

A STUDY ON THE PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENT TEACHERS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'WH' QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

English language is widespread globally and serves as a link language within all the countries. In India it enjoys an official language status in addition to Hindi. English is taught as a second language from lower classes to degree classes. Most of the parents wish their children to be admitted in English medium. In order to have good career prospects, students need to acquire good proficiency in English along with the other subjects like Mathematics, Science etc. However due to different socio-cultural background the learners commit a lot of errors in their learning process.

In most of the educational institutions English classes are taught through translation method. Students who study English literature are also trained in a similar stream and language fluency is not considered to be a major criterion for passing their examinations. Importance is given for the written content and the other skills such as reading, speaking and listening skills are not tested. Once graduates/postgraduates take training to become teachers they have to ask many questions as part of classroom activity. Teacher training students who lack proficiency fumble at such situations.

The present study has been undertaken to analyse the errors of the student-teachers in framing "Wh" questions and suggest remedial measures for improvement.

Keywords: Student Teachers, 'Wh' Questions.

INTRODUCTION

English serves as a link language in a multi linguistic country like India and enjoys the status of an official language in addition to Hindi. English is taught as a second language from lower classes to degree classes. Most of the parents wish their children to be admitted in English medium. In spite of socio-political conditions, every effort is made by the learners to attain proficiency in English. Students at the school level need to acquire better proficiency in English along with the learning of other subjects like Mathematics and Science. Good teachers play a vital role in the overall development of the students. Not only they are responsible for imparting academic knowledge, but also responsible for inculcating the right values and principles to their students.

The importance of teachers is especially enormous during the formative years of children when they first join in the school. Therefore it is very important to have professionally qualified teachers to ensure the right development of students. The Educational Commission (1964-1966) said, "a

sound program of professional education of teachers is essential for the qualitative improvement of education". One of the objectives of teacher education in India is to develop prospective teacher educators, with necessary skills and competencies needful for the preparation of the teacher.

Need for the Study

At present there are several colleges and institutions offering Teacher's Training Courses in India. There are different teacher's training institutes offering Basic Training Certificate (BTC), Junior Basic Training (JBT), Diploma in Education (D.Ed), Primary Teacher's Training (PTT), Bachelor in Education (B.Ed) and Master of Education (M.Ed.). Discerning the importance of technology and communication skills, the National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE) has introduced a separate subject on technology known as 'Educational Technology' at both B.Ed and M.Ed levels. Computer Education, Communicative English, and Personality Development are also introduced at the B.Ed. level.

Drawbacks in Teacher Education in India surveys and researches state that there are nearly 5.98 lakh Primary Schools, 1.76 lakh Elementary Schools and 98 thousand High / Higher Secondary Schools in the country, about 1300 teacher education institutions for elementary teachers and nearly 700 colleges of education / university departments preparing teachers for secondary and higher secondary schools. Out of about 4.52 million teachers in the country nearly 3 million are teaching at the primary/ elementary level. A sizeable number of them are untrained or under-trained Saxena, Mishra, and Mohanthy (1998).

Objectives of the Study

Questions help the students to develop their knowledge about the world. Knowledge is the result of questions. A teacher has to ask many questions in the classroom and often student teachers fumble at such situations. The present study aims to investigate the problems of the B.Ed students in framing 'Wh' questions. However the study is restricted to certain selected colleges of education in Coimbatore district.

- To test the ability of B.Ed students in framing 'Wh' questions.
- To analyse the errors committed by the B.Ed students while framing 'Wh' questions.
- To suggest remedial measures for rectification of their errors.

Aim of the study

This study aims to investigate the problems of the B.Ed students in framing 'Wh' questions. The study is limited to certain selected colleges of education within Coimbatore district.

Sample and Tool for the study

For the present study, 150 B.Ed students from 3 colleges of education from Coimbatore district have been drawn as sample. Two Questionnaires have been used to collect the data. The questionnaire consists of two parts: Personal Performa-Appendix I and Appendix II- consisting of fifty 'Wh' question items. These questionnaires were administered to the 150 student teachers and their responses have been analyzed.

Review of Literature

In "The practice of English language Teaching", Harmer, Jeremy presents theoretical insights into teaching English as a second language. The work suggests a broad methodological approach called the balanced activities approach. The book aims at providing a theoretical background to the approach as well as detailing practical instructional techniques.

Fries, Charles C.(1945) in his Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language", sets forth the Linguistic approach employed in writing instructional materials used in English as a Second language programs at the English language Institute of the university of Michigan during the 1940's and 1950's. It presents the principles of the assumptions underlying the choice, sequence and handling of the materials of the "Intensive course in English for Latin American students".

