

# The Polemics of Interrogatives in a Pluralistic Setting: A Case Study of Bilingual Francophone Students in ENS Bambili Cameroon

Feuba Wanji Elvis

Department of English  
University of Yaounde 1

## Abstract

*This paper examines the manipulation of English interrogatives by francophone learners in informal situations. This study equally intends to discuss the inherent interrogative difficulties face by these learners as they negotiate interaction outside the classroom. Using the purposive sampling technique, a sample of 122 informants was used. Data collection was done with the aid of a tape-recorder and personal observation. The study used descriptive and inferential statistics to analyse data. Using Quirk et al (1972) framework on interrogatives, four interrogative forms were examined and the following findings recorded: that the production of interrogative forms by francophone students of English deviates tremendously from the standard British English; that these learners face much difficulty in the use of tag questions than any of the other interrogatives; that francophone learners make errors caused by language interference, overgeneralisation of the rule, language rectification, poor mastery of the English language and lastly, what can be termed "the linguistic deficit of the English language". It was equally discovered that most of the students failed to understand the pragmatic value of English rhetorical questions.*

**Key words:** *interrogatives, pragmatic value, francophone learners.*

## Introduction

English in Cameroon is a perfect example of a language spoken within a multicultural and multilingual setting. In fact, the country has two official languages, namely French and English, which are given equal weight by the government. The English language competes with the French language for official use, and with Pidgin English and Home languages for contact and for phatic communion. Francophones learners of English in general and Cameroon in particular, where these two languages co-habit, face a lot of problems in manipulating English interrogatives. In fact, it has been argued by many scholars such as Kouega (1999) that though the country has an official status, it is the country that is bilingual and not the citizens. Such a postulation finds credence when one looks at the production of English by Francophones as well as the production of French by Anglophones. Much needs to be desired. Ellis (1984) stipulated that learners of English as a second language have various reasons for learning the language. He holds that some learn the language because they want to pass an examine (instrumental motivation), others learn the language because they want to achieve proficiency in a new language in order to participate in the life of the community that speaks the language (integrative motivation). Others learn the language for social group identification. However, in this setting, francophone learners are instrumentally motivated since they need this language to validate their end of course examine so as to obtain a BA in Bilingual Studies. This study was motivated by the fact that francophone students of the Bilingual Unit of the university of Yaounde 1 are sent to ENS Bambili to perfect their English (especially spoken English), yet these students face difficulties in using interrogatives. In fact, this was a lofty idea initiated by the government, since the best way to learn a language is to live among its speakers. The government thought it wise to send these students to Bambili (a purely Anglophone area) to better the English. However, little attention is paid on interrogatives. The curriculum shallowly handles issues of interrogation and the teaching method is highly teacher centred.

It is curious enough to know that teachers of this professional school pay much attention to the other aspects of grammar to the detriment of interrogatives. They lose sight of the fact that interrogatives constitute a major aspect in human interaction. This is so because hardly will one spend a day without

having to ask a question. Interrogatives embody aspects such as tense, verb, subject and number. Hence, if much attention is paid to it, Francophone learners will not only be good at interrogatives but good articulators of the language in general. It was however observed that these students formulated questions that were either influenced by their linguistic background or conditioned by some inherent linguistic “deficit” of the English language. Therefore, the departure point of this paper is to identify the various deviants in the use of interrogatives by francophone learners of English as well as trace the source of such errors.

## Literature Review

The study of interrogatives has been the centre of interest to many researchers, national and international alike. However, each researcher has his/her point of focus with regards to the subject. Generally speaking, most scholars have tried to describe patterns of errors committed by Cameroonians as they engage in conversation in English. This indicates that they have attempted a description of Cameroon English (CamE) both at the segmental and at the suprasegmental levels. This variety of English has been describe by many linguists, as can be attested by the works of Masanga (1983), Mbangwana(1987), Simo (1986), Kouega (1991), Talla (1999), Wolf (2001) and Bobda(1994) to name these few.

Wolf (ibid) example the influence of French on the English language. He holds that in the “frenchification” of the lexicon of CamE, Anglophone code-mix CamE with standard French. Chumbow and Simo Bobda(1996) insist that the influence of French on CamE is noticeable at several linguistic levels such as lexical and phonological.

