

# Grammatical Competence in Constructing Wh-Questions in Reading Comprehension Test: A Proposed Study

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## ABSTRACT

Creating a reading comprehension test is a common task for teachers. In constructing a reading comprehension test, grammar plays a big role in minimizing the possibility of misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the questions. One of the common question types used is wh-question. This paper aims to find out English education students' grammatical competences in constructing wh-question in reading comprehension test. This is a descriptive study because it describes the detail analysis of students' grammar competence in creating wh-question tests. The data of this study was students' final test in Language Assessment course. There were seventy students who joined Language Assessment course and they were asked to create ten reading comprehension questions each. In fact, among 70 students, 17 of them will be analyzed in this preliminary study. The data were analyzed using the theory from Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), those are, omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. This study found that the participants have grammatical problems in omission for 42%, addition 22%, misformation 30%, and misordering 6%.

**Keywords:** *grammatical competence, wh-questions, reading test construction*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English ability is now considered as the key to access the world. Both written and spoken abilities are needed in order to build good communication. This good communication will not be achieved if the students do not have proper communicative ability. Green and Hecht [1] evaluated learners' communicative effectiveness by looking at "content of the message, the linguistic form in which it was encode, and the interplay of the two." Lynch and Anderson [2] agree with the idea of grammar as "rule system of a language" that becomes the resource of delivering meaning.

Since grammar is one of language components, there is no doubt that grammar plays a vital role in communication, both written and spoken. Obviously, it makes grammar become one of main courses in English Department, in this context Universitas Negeri Padang. English department students have learnt grammar since the first semester. Besides, this grammar skill is integrated to other courses, like, skill courses (Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing) and working behavior courses (such as Curriculum, Media, and Language Assessment). Then, grammar skills are integrated into the content of each subject.

Furthermore, it is a must for the students of English education program to master grammar because they are teachers to be. As the future teachers, they will have high responsibility to teach their students to achieve

the goal of learning English and will be the instructional designers. If these students still have low grammar ability, they will face problems in communicating the knowledge and in modeling English to their future students.

In educational scope, creating a test is a common activity done by teachers. Test has many types with different purposes for each type of test. Brown [3] mentions five test types, they are, language aptitude tests, proficiency tests, placement tests, diagnostic tests and achievement tests. With these test types and the massive use of tests in education, then, English education students should be able to create a good test. As Brown [3] states that written words are commonly used in most formal test, it makes reading becomes the frequent test used in language assessment. Assessing reading can be done by using multiple-choice, picture-cued items, short-answer tasks, gap filling, editing, etc [3]. Moreover, Weir [4] explains some test methods for testing reading comprehension, they are multiple-choice questions, short-answer question, cloze, selecting deleting gap fillings, C-test, cloze elide, and information transfer.

Among those reading assessment activity, short-answer question is another popular option to multiple choice questions [3]. It requires test-takers to write the answers with their own sentences for one or two sentences. Weir [4] claims that the result of this test is more reliable because it shows students' reading comprehension ability. There are two main types of questions or interrogative

sentences, they are, Yes/no questions and Wh- questions [5-8]. Yes/no question is a questions to ask for information with two options of answers and one possible answer—yes or no. Second, wh- question is made to ask for information with the expanded answers that consist of several words or even several sentences.

An information question uses wh-questions as the format in formulating a question. It starts with the word “who, what, which, whose, where, when, why, and how” [5]. In addition, [8] said that the sentence starts with wh- and it makes the sentence called as wh-question. The question word is replacing the missing piece of new information that the speaker wants [6,8]. The answer of this type of question is expected to be an integrated answer instead of yes or no response. Mostly, the pattern of wh-questions start with one of the question words and followed by an auxiliary verb [5]. The auxiliary verb can be in form of ‘be, have, or modal verb’. Then, the main verb comes before the subject. The example can be seen at *Ujian Nasional SMP Bahasa Inggris 2018* as “What is the purpose of the greeting card?”.

