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Syntactic Features of Interrogative Sentences in the English Language

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Abstract

English learners who can form a yes/no question may still add an unnecessary auxiliary to a subject question or retain inverted word order in an embedded clause. This methodological article addresses a practical problem for teachers: how to identify which grammatical decision a learner needs to practise. It compares constructed question–answer pairs in which the speaker asks about different parts of the same event, then uses those contrasts to design speaking and writing tasks. The analysis distinguishes three decisions: identifying the missing information, selecting the finite verb and its position, and choosing a form appropriate to the exchange. In pair work, a completed appointment card provides evidence that the intended information was understood; a subsequent individual question shows whether the learner can produce the form independently. The sequence illustrates why teachers should examine the listener's answer alongside the speaker's wording. It offers a method for classroom diagnosis and feedback whose effectiveness can be tested in future teaching trials.

Keywords: *interrogative sentences; English language teaching; subject–auxiliary inversion; question formation; corrective feedback; pedagogical grammar*

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1. Introduction

A learner who can say "She works at the university" may still hesitate before asking "Where does she work?" The difficulty is partly that the statement contains no separate word corresponding to does. To form the question, the learner must supply an auxiliary and change works to work. Starting with this familiar contrast gives the class a reason to examine English word order.

A useful first step is to compare statements that already contain an auxiliary with those that do not. In "She is studying English," learners can identify is and place it before the subject: "Is she studying English?" In "She studies English," they need does instead. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) provide the grammatical basis for distinguishing these patterns.

The next step is to ask what information is missing. "Who opened the window?" asks for the person who acted. "What did she open?" asks for the object. Both questions begin with an interrogative word, but only the second requires did. Asking learners to supply an answer before explaining the rule makes the difference easier to see.

A question also has a purpose in conversation. A speaker may want a new piece of information, offer a choice, or check something that appears to be true. The spoken exchanges described by Carter and McCarthy (2006) provide a useful context for teaching these differences.

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For classroom practice, the answer is often as useful as the question. A learner who replies "Yes" to "Which bus do you take?" has heard the question but has not identified the information being requested. Pairing each question with a plausible answer lets the teacher check meaning as well as grammatical form.

The guiding teaching question is practical: how can a teacher tell whether a difficulty lies in choosing what to ask, forming the clause, or interpreting the reply? The sequence below starts with a meaning learners can express and changes one grammatical feature at a time. This draws on Ellis (2006) on the place of grammar in communicative instruction. The activities are teaching proposals; the examples illustrate classroom decisions rather than reporting learner outcomes.

The following sections present the main question patterns, illustrate them with familiar examples, and suggest ways to practise them in speaking and writing.

2. Forming Questions with an Auxiliary

An interrogative clause is a grammatical form commonly used to ask a question. When introducing it, begin with a statement whose subject and auxiliary are easy to identify. Ask learners to underline the subject and circle the auxiliary before they change the word order.

In English declarative sentences, the subject generally precedes the predicate:

She is reading a book.
They have finished their work.

To make a yes/no question from either statement, place the finite auxiliary before the subject:

Is she reading a book?
Have they finished their work?

This change of order is called subject–auxiliary inversion. When a simple present or simple past statement has an ordinary lexical verb and no auxiliary, use do, does, or did to form the corresponding yes/no question:

Do you speak English?
Does he work at the university?

After do, does, or did, the main verb takes its base form. Compare "She enjoys music" with "Does she enjoy music?" If a learner says "Does she enjoys music?", point to does and ask which word already carries the third-person singular ending.

One useful board exercise keeps the vocabulary constant: "She works here," "She worked here," and "She can work here." Cover the verb and ask learners to make three questions. When they uncover it, have them explain why work appears in all three answers even though the auxiliaries differ. If a learner succeeds with can but omits does, practise that contrast before introducing longer questions. Spada and Lightbown (1999) examined English question development in relation to instruction, first-language influence, and developmental readiness; their work gives teachers reason to check which contrasts learners already control.

3. Question Types and the Answers They Invite

For teaching purposes, the following groups are useful, although they overlap. Yes/no and wh-questions differ in the answers they invite. A rhetorical question can use either pattern; what distinguishes it is the speaker's purpose.

