

# THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH INTERROGATIVE OF A SIX-YEAR-OLD CHINESE INDONESIAN BOY

Vivaldi, J.<sup>1</sup> and Rini, J.E.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>English Department, Faculty of Letters, Petra Christian University  
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, East Java, Indonesia  
e-mail: [vivaldi2349@gmail.com](mailto:vivaldi2349@gmail.com); [jerini@petra.ac.id](mailto:jerini@petra.ac.id)

## Abstract

This study focuses on language acquisition of a Chinese Indonesian multilingual boy, who understands three languages, English, Indonesian and Chinese, although his English seems to be dominant than others. This qualitative research was conducted to assess how his English develops. The two questions of this study are, first, how his acquisition of English question has developed, and second, what the difficulties for him to make question in English are. The result of the study is that the boy is at the third stage, a period when a child get accustomed to use auxiliary and inversion and his difficulties are in the area of vocabulary, tenses and inversion of embedded question.

Key Words: language acquisition, interrogative, auxiliary, inversion.

This study focuses on language acquisition of a Chinese Indonesian multilingual boy. Therefore, the suitable respondent to fulfill the need of this research must at least have two criteria. First, the respondent must be able to speak more than one language besides the mother tongue or first language. Second, the subject must be less than 10-year-old, as at this age, the language has not been developed fully, which makes the study more interesting and significant. Thus, I choose DA, an initial name. He is the perfect respondent represents the two criteria above.

This six-year-old boy comes from a Chinese family. He studies at Logos kindergarten, using English and Mandarin as the medium of interaction, and at home he uses English, Mandarin or Indonesian. Therefore, he lives in a multilingual community. Multilingual community makes him able to speak more than one language besides his mother tongue. The boy's initial name is DA; he is six years old. As mentioned by his parents and teachers, his motoric and intellectual capacity is developed well. This boy is a good example to observe, since he can speak some languages. In other words, he is considered a multilingual boy. However, the only problem is neither the parents remember the first language they taught to the boy. The mother used Mandarin when speaking with him until the age of four, then, she stopped speaking in Mandarin. Instead, she spoke English with him. Now, when he is six years old, she mixes Mandarin and English while she speaks to him and forbids him to use Indonesian while communicating with her. The father converses with him in Indonesian since he was born and gradually speaks in English with him. This interesting phenomenon is called simultaneous multilingualism as been said by Tucker (1999), as cited by Saville-Troike (2006), which results in having more than one "native" language for an individual. In this case, the kid gets two native languages, Indonesian and Chinese. Therefore, I come out with two things that I am interested in; about the stage of his acquisition of English question and his difficulties in producing English question.

The main reason why I choose English question as the main concern is, first, because English seems to be his dominant language. Although he can speak Indonesian and listen to Mandarin utterance, he rarely uses them compared to English. It was proved when I did my pilot project that the boy always spoke in English. Second, I pick question as my target of observation because question form is more difficult than positive or negative form (Hoff, 2009: p.239). Undeniably, for learners, it is very difficult for children to compose interrogative sentences, for they have to consider the rules such as; subject-auxiliary inversion, wh-movement, affix-hopping, and do-support. For Indonesian children who learn English, these rules are the hindrance for them to make question in English. Question form in Indonesian is relatively free from any rules. Indonesians can make a question simply by rising intonation of positive sentences. However, making questions in English cannot be done by merely raising the intonation. It requires an

auxiliary in which Indonesian mostly find difficulty, for Indonesian grammar does not have auxiliary. More complicated than this one is the rising intonation, that is required in yes-no question; while for wh-question, the rising intonation is not required. Thus, English question is an indicator of how well the children have developed their language.

In this research, I use second language acquisition theory. One is from Klima & Bellugi (1979) as cited by Hoff (2009, p.239-240), which is the stages of development of the children question form. There are three stages in order of development of the children question form. At Stage 1, the most common questions are a nucleus with a rising intonation like 'what's that?'. This stage is clearly pre-transformational, since no conscious question transformation occurs. At Stage 2, constituent questioning develops, but there are still no auxiliary verbs. Therefore, there is no subject-auxiliary inversion in Yes-No questions. The wh-words merely serve as question introducers. By Stage 3, certain auxiliaries are inverted. The wh-words are moved to the beginning of the question by wh-transformation. Here, the mistake of using auxiliary is less frequent than stage two.