Unfortunately, grammatical problems are often found in writing products. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen [9] have categorized those common problems into four categories, they are, omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Omission is “the absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance” [9]. When there is no verb, for instance, in a sentence, it might means that the writer omits the verb. Grammatical morphemes, such as verb inflections, noun inflections, article, preposition, are the frequent problems made by language learners. Second category is addition which is the opposite of omissions. When a sentence has item(s) that must not appear in a well-formed sentence, it is called as addition. For example, in forming a sentence using past tense, the writer places 2 tense marker in the auxiliary verb and the verb, such as in “We didn’t went there”. The word “went” should be “go” because the tense marker is already indicated in the word “didn’t”. Third, misformations happen when the writer uses the wrong form of morpheme or structure. For example, “the dog eated the chicken”. It is true that –ed is needed as a tense marker but the word “eat” belongs to irregular verb which cannot be treated as the regular verb. The sentence will be correct if the word “eated” is changed into “ate”. Last, misorderings are “the incorrect placement of a morpheme or group of morphemes in an utterance”. For example, “What Daddy is doing?” is wrong because the auxiliary verb is misplaced. It should be put after the question word.

One of the ways of studying English education students’ grammar ability is by analyzing their product related to English teaching activity. Moreover, this can be achieved by getting the data on one of their educational courses. One of the courses that are considered to play a big role on their future teaching is Language Assessment course. The reason is because Language Assessment (LA) course teaches students on how to assess learners’ language competency, for instance, using a test.

Unfortunately, other researches only focus on grammar ability on a writing a text [10-15]. Then, some other researches analyze junior high school students’ grammar in producing interrogative sentences [16-18]. There is a few attention on English education students that analyze their grammatical competence on their writing product.

Therefore, this study analyzed in detail about students’ grammatical competence in constructing reading test questions, especially the use of wh-questions in reading test. It is expected to give contribution and information to students’ grammatical competence in constructing reading comprehension test. Furthermore, it could be a consideration for teachers in selecting materials or in choosing teaching strategies in teaching and learning grammar for foreign language learners, especially for English education students.

**2. METHOD**

This study belongs to descriptive study because it describes the analysis of students’ grammar competence in constructing reading comprehension test using wh-questions. The data was the final test of the students of Language Assessment course. There were one hundred and sixty five wh-questions. These questions were analyzed using the theory from Dulay et al. [9], they are, omission, addition, misformation, and misordering.

In analyzing the data, the first step was preparing the document. Then, all the data were read to get the general ideas. After that, researcher grouped them based on their categories and counted the frequency and the percentage of each of the categories. Last, the data were described and interpreted.

**3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the data analysis, there are some problems found in each category of grammatical problem. The problems are omissions, additions, misformations, and misorderings. Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage for one of them.

Table 1. The Percentage of the Grammatical Problems

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Omission</b>	39	42%
<b>Addition</b>	20	22%
<b>Misformation</b>	28	30%
<b>Misordering</b>	6	6%
<b>Total</b>	93	100%

The total number of grammatical problems found are 90 from 165 sentences. Five questions were eliminated because they were not belong to wh-questions. Students made problems mostly in omission (43%) and misformation (30%). Moreover, the least frequent problem is misordering (6%).

*Omissions*

Omission has the highest percentage in this study. Since the participants of this study are language learners, it is in line with the statement from Dulay et al. [9] that omissions mostly occur in the early stage of second language acquisition. They mostly made problems in grammatical morphemes than content words, as can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The Percentage of Omissions

Indicator	Grammatical Problems	Frequency	Percentage
Omission	Preposition	2	5%
	Adverb	1	3%
	Article	12	31%
	Verb Inflection	9	23%
	Conjunction	2	5%
	Noun Inflection	2	5%
	Verb Auxiliaries	6	15%
	Verb Phrase	3	8%
	Noun Phrase	1	3%
Pronoun	1	3%	
<b>Total</b>		39	100%

This table shows that there are 39 problems of omissions. The most frequent problem is the use of article (31%). The participants often omit the use of article on their sentences, especially the article ‘the’. In fact, in describing the specific count noun, unique nouns, repeated nouns, identifying phrases, and identifying clauses, article ‘the’ is needed [7]. Below are some examples of the article omission made by the participants.

