?

These five interrogatives are often used in daily conversation when a speaker wants to know about a hearer, and many students actually ask their classmates these questions after they have finished introducing themselves. In this study, the students were asked to produce these five interrogatives both in a personal interview and in a written test.

1) Personal interview

First, we told the students to presume that the interviewer was an English-speaking foreigner and that this was the first time that she and the students had met. The interviewer requested the students to ask her five questions in English according to a situation she explained in Japanese. After the students produced a question, the interviewer wrote it down and moved on to the next oneⁱⁱⁱ. The five situations she gave the students were as follows:

1. What will you say when you want to know the interviewer's favorite sport?
2. What will you say when you want to know the interviewer's favorite color?
3. What will you say when you want to know the interviewer's favorite fruit?
4. What will you say when you want to know the interviewer's favorite subject?^{iv}
5. What will you say when you want to know which book the interviewer read yesterday?

2) Written test

After two weeks, we gave the students a written test. They were asked to translate five sentences written in Japanese into English. The sentences were:

1. Anata wa donna supohtsu ga sukidesuka? (What sport(s) do you like?)
2. Anata wa donna iro ga sukidesuka? (What color(s) do you like?)
3. Anata wa donna kudamono ga sukidesuka? (What fruit(s) do you like?)
4. Anata wa donna kamoku ga sukidesuka? (What subject(s) do you like?)
5. Anata wa kinou donna hon wo yomimashitaka? (What book(s) did you read yesterday?)

3) Categorization of the answers

We categorized all the sentences produced by the students in the personal interviews and in the written tests. The answers provided by the students in the personal interviews were categorized as follows:

Table 1. Categorization of the students' production in the interview

(1) Correct Production 1	In this case, the students gave a correct answer by producing "what" and a noun in the correct order. E.g., "What sports do you like?"
(2) Correct Production 2	In this case, the students gave a correct answer, by using "favorite." E.g., "What is your favorite sport?"
(3) Correct Production 3	In this case, the students gave a correct answer by using "what kind of." E.g., "What kind of sport do you like?"
(4) Wrong Production 1	In this case, the students kept "what" and the noun apart. E.g., *"What do you like sport?"
(5) Wrong Production 2	This category encompasses all other incorrect productions, as well as situations where the students gave no answer. E.g., *"Would you like some sports?", *"What your like sports?", and so on.

The answers produced by the students in the written tests were categorized as follows:

Table 2. Categorization of the students' production in the written test

(1a) Correct Production 1a	In this case, the students gave a correct answer by producing “what” and a noun in the correct order. E.g., “What sports do you like?”
(1b) Correct Production 1b	In this case, the students gave a correct answer by producing “what” and a noun in the correct order, but with incorrect spelling. E.g. * <i>“What suport do you like?”</i> , * <i>“What frute do you like?”</i> , and so on ^v .
(2) Correct Production 2	In this case, the students gave a correct answer, by using “favorite.” E.g., “What is your favorite sport?”
(3) Correct Production 3	In this case, the students gave a correct answer by using “what kind of.” E.g., “What kind of sport do you like?”
(4) Wrong Production 1	In this case, the students kept “what” and the noun apart. E.g., * <i>“What do you like sport?”</i>
(5) Wrong Production 2	This category encompasses all other incorrect productions, as well as situations where the students gave no answer. E.g., * <i>“Are you favored sports?”</i> , * <i>“Do you like favalit sports?”</i> , * <i>“What like you sport?”</i> , and so on.

In the next section, we present the numbers and the percentages associated with each category. In addition, the relationship between errors in speaking and those in writing will be analyzed.

III. Results

1. Students' productions in the interview

The table below shows the numbers and percentages of the correct answers produced by the students in the personal interviews.

Table 3. The numbers and percentages of each category of the students' answers in the interview

	Number (Percentage)				
	Category (1)	Category (2)	Category (3)	Category (4)	Category (5)
Sentence 1	8 (20.5%)	6 (15.4%)	2 (5.1%)	15 (38.5%)	8 (20.5%)
Sentence 2	14 (35.9%)	7 (17.9%)	0 (0%)	10 (25.6%)	8 (20.5%)
Sentence 3	10 (25.6%)	7 (17.9%)	1 (2.6%)	13 (33.3%)	8 (20.5%)
Sentence 4	15 (38.5%)	6 (15.4%)	0 (0%)	12 (30.8%)	6 (15.4%)
Sentence 5	3 (7.7%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.6%)	7 (17.9%)	28 (71.8%)

As we can see from Table 3, about half of the students correctly produced Sentences 2, 3, and 4, and about 40% of them did so for Sentence 1. As for Sentence 5, the most difficult one, only 10.3% of the students produced it correctly; most produced incorrect constructions because of the sentence's complexity. The percentage of Category (1) answers, in which the students answered correctly with a noun following right after “what,” make up less than 40% in all the sentences. On the other hand, Category (4) answers, in which the students kept “what” and the noun apart, make up between 25 and 40% in Sentences 1, 2, 3 and 4, which means that more than a quarter of students do not understand that “what” and a noun should not be kept apart in such interrogatives. This percentage is higher than we expected.

2. Students' productions in the written test

The table below shows the numbers and percentages of the correct answers produced by the students in the written test.