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3.1. Yes/no questions

A yes/no question asks whether something is the case. Yes or no is often sufficient, although speakers may give fuller answers. Ask learners to compare the first word in each example:

Do you like reading?
Is she a university student?

The main syntactic feature of yes/no questions is the inversion between the auxiliary verb and the subject. When the verb be functions as the main verb in the predicate, no additional auxiliary verb is required:

Are you ready?

To practise the contrast, give one partner two prompts: "ready" and "like reading." The partner asks "Are you ready?" and "Do you like reading?" The listener answers both questions and adds one detail to the second answer.

3.2. Wh-questions

Wh-questions ask for a particular piece of information. Where asks for a place; when, for a time; and why, for a reason. Who and which can ask about either the subject or another part of the clause.

Examples:

Where do you live?
Why did she leave the university?

For these two examples, the pattern is:

Interrogative word + auxiliary verb + subject + main verb + other sentence elements.

However, inversion does not occur in all types of wh-questions. When who or what functions as the subject of a sentence, there is no need to place an auxiliary verb before it:

Which student answered the question?

Compare "Which student answered the question?" with "Which question did the student answer?" Have learners answer each in a complete sentence. In the first, the missing expression names the person who answered; in the second, it names what that person answered.

To check the distinction without asking learners to recite a rule, write "The nurse called the driver." Cover the nurse and ask for a question whose answer is "the nurse." Then uncover the nurse and cover the driver. The expected questions are "Who called the driver?" and "Who did the nurse call?" A learner who repeats the first pattern in both cases may be responding to who alone. Restore both nouns and have the learner point to the caller before trying again. In classes that use Azerbaijani as well as English, Ismaili (2023) offers background on grammatical categories in the two languages; the immediate task is to identify the participant's role in this sentence.

3.3. Alternative questions

An alternative question asks the listener to choose between options, typically linked by or. Use the examples below with a partner who must select one option:

Do you prefer tea or coffee?
Will you travel by train or by plane?
Is she studying English or German?

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Ask the listener to answer the travel question with “By train” or “By plane.” In a different context, a question containing or can invite a yes/no answer: someone checking the available means of transport might ask “Can you get there by train or bus?” The situation helps learners decide what response is useful.

Before giving a model, offer the class two possible replies: “Yes, I do” and “Coffee, please.” Ask which reply would help a host decide what to pour. This starts with meaning, an approach also discussed by Askerova (2023) in the context of teaching German. English conversational evidence supports attending to both grammatical form and the action a speaker performs with a question (Stivers, 2010).

3.4. Tag questions

Tag questions consist of a declarative statement followed by a short interrogative element at the end of the sentence. They are used to seek confirmation of the speaker’s statement or to find out the listener’s opinion.

They have finished the task, haven’t they?
He can drive, can’t he?

In these examples the tag repeats the auxiliary from the statement, uses a pronoun for the subject, and reverses the polarity. Ask the class to change “He can drive, can’t he?” to “He can’t drive, can he?” Then invite two learners to use the tags while checking information about an imaginary driver.

Polarity and agreement are separate checks. A learner who writes “She works here, isn’t she?” has chosen a negative tag but the wrong auxiliary. First reconstruct the full yes/no question (“Does she work here?”); then shorten it to the tag (“doesn’t she?”). Turkan’s (2022) discussion of affirmation is useful here: the positive wording of the statement and the speaker’s wish for confirmation are distinct.

3.5. Rhetorical questions

A speaker can use a question to make a point without expecting an answer. This is a rhetorical use of an interrogative form.

Who doesn’t want to be successful?
Isn’t education important for everyone?

To make the purpose clear, place the second example at the end of a short speech in support of a school. Then compare it with “Why is education important to you?” in an interview. Ask learners in which situation the speaker would pause and wait for a personal answer.

Context can change how the same question is heard. “Who would take the last bus?” invites names when a teacher is arranging transport; after someone describes an unreliable service, it may suggest that nobody would choose it. Ask pairs to write one preceding sentence for each reading. The activity makes rhetorical interpretation audible without teaching a separate rule of word order (Han, 2002).

4. Word Order in Independent and Embedded Questions

When revising inversion, ask learners to identify the finite auxiliary or modal before moving it. The rest of the verb phrase stays in place:

She can speak English. → Can she speak English?
They have arrived. → Have they arrived?