"Prepositions and Pictures in the English Learning Materials" by Y.G.Harto Pramono, explores the type of pictures used in English textbooks for teaching prepositions. It points out the resulting problem areas as well as the ambiguities.

Celce- Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) opine that the formation of wh-questions in English is complex grammatical effort. Wh-questions query specific information.

Their formation is not grammatically universal; some wh-questions require subject-verb inversion when the information queried is in the predicate while others when information gap is in the subject do not. Because of this variety and the grammatical complexity it implies, wh-questions are often difficult for learners of English as a second/foreign language. As teachers of English language learners, we can easily understand that wh-questions are important in the classroom for both receptive and productive English language competence.

Byrd (2005) notes that question and answer sessions are central to many classroom sessions. Because wh-questions are essentially statements that contain an information gap (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999), they are often employed in these question and answer sessions where teachers seek to activate, engage, and expand students' knowledge. So one can see that wh-questions are not only necessary in enhancing ELL students' productive ability-

they give students a grammatical structure with which to seek out new information and therefore expand their English language ability but wh-questions are also integral in the receptive functioning of understanding classroom instructions, activities and discussions.

Moti Lieberman, Sachiko Aoshima, and Colin Phillips (2005) investigated biases in the L1 transfer to superficially similar cognate structures in the L2. Wh-questions in English and Japanese presented a valuable test case for investigating the relation between L1 and L2 sentence processing. Native speakers of English and Japanese show strong locality biases in processing wh-questions, but these locality biases are realized in rather different ways in the two languages. Results from a sentence generation study with native speakers of Japanese and advanced English-speaking L2 learners of Japanese show that the L2 learners show a strongly native-like locality bias in the resolution of scope ambiguities for in-situ wh-phrases, despite the fact that the closest analog of such an interpretation is impossible in English. This indicates that L2 learners are guided by abstract processing mechanisms and not just by superficial transfer from the L1.

Error Analysis

Error Analysis (EA) is the examination of those errors committed by students in both the spoken and written medium. Corder, who has contributed enormously to Error Analysis, says the study of error is part of the investigation of the process of language learning. "In this respect it resembles methodologically the study of the acquisition of the mother tongue. It provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of a learner and may give us indications as to the learning process." (Corder, 1974: 125) The analysis of learner's errors is one of the most important areas of investigation during the past few decades in language teaching and learning activities.

Error Analysis is useful in second language learning because this will reveal to teachers, syllabus designers and textbook writers - the problem areas. One could design remedial exercises and focus more attention on the trouble spots. Corder outlines 3 stages in the learning and types of errors; the pre-systematic stage, the systematic stage and the post systematic stage. Richards J.C. (1974)

makes a three way classification of errors: Interlingual errors, Intralingual errors and Developmental errors.

Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis and interpretation are indispensable tools for researchers that enable them to make inferences of generalizations about the errors committed by the students. The charts represent the percentage of the student's performance in each and every section of the appendix. In these charts 'X' axis represents the number of items (10) in every section and 'Y' axis represents the total number of the students (150).

Section I

The first section consists of 10 items incorporating different types of 'Wh' questions. Items are in the form of questions and the choices given are 'correct' and 'incorrect'. The students have to identify the correct and incorrect forms (Figure 1).

Example: Item 1

1. Who wrote the book "The God of Small Things"?

For the above given item, the respondent should answer "correct/in correct".

Section II

The second section consists of 10 items. Items are in the form of incomplete questions and the answers are given in choices under each question. The students have to select the suitable options to fill the blanks (Figure 2).

The chart represents the percentage of student's performance in the second section of the given items in the appendix.

Example

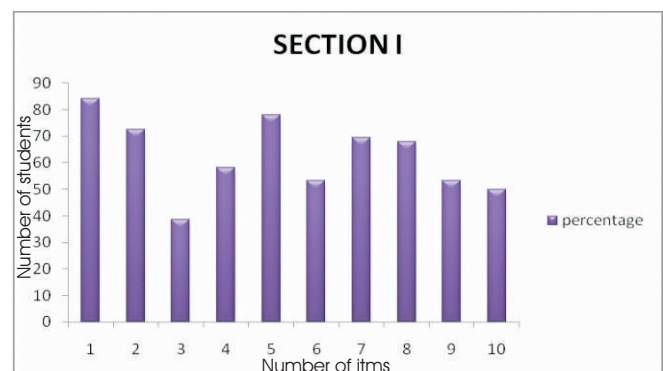


Figure 1. Ten items incorporating different types of 'Wh' questions

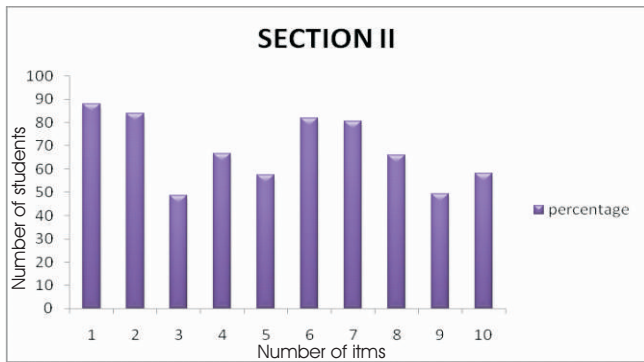


Figure 2. Percentage of student performance in the form of incomplete questions and answers

1. _____ yesterday?
 a. Whose called b. Who called

The respondents should choose from the options provided.