(1) What are differences between longboards and shortboards?

The problem with this sentence is the omission of article ‘the’ that should be written before the noun phrase. The article is used in order to identify the following phrase. The correct sentence should be ‘What are the differences between longboards and shortboards?’.

(2) What are moral messages can be taken from the short story above?

There are two omissions found, article and conjunction. The writer did not put article ‘the’ before the noun phrase ‘moral messages’. Moreover, the phrase ‘moral messages’ is specific and count noun. The second problems is the omission of conjunction ‘that’ before the second clause. There are two clauses on the above sentence—what are ‘the’ moral messages and can be taken from the short story above. To join these sentences, subordinating conjunction is needed. The correct sentence should be ‘What are the moral messages that can be taken from the short story above?’.

The second frequent problem is the use of verb inflection (23%). Mostly, the participants did not put –ed after the verb as the tense marker. Below are the examples.  
 (3) What happen in a one cool summer night?  
 (4) What happen to the writer?  
 (5) What happen with his dad?

These three examples have the same problem with the same word. The writers did not put –ed to the main verb. The –ed after the word ‘happen’ is used to indicate the past time. In fact, these questions were made based on the same text and the text shows clearly the time marker, the past time. Therefore, the problems are not in the text. These problems may happen because the writers do not know the rules of using a past tense in the affirmative sentences.

Unfortunately, there are three problems in verb phrase. The students of English department should not make any mistakes on the use of verb phrase. Problems with the content verbs indicate that their competence are equal to the children who are at the early stage of first language acquisition. Below are the examples.  
 (6) How old he lost his father?

There is no main verb in this sentence. The verb ‘lost’ belongs to the second clause ‘he lost his father’. There should be a verb and a subject to complete the first clause. Since this question indicates the past time, it needs a verb auxiliary for past tense. To complete the first clause, ‘was the writer’ should be added. Then, it needs conjunction to join the first clause with the second clause.

Therefore, the sentence ‘How old was the writer when he lost his father?’ is considered to be the correct sentence.

(7) How many kinds of skateboard?

This is a sentence fragment because there is no predicate. To make a complete sentence, it needs a predicate. The predicate can be ‘are there’. Therefore, the correct sentence is ‘How many kinds of skateboard are there?’.

*Addition*

Additions are characterized by the presence of an item that must not appear in a well-formed utterance. They usually occur in the next stage of L<sub>2</sub> acquisition. In this study, there are 20 problems (22%) found that consist of adjectives, verb and noun inflections, adverb, verbs, articles, be, conjunctions, and quantifier. The following table shows the detail percentage for each problem.

Table 3. The Percentage of Additions

Indicator	Grammatical Problems	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Addition</b>	Adjective	3	15%
	Verb Inflection	5	25%
	Noun Inflection	1	5%
	Adverb	1	5%
	Verb	2	10%
	Article	4	20%
	Be	1	5%
	Conjunction	2	10%
	Quantifier	1	5%
<b>Total</b>		20	100%

This table shows that there are 20 problems of additions. It can be seen that the participants did not frequently make problem on each point of addition. There are only around 1-5 problems found for each category. Among those problems, the most frequent problem is verb inflections (25%). Verb inflection is adding an element to the base form of verb. It is also known as adding bound morpheme to free morpheme. For example, -s after the base verb is used as present tense marker; -ed is used for past tense. In this study, the participants used verb inflection more than one time. That is why they have problems with additions, especially verb inflection. Look at these examples.

(8) How does the traditional skateboard construction looks like?

The addition is on the word ‘looks’. This sentence has an auxiliary which already functioned as the tense marker. Then, the word ‘looks’ is the main verb of the sentence. Since this sentence has an auxiliary, the tense marker is put at the auxiliary instead of the main verb. However, the writer of this sentence have put -s on the main verb which is not required. Therefore, to correct the sentence, the -s on ‘looks’ should be omitted and the

sentence will be ‘How does the traditional skateboard construction look like?’.