Another sub theory is from Rod Ellis (1997, p.22). He concluded that most researchers agree that there is definite accuracy order of acquisition. The progressive *-ing*, auxiliary *be*, and plural *-s* are acquired first, articles and irregular past come next. The most difficult structure are regular past and third person *-s*. This study, however, will reveal how far this order of acquisition is applicable to a multilingual boy.

## METHODS

The source of data was in the form of full utterances of the boy. The data was in the form of questions uttered by the boy. In addition, I interviewed each party that engaged with the boy; his father, his mother to get the biography of the boy. This is also important since interviews provide more data that I do not get merely from observation.

Before the data collection, I conducted a pilot project by observing the boy's utterance and his conversation at home. This technique was not satisfying, since I did not get enough data, namely the English questions from the boy. Furthermore, I could not get the data of question aiming for third person singular pronoun. Therefore, I decided to use a game as the method to elicit the data thoroughly.

The game was purely designed by myself to elicit the English question. I named them "who am I" game. The purpose I used this kind of techniques is to ensure myself to get all kind of questions by making him guess of who I am. The procedure was simple; I made him guess "who am I". I might be a doctor, or a nurse, or a teacher, or any kind of people. How to win this game was by making any question. The question might be like "where do you work?", "what can you do?", "what tools do you use?" would lead to the possible answer. Therefore, it would push him indirectly to make any question that he could to get a clue of who I am. Sometimes, the boy did not say anything. He did not have anything to say. To cope with the difficulties, first, I, myself, gave bait in the form of Indonesian question in order to make him produce the English version by his own. For instance, I said "*apakah dia kuat*, how to say it in English?" Then he directly could have a question to ask me by asking "is he strong?" This was proved effective in making him produces more various questions using modals, do, does, and wh-word.

One thing I had to consider was in order to help him imagining of who the third person was in the game "who is he". I had to provide another person to whom the boy had to make question. In this case, I needed a person so the boy could easily make a question about him. Thus, I brought Willy, my assistance. His presence was the aid for the boy to imagine the third person singular. The boy guessed who he was, in this case Willy. The scenario of the game put Willy as one of the character in Avengers or one character of American superheroes. After doing the game, it was obviously seen that guessing Avengers character and American heroes was easier to him than guessing profession as in the "who am I" game. However, the technique I used is more effective in making list of all kinds of question. I could indirectly point him to make wh-questions and yes-no question, also I could point him to change the subject into third person singular; he, she, it, to make the data more various. In short, this game gave me full control of what question I wanted him to produce.

## QUESTIONS

To answer the first question about the stages of language development, I classified the data, into three categories, the first was the questions with rising intonation, second was the questions in correct form, grammatically and contextually. The last was the incorrect questions produced by the boy.

I measure his stage of development with the three stages of English question development produced by Klima & Bellugi theory (1979) as cited by Hoff (2009, p.239-240). Below are the results of the analysis, I give example of each sub topic.

### Questions with rising intonation

This kind of questions is a nucleus consisted of one or two words with rising intonation, which are difficult to judge whether it is correct or wrong. This example below was taken in the last part of recording, when he was stuck with questioning and almost gave up. Fortunately, his persistence brought him to the correct answer which was Superman, one of the American heroes.

James : Hmm, I don't know... *Ok, Udah menyerah?*

DA : No, I haven't given up. I try to find. Give me the clue, start from?

James : He wears red costume, his underwear is outside.

DA : Yeah, I know, I know, I know, I know. (yelling) Superman.

James : Yeah, this one is for you. What to say?

DA : Thank you.

The underline ones were the question with rising intonation made by the boy. I, myself, was confused what he meant by asking "start from" whether he wanted me to give another clue or it might be that he wanted me to give the first letter of the name of that American hero. Therefore, what I did was I gave him another clue which was the costume of this American hero.

### English questions in correct form

Although, his acquisition of English was not yet complete, still I could get the data of the correct questions produced by him. This proved that he had comprehended either the structure of English question, or the precise vocabulary that matched with the context. One unique question that was produced by him:

James : *Tanya dong, kamu kerja dihospital ndak? Tanya koko. Kalau dalam bahasa Inggris, apa? Kamu kerja di hospital, ngga? Gimana cara nanyanya?*

DA : Don't you work at the hospital?

James : Sometimes yes, but I can work at home. *Bisa kerja di hospital bisa kerja di rumah, who am I?*

DA : Doctor?

Surprisingly, he made the correct form of negative question, which is a rare phenomenon produced by child at his age, even adults can sometimes make mistake by putting "don't" after subject in asking. Here, I could say he did not translate my Indonesian sentence, "*kamu kerja di hospital, ngga?*" word per word. If he did word per word translation, he would say "you work at hospital, don't you?" but he produce the question in correct order, "don't you work at the hospital". This proved that his comprehension in digesting Indonesian sentence and converting it into English question was working well.