Section III

The third section has 10 items. This section is presented in the form of dialogue. Here the students are required to fill the blanks in the dialogue with suitable 'Wh' words.

The chart represents the percentage of the students' performance in the third section (Figure 3).

Section IV

The fourth section consists of 10 items. Here the items are in the form of shuffled words. The students should arrange the words to form the correct interrogative sentence (Figure 4).

The chart represents the percentage of the students' performance in the fourth section of the given items in the appendix.

Example

1. (When/was/built/this house)

Section V

This section consists of 10 items. Items are in the form of

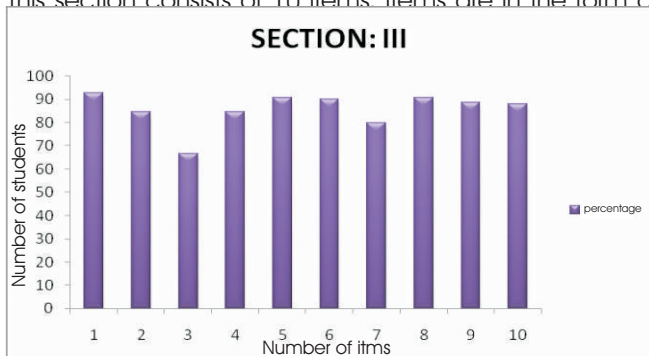


Figure 3. Percentage of student performance in the form of dialogue

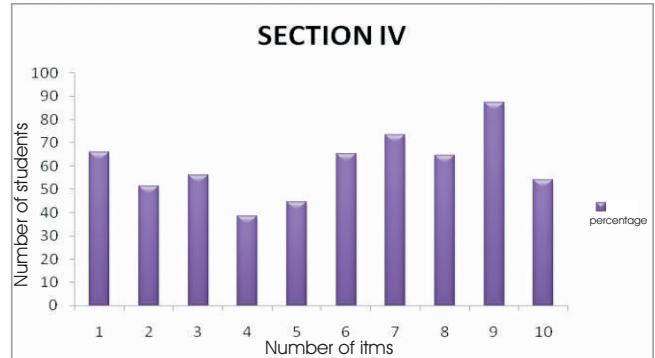


Figure 4. Percentage of student performance in the form of shuffled words

sentences. The students should frame questions from the sentences using 'do-support' rule.

The chart represents the percentage of the students' performance in the fifth section of the given items (Figure 5).

Findings

Performance of students

The activities have been designed to elicit responses that would reveal the student teachers' familiarity and competency in using 'Wh' questions (Figure 6).

The chart represents the overall performance of the

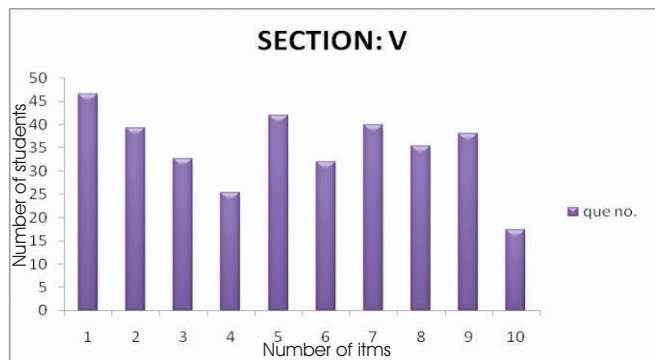


Figure 5. Percentage of student performance in the form of sentences

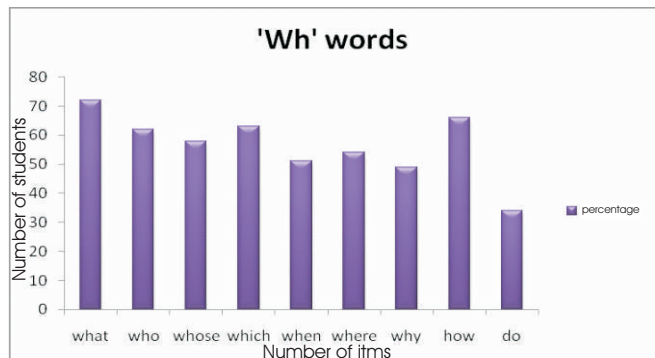


Figure 6. Overall performance of students in the use of 'Wh' questions

students in the use of 'Wh' questions (what, which, why, where, who, when, whose, how and do-support verb). 72 percent of the students have answered correctly to 'what' type of questions. This shows the students' familiarity with the 'Wh' word 'what'. Errors of other students in this type of questions are due to the ignorance of its function as 'subject' and 'object'.