Table 4. The numbers and percentages of each category of the students' answers in the written test

	Number (Percentage)					
	Category (1a)	Category (1b)	Category (2)	Category (3)	Category (4)	Category (5)
Sentence 1	9 (23.1%)	2 (5.1%)	2 (5.1%)	3 (7.7%)	9 (23.1%)	14 (35.9%)
Sentence 2	12 (30.8%)	3 (7.7%)	1 (2.6%)	1 (2.6%)	6 (15.4%)	16 (41.0%)
Sentence 3	6 (15.4%)	7 (17.9%)	2 (5.1%)	1 (2.6%)	7 (17.9%)	16 (41.0%)
Sentence 4	13 (33.3%)	1 (2.6%)	2 (5.1%)	0 (0%)	6 (15.4%)	17 (43.6%)
Sentence 5	3 (7.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (12.8%)	10 (25.6%)	21 (53.8%)

We can see from Table 4 that about 40% of the students gave correct answers in the written test, except in the case of Sentence 5, which nearly 80% of the students could not produce correctly because of its length and complexity relative to the others. Category (1a) and Category (1b) answers, in which the students answered correctly by writing a noun right after "what," make up between 30 and 40% in Sentences 1, 2, 3 and 4. On the other hand, Category (4) answers, in which the students did not write a noun right after "what," make up between 15 and 25% in all the sentences. This percentage is lower than that in the interview.

3. Relation between spoken and written production

Table 5 below shows the relation between the students' spoken and written productions.

Table 5. The joint numbers and percentages of the students' speech and written productions

	Number (Percentage)			
	S _o /W _o	S _o /W _×	S _× /W _o	S _× /W _×
Sentence 1	7 (17.9%)	9 (23.1%)	8 (20.5%)	15 (38.5%)
Sentence 2	11 (28.2%)	12 (30.8%)	5 (12.8%)	11 (28.2%)
Sentence 3	8 (20.5%)	10 (25.6%)	8 (20.5%)	13 (33.3%)
Sentence 4	10 (25.6%)	11 (28.2%)	6 (15.4%)	12 (30.8%)
Sentence 5	2 (5.1%)	0 (0%)	6 (15.4%)	31 (79.5%)

S_o/W_o: The number and percentage of students who gave a correct answer in both the interview and the written test

S_o/W_×: The number and percentage of students who gave a correct answer in the interview, but a wrong answer in the written test

S_×/W_o: The number and percentage of students who gave a wrong answer in the interview, but a correct answer in the written test

S×/W×: The number and percentage of students who gave a wrong answer in both the interview and the written test

As we can see from the table, the percentage of students who gave a wrong answer in both the interview and the written test is a little higher than the others. The percentages of the other combinations are similar, except in the case of Sentence 5, where the vast majority of students gave a wrong answer in both the interview and the written test.

IV. Discussion

1. The error of keeping “what” and a noun apart in interrogatives of this type

From the students’ sample evaluated in the previous section, it seems Japanese university students who are beginner to pre-intermediate English learners may not understand how to produce interrogatives with “what” plus a noun. Between 25 and 40% of the students in the interview kept “what” and the noun apart, except in the case of Sentence 5, and between 15 and 25% of them did so in the written test. Considering that the students learn about these kinds of interrogatives in junior high school, these percentages are rather high. Therefore, teachers should explicitly correct this error when they notice their students making it. In addition, as we can see from Tables 1 and 2, Category (4) answers made up a greater percentage in the interview than in the written test. This may be because students have more time to think while writing than while speaking, and perhaps because they had spent more time learning English grammar than practicing speaking. From the results in this case, it is clear that the students evaluated need more opportunities to practice speaking English to reliably produce correct sentences with problematic constructions.

Moreover, even though Category (4) answers make up a lower percentage in the written test than in the interview, Category (5) answers make up a higher percentage in the written test, showing that many students do not understand sentence structures when they write English. Given that all of the sentences in this study can be produced using only knowledge acquired in junior high school and given that the participants were university students, these results are alarming.

2. Relation between spoken and written production

Before conducting this research, we thought it was possible that students kept “what” and a noun apart in this type of interrogative more often in speaking than in writing because they had not had sufficient opportunity to practice speaking English. However, as Table 5 shows, the percentage of errors made in writing is not so much smaller than the percentage of errors made when speaking. Furthermore, we found that students who gave correct answers in interviews did not necessarily also give them in writing, and vice versa.

V. Conclusion

Although Japanese students learn English for at least nine years before they enter a university, some of them do not understand how to compose simple *wh*-interrogatives in speech or in writing. As we have seen from our results, between 25 and 40% of the students in the interview and between 15 and 25% of them in the written test kept apart “what” and a noun, incorrectly forming this type of interrogative. Considering the amount of time they have spent learning English prior to entering a university, these percentages are not low. Therefore, English teachers need to emphasize that “what” and a noun should not be kept apart when forming this type of interrogative, and they should

be vigilant for errors that students make and correct them, especially in commonly used expressions where an error may lead to a misunderstanding. We have to be more efficient our efforts to ensure that university students acquire a good command of basic English.

Notes

ⁱ The study was approved by Ryotokuji Bioethics Committee

ⁱⁱ Japanese students learn *wh*-interrogatives in the first year of junior high school. *New Crown English Series New Edition 1* deals with interrogatives using “what” and “what” plus a noun in Lesson 3. *One World English Course 1* also presents interrogatives with “what” plus a noun as target sentences in Lesson 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ It would have been more accurate to record the students’ answers than to write them down, but this could have interfered with some students’ answers, as some of them would have been nervous and uneasy due to being recorded, so we decided against it.

^{iv} If students did not know what exactly “subject” meant, the interviewer told them, as their knowledge of the word is not relevant to this study.

^v Strictly speaking, this production is not “correct” due to the spelling being wrong. However, as the study focuses on examining students’ understanding of interrogatives with “what” and a noun and not on their spelling skills, we considered these answers “correct” insofar as they were grammatical.

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