### English questions in incorrect form

This part, I divided into four big categories, those are questions with inversion and auxiliary, questions with auxiliary but no inversion, questions without auxiliary and questions, and the last is miscellaneous.

#### English questions with inversion and auxiliary

This is the example of the wrong auxiliary. Although he inverted the auxiliary, the auxiliary did not match with the pronoun. It was a matter of subject-verb agreement, that third singular person in present tense should be equipped with “does” instead of “did”.

- James : It is toy story, it's not Avenger. This one I mean is Avenger team. *Apakah dia punya sayap? How to say in English?*  
 DA : Can he? Did he have a wings?  
 James : Does he have wing?  
 DA : Does he have wing?

What was interesting was the shifting of auxiliary there. First he used “can”, and then he used “did”. This might be the indicator that he was confused what auxiliary that he had to use. Therefore, I wanted to correct his sentence by saying the correct form of the question, “does he have wing?”. Undoubtedly, the correct question was “Does he have wings?”. Although I made mistake in verb “wing” which was supposed to be “wings” but my focus at that time was his grammar, to use auxiliary does for “he” pronoun. This, I believed would be a learning process to the boy. Although I could not assure that this correct model would become “uptake”, at least I gave him a correct “input” that could trigger his comprehension of subject-verb agreement.

#### English questions with auxiliary but no inversion

This group of questions was made due to absence of inversion when the boy made question, which was rare phenomenon. It appeared in the appendix, that mostly the boy used the inversion when asking. Therefore, it is an interesting to see why he did not use the inversion as usual. The example below showed how he lost the sense of inversion:

James : You have to make a correct guess. So, who am I? I work.. ehm, I don't work in the office. I write a prescription. Then, you can ask more. Ask anything.

DA : You work in “*apotik*”, right?

James : No, I don't work in pharmacy. Yeah, In english “*apotik*” is called drug store. I don't work in drug store.

DA : You don't work in drug store?

As a comparison, he could make a negative question. I have already discussed in question with correct form, the first example. I quoted his question “don't you work at the hospital?”. Strangely, here, he made the mistake about negative question by saying the negative question in positive form of sentence, “you don't work in drug store?”. This inconsistency was something important to be analyzed, but I did not find the reason of this. It was still questionable whether he could make a negative question.

#### English questions without auxiliary and inversion

These questions were grouped since when I was collecting the data, he lost both the sense of inversion and auxiliary. He did not invert the question even he did not use auxiliary, as seen below:

DA : What?

James : *Tanya apa pun. Dia kerja sama siapa?*

DA : He work with whom? With whom did he work?

James : With whom does he work? Eh.. he work alone.

The example above showed how he lost the auxiliary “does” and how he lost the sense of inversion. Although the underline sentence was in the form of positive sentence, the function was served as question form. At least, he revised the first sentence “he work with whom” into “with whom did he work” which meant he knew that he needed an auxiliary there. However, still he made mistake in the auxiliary itself. It should be “with whom does he work?”.

## Miscellaneous

This part was made since I found one data that was not a rising question, question with inversion and auxiliary either, question with auxiliary and no inversion either, and question without auxiliary and inversion either. Therefore, I consider this as a miscellaneous one, as seen below:

James : *Tanya lagi, jadi dia kerja apa ko?*  
DA : What did he work?  
James : Hah?  
DA : What he did he work?  
James : What does he do?  
DA : What does he do? (repeating)

The sample data above was the most unique data among the others. Since he had inverted the auxiliary, yet he still put he before does. If I cut the sentence into “what he did?”, it would be a question without inversion. However, if I omit the first “he”, the question would be “what did he work?”, which there was inversion there. Therefore, this kind of data was a bit complicated, whether the question had been inverted or not. Still in the end, I wanted to correct him, by letting him repeating my correct model of question. This, to make him know the mistake he did before.

## **DIFFICULTIES**

This part discusses about the second question, which is the difficulties when the boy made question in English. His difficulties in making questions were his limit of vocabulary, tenses which affects to the usage of auxiliary, and inversion.