62 percent of the students have given correct answers to 'who' type of questions and others have committed errors due to ignorance of the fact that 'who' can be used to question the 'subject' and 'object' of the sentence.

58 percent of the students have answered correctly to 'whose' type of questions and others have committed errors due to ignorance of the usage of the word which is followed by objects.

63 percent of the students have answered correctly to 'which' type of questions. The rest have committed errors due to over generalization in which it is used instead of 'what' and 'who'.

51 percent of the students have answered to 'when' type of the questions which means 'in what time'. 54 percent of the students have answered correctly to 'where' type of the questions which means 'in what place'. 49 percent of the students have answered correctly to 'why' type of the questions which means 'in what reason'.

66 percent of the students have answered correctly to 'how' type of questions which means 'in what way'. 'How' can be used with adverbs, adjectives and much and many.

Only 34 percent of the students have answered correctly to the 'do-support' questions. Do-support rule is a common element in all 'Wh' questions. If there is no modal verb in the auxiliary of the sentence 'do' is inserted as a supporting verb. Identification of the form of the verb in the sentence is essential to judge whether a particular test item requires do-support rule or not and the proper form of the do has to be decided.

Conclusion

The performance of the students in the acquisition of 'Wh' questions as a system is not satisfactory. The students seem to be familiar with what, who, when, where, whose, which, how and do type of questions.

One of the important findings of this study is that the students are aware of the do-support rule and subject-verb inversion in 'Wh' questions but they are not able to apply these rules while they are framing questions on their own. There are errors due to mother tongue interference and over generalization. During their course of study they are trained on Teaching Practice for one month or 40 days. This teaching practise is evaluated by senior in service teachers and marks are awarded. However this activity is often neglected or done in a slip shod manner. The failure in this activity results in untrained, inefficient teachers entering the mainstream of education. Sometimes in the absence of subject experts any available senior teacher supervises all the student teachers irrespective of their discipline. As a result a Mathematics or Science expert supervises the language student teacher in their teaching practice. When evaluation of the student teacher takes place in such a manner the quality is lost. This problem can be overcome by introducing changes in the training and evaluation of student teachers. Language experts should be part of the evaluating team to ensure that every student teacher is competent in the LSRW skills of English teachers' teaching practice.

Learning of the structures and using them properly is a skill. The acquisition of a skill depends a lot in practicing it. This study shows that the errors have occurred due to lack of adequate practice in asking questions as part of teaching practice. Usually only the written skill competencies are evaluated in the examination system. The oral production of 'Wh' questions in the classroom teaching practice is not tested. As a result the student teachers are able to identify the 'Wh' items but are not competent in using them.

Motivation of the students is the first and the most important phase in teaching and motivation is built by asking questions. So the teachers should have English language skill to ask grammatically correct questions. Their performance has its impact on students because students will misinterpret poorly constructed questions. The proficient students will ignore the teachers and those lacking in language skills will imitate the teachers. From the results and findings of the study it is concluded that the B.Ed students commit errors while preparing 'Wh' questions due

to mother tongue interference and over generalization.

Remedial Measures

Remedial measures begin with the identification of learners' difficulties. The next step involves giving them the necessary guidance to overcome their problems. There are problems very specific to the individual learners as well as ones that are common to all. Remedial teaching is not revising the topics taught repeatedly. Careful analysis of the students' performance should be made and the areas of difficulty are the key aspects in remedial teaching. Once the difficult areas are identified, the next task is to plan the learning experiences for the student teachers. Learning takes place from simple to complex. So if some of the student teachers have not learnt the basics, it is futile to make them do revision tasks.

Students learn a lot from the peer group. Unconscious learning does not take place if students are segregated. So keeping the learners with difficulty in the peer group of proficient students and involving them in teacher role play will be useful. During the role play the student with difficulty will get the attention of the peer group and learn to imitate the right type of questions within the first few sessions.

The next level is to provide the learners an activity with blanks for filling question tags. Then as a next step they can be asked to frame questions for specific purposes. After these levels the students with difficulty can be made to participate in mock classroom practice. Such a step by step method will enable the student teachers to overcome the difficulties in framing "Wh" questions. Suitably tailored activities by the teacher and careful monitoring by a peer group will help the learners with difficulties to get a better grasp of the items.

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