The same pattern applies to should. There is no need to add do before a modal:

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Should students use artificial intelligence?

In a standard embedded question, the subject normally precedes the finite verb. The opening clause can still be an independent question:

Where does he live? – Direct question.
Could you tell me where he lives? – Indirect question.

In the classroom, put a vertical line after "Could you tell me" to separate the two clauses. In the opening question, could comes before you. In the embedded part, he comes before lives. A learner who writes "Could you tell me where does he live?" has applied the direct-question pattern a second time.

A final listening contrast is "The class starts at nine?" versus "Does the class start at nine?" Give one partner a timetable and the other a partly legible copy. Someone who thinks the entry says nine has a reason to use the first wording to check it; someone who has no time written down might instead ask "When does the class start?" Gunlogson (2003) and Jeong (2018) explain why declarative word order with a rise deserves attention in its own right. A question mark on a worksheet cannot supply the missing spoken context.

5. Classroom Practice and Assessment

Begin with three statements on the board: "She is reading," "He works here," and "Sara opened the door." Partners take turns asking about the activity, the place, and the person. Each listener answers without looking at the board. In feedback, write one question that needs revision and ask learners to identify the subject, locate the auxiliary if there is one, and check the form of the main verb. Finish by asking each learner to turn one direct question into a polite request for information. This final change shows whether the learner can retain the meaning while adjusting the word order.

An information gap gives the pair work a visible outcome (Ellis, 2009). Prepare two appointment cards. Card A gives the visitor's name and the day; card B gives the room and the time. Neither partner may show the card. After completing the schedule, partners compare entries and trace any mismatch to the question that produced it. Mackey (1999) investigated conversational interaction specifically in the development of English questions. In the proposed task, an accurate schedule shows that information was exchanged; it does not by itself establish grammatical accuracy.

During the exchange, choose feedback according to what the learner can repair. After "Where does she works?", a brief prompt such as "After does?" leaves the correction to the learner. If the learner cannot continue, supply "Where does she work?" and let the partner answer. Work on recasts and responses (Mackey & Philp, 1998) and on classroom oral feedback (Lyster & Saito, 2010) informs this choice. At the next lesson, use a new verb and a different subject. Producing the new question independently is more informative than merely repeating the teacher's correction. Ammar and Spada (2006) compared prompts and recasts on a different grammatical target; that distinction is useful here when deciding who should supply the corrected form.

For a spoken extension, play a short recorded story and stop before the speaker identifies who made a telephone call. One listener asks for the caller and another for the recipient. This adapts the speaking work discussed by Ismayilli and Özperçin (2026). Teachers preparing additional dialogues with AI can draw on Mehdi and Ismayilli (2026) and Ismayilli et al. (2026) for pedagogical context. Nuri and Ismayilli (2025) examine AI-assisted academic writing; a written model needs a separate check for spoken use. Read the exchange aloud and ask whether the second speaker has a reason to ask a question whose answer the first speaker may already have supplied.

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During feedback, keep a record of the question and the answer together. If a partner writes "Tuesday" in the room column, the first issue to investigate is the information requested: a perfectly formed when-question would still be unsuitable. If the partner writes the correct room after hearing "Where the visitor will meet us?", the message has succeeded, but the speaker still needs practice with will before the subject in an independent question. Recording these two outcomes separately gives the teacher a concrete reason to choose a meaning-focused prompt in the first case and a word-order prompt in the second.

For an individual exit task, give learners "Nigar sent a message to Ali." Ask for the sender, ask for the recipient, and then ask about the recipient after "Could you tell me …". Check three features separately: whether each question targets the intended person, whether did is followed by send, and whether the embedded clause retains subject-before-verb order. A learner who gets the first two right but writes "Could you tell me who did Nigar send a message to?" needs practice with clause boundaries rather than another general lesson on auxiliaries.

6. Conclusion

English question formation is easier to teach when each change in word order serves a clear purpose. A yes/no exchange gives learners a reason to practise inversion; a missing name or place motivates a wh-question; and a polite request makes the contrast between direct and embedded word order audible. Teachers can assess both form and use by checking two things: whether the learner formed the question accurately and whether the listener understood what information to supply.

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