### **Vocabulary**

The limitation of English vocabulary, undoubtedly, restrained him in making question. This phenomenon was a common one, since some adults even do mistake in vocabulary. There are many ways to solve this limitation of vocabularies; one way to solve this is using the equivalent word from another language. This strategy was used by the boy to handle his limitation of vocabularies, as seen below:

James : You have to make a correct guess. So, who am I? I work.. ehm, I don't work in the office. I write a prescription. Then, you can ask more. Ask anything.  
DA : You work in “apotik”, right?  
James : No, I don't work in pharmacy. Yeah, In english “apotik” is called drug store. I don't work in drug store.  
DA : You don't work in drug store?

The underline sentence shows that he used Indonesian word in English sentence since he did not know what “apotik” was in English. Thus, he borrowed Indonesian term “apotik”. I, however, gave him a correct model by saying “pharmacy” or “drug store” as equivalent words to “apotik”. It appeared that he digested the input and it became his intake as seen in his last question above, “you don't work in drug store?”.

### **Tenses**

This was the mistake that I found the most in collecting the data. It seemed that he did not understand well how to compose a question aiming for third person singular. The auxiliary “did” always appeared as a substitute of “does”. This, phenomenon, however, matched with Rod Ellis' (1997, p.22) theory that the most difficult structure is third person *-s*.the progressive *-ing*, auxiliary *-be*, and plural *-s* are acquired first then articles and irregular past. Therefore he was likely to substitute “does” with “did” in making question aiming for third person singular.

James : *Apakah dia punya teman?*  
DA : Did he have a friend?

James : Does he have..  
DA : Does he have a friend?  
James : He has some friends that help him. (...) so, who is he?

It was clear there that he automatically, with awareness, put “did” in making question aiming for a male. Thus, I made him continue my sentence “does he have..” to bait him in saying a complete correct question which was “does he have a friend”.

### **Inversion in embedded question**

Another difficulty that I found the boy had was the use of inversion in embedded question. I had only one striking example that is interesting to be discussed, as seen below:

James : Yes, he was once dived. And then he found a secret weapon below the ocean. Who is he?

DA : Koko James, can you tell me what is the weapon?

James : The weapon is used to bring power to the wielder, *untuk memberikan kekuatan kepada penggunanya.*

The underline question was a mistake, “can you tell me what is the weapon?”, since he used double inversion in the question. Actually, he only needed to invert auxiliary “can” to bring it to the front, and the auxiliary “is” had to be put after the weapon. The correct sentence would be, “can you tell me what the weapon is?”. This mistake, however, to me, was not a critical mistake done by a child at his age. This structure, however, needed a high level of comprehension. Even an adult does the same mistake as what the boy did, by doing double inversion.

### **CONCLUSION**

Up to this point, I could conclude that the boy was in the stage three of the development of question form. As what was described by Klima & Bellugi theory (1979), as cited by Hoff (2009, p.239-240), the stage three is the stage where the child has already use inversion and auxiliary in making question, although there are still some mistakes found. Though there were some data proved that he lost the sense of inversion, the boy was used to using inversion in making questions.

Then, during analyzing, I also found some difficulty made by him in making English question. There were vocabulary, tenses, and inversion in embedded question. Therefore, I classified the wrong questions into those three categories and gave example each. By doing that, I answered my second question.

However, the assumption that his English is his dominant language is not necessarily true. After the game, I could make conclusion that the boy mastered Indonesian more than English and Mandarin. Oftentimes when he did not know the answer of the game, or merely got confused, I assisted him in Indonesian and he could understand easily rather than I spoke in English. Though in terms of frequency he likely used English in conversation, but in comprehension he understand Indonesian a lot rather than English. Though interview, the mother told me that she sometimes pushed the son to use English simply because she wanted to make his son fluent in other languages. No wonder she spoke with the son with Mandarin even though he could not reply her with Mandarin. Perhaps a deep research need to be conducted, in revealing the cause what makes his Indonesian more dominant than English and Mandarin.

Moreover, in this research there is definite order of acquisition as is written by Rod Ellis (1997, p.22). This order of acquisition ends with the acquisition of third person –s. This is the most difficult structure to young learner. My study, however, reveals how the boy consistently made a mistake in using does as the third person –s in making question. Instead, he substituted “does” with “did” in most of the game. However, the correction that I did to the boy was not pointless. I saw a learning process when he made a question aiming for third person singular. After several corrections in “does” auxiliary, he could utter the question aiming for third person singular correctly without me correcting him. This, I believed is a process an input becoming an intake, meaning that there was an acquisition process happened within the mind of the boy.

Therefore, the most important thing of a learning process, especially learning a language, is not determined by how good the input is, either how brilliant the teacher is, but a good learning process is determined by how the input transfers into an intake, in the other words, how the child begins to understand the correct form and be able to apply it.

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