The second frequent problem is the addition of article. It seems that the use of article is problematic. Sometimes the participants omit the article and the other time they put article in the unnecessary part, such as in sentence (9),

(9) What happened in a one cool summer night?

The problem is on the presence of article ‘a’ before the word ‘one’. Article ‘a’ is used before a singular count noun [7]. In addition, ‘one’ means to show singular noun. It means that the above sentence has two indicators in showing that the following noun is singular – ‘a’ and ‘one’. To make the sentence correct, one of them should be omitted. It could be ‘What happened in one cool summer night?’.

*Misformation*

Misformation is at the second position of the most frequent problem occurred. There are 28 problems (30%) of 90 problems in total. The problems in misformation are subject-verb agreements, articles, noun inflection, verb auxiliaries, quantifier, prepositions, pronoun, and noun. To see the detail percentage of each point, Table 4 provides the information.

Table 4. The Percentage of Misformation

Indicator	Grammatical Problems	Frequency	Percentage
Misformation	Subject-Verb Agreement	7	25%
	Article	2	7%
	Noun Inflection	1	4%
	Verb Auxiliaries	10	36%
	Quantifier	1	4%
	Preposition	5	18%
	Pronoun	1	4%
	Noun	1	4%
<b>Total</b>		28	100%

Among 28 problems, 10 of them are verb auxiliaries problems. They chose the wrong form of auxiliaries, for example ‘does’ for ‘did’, ‘can’ for ‘do’, etc. To know the detail problems, look at these examples.

- (10) Why does the writer feel so mad and hurt?
- (11) When does the writer lost her father?
- (12) Why does the writer lost her father?

These sentences have the same problem. The context of these sentences is past time. Then, it needs do + -ed to show the past tense. However, these sentences use do + -es which indicate present tense. It is obvious that they are incorrect. With these tense marker problems, it can be seen that there are still some participants who cannot differentiate the use of auxiliaries for different tenses. Therefore, if the word ‘does’ is changed into ‘did’, the sentences will be correct.

- (11) Where is her father taken after that incident?

This sentence has similar problem with the previous sentences. It also uses wrong tense. Because the activity that is questioned happens in the past, the word

‘is’ should be replaced with ‘was’. That is because ‘was’ is used as past tense marker.

The other problem with auxiliary verb is on how to differentiate between the uses of auxiliary and to be. They use to be for auxiliaries or vice versa. In fact, they have different function in a sentence. Auxiliary is used when the predicate have a verb (verbal sentence) while to be is used for nominal sentence.

- (12) What is the text mostly talk about?

This is a verbal sentence because there is verb ‘talk’. Auxiliary do/does is the correct auxiliary for this type of sentence. Since the subject is singular then the appropriate auxiliary is ‘does’. The auxiliary ‘is’ is not appropriate for this sentence because ‘is’ is used for nominal sentence. Therefore, ‘What does the text mostly talk about?’ is the correct sentence.

*Misordering*

Misordering is the least frequent problem found in the participants’ works. There are only six problems (6%). The only problem is on the location of the verb phrase as can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. The Percentage of Misordering

Indicator	Grammatical Problems	Frequency	Percentage
Misordering	Verb Phrase	6	100%
<b>Total</b>		6	100%

- (13) Where he was watching scary movie?

The clause ‘he was watching scary movie’ seems like the pattern of positive sentence instead of interrogative sentence. In interrogative sentence, the position of the subject and the verb are inverted. So, the auxiliary ‘was’ should be put after the question word ‘where’. Therefore, the correct sentence should be ‘Where was he watching scary movie?’.

**4. CONCLUSIONS**

This study revealed that the students of English Education Program have many problems with their grammar. Among the four indicators of grammar from Dulay et al. [9], problems were found for each of the indicators. The most frequent grammatical problem is omission and the second is misformation. It means that their grammatical competences need some improvement

on those points. Moreover, they have a few problems in creating the correct order sentences. This indicates that they have the knowledge of sentence pattern in English. This study needs more data to be analyzed to get the more complex results. Therefore, this study will be continued to analyze those 70 students of Language Assessment course with the addition of yes/no questions type to cover all types of questions.

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