Narrowing down our review on interrogatives in Cameroon, it is worthy to note that much has not been written on the use of interrogatives by students. However, some few works address issues of interrogatives. Angawah (1997) probes into the ways students in some Anglophone schools in Cameroon use tags in English. Her results showed that students were unable to form proper tags in English. They had difficulties in using the rules that govern the formation of tags. Ngum(1999) on her part, investigated the manipulation of English interrogatives by secondary school students. Using intermediate students as her case study, she found out just like Angawah(ibid) that these students have a poor mastery of the language. Kwansuh (2002) handling four interrogatives structures: tag, wh, yes/no and emphatic questions and using 3eme(form 3) students of lycee de Mendong, his findings revealed that students face problems with the use of question types because of lack of motivation and bad teaching method. He holds that most teachers use the teacher centred approach in teaching these students which hinders cooperative learning and learning initiative.

Lachi (1987) investigated students ability to provide appropriate answers to questions in the 3eme classes of lycee de Biyem-Assi. Seven question types were chosen for her study. She discovered that students faced a lot of problems in providing appropriate responses to Yes/no questions, wh-questions, phatic questions and rhetorical questions. Mambo (2001) predicated her study on the differences and similarities that exist between question formation in Mankon and English. Her investigation revealed that as far as these two languages are concerned, there exist structural and semantic differences in question formation. Lum (2003) set out to examine question formation in CamE with close reference to the speech of some selected Cameroonian speakers of English particularly LMA (Lettre Modern Anglaise) students of the university of yaounde 1. Dealing with purely Anglophone students, her study revealed that question formation by LMA students deviates drastically from the Bristish Norms. She attributes this to the poor teaching methods, poor motivation and a general lack of mastery of the language rules. Lastly, Etanow (2008) carried out an investigation of the use of interrogatives by francophone learners of English. Unlike her predecessors, she handled advanced learner “Terminale students” of a commercial and industrial school. Hence, she goes out of grammar schools to see what obtains in commercial and industrial schools. She found out that these students equally perform poor in interrogatives like their fellows in grammar schools. The teaching method in this school is “deplorable”. There is a total lack of interest and motivation. The target population of the above mentioned works is secondary and high school students but for Lums (2003) that handles LMA 1 students. They above mention works limit their investigation within the confine of a language classroom. The present study takes up the task of investigating the use of interrogatives by Francophone students at tertiary level (university) in formal settings.

## Objectives

A substantial amount of study has been carried out on interrogatives in Cameroon (c.f. Lum; 2003, Angawah; 1999, Lachi; 1987, Mambo; 20001, and Etanow; 2008). A study on the production of interrogatives by francophones university students is rare. The present study aims at bridging this gap and therefore attempts to provide answer to the following questions:

- 1) What deviant forms are evidence in their interrogative forms?
- 2) What are the causes of these deviant forms?
- 3) To what extend do these deviant forms different from SBE as far as interrogatives are concerned?
- 4) What are the solutions to these problems?

## Methodology

This paper sets out to present the method that was adopted for the study. It gives a picture of the population of the study, the research design and the selected sample. It also, shows how the instruments used were constructed and administered. Finally, it explains the method of data analysis.

This study is built on the theoretical framework of Alexander (1988) on interrogatives where he identifies eight types of interrogatives. However, this study addresses itself to only three of his question types: Tag questions, Wh-questions and Rhetorical question. Data were collected with the help of two instruments: tape-recorder and personal observation. Tape recorder was used to record students' conversations without their knowledge. After the recording, only features that were recurrent in their speech were considered as errors. Those that were not recurrent were considered as slips. The recording took a period of three months. 135 question forms were noticed; 80 were in the form of tag questions, 29 in the form of wh and 26 in the form of rhetorical. The participant observation method was used where the researcher listened with keen interest the conversation of francophones students and took down utterances with deviant forms. Following this method, 74 deviants were recorded; 44 on tag questions, 20 on wh-questions and 10 on rhetorical.

The informants were bilingual francophone students of the university of Yaounde 1 on internship in Bambili. They were 122 in number, 80 girls and 42 boys. Our choice of this level of students and particularly this set of students was deliberate. It was aimed at examining the extent to which level of education and environment affect the use of interrogatives.

## Presentation of Data and Analyses

Under this section of the paper, we shall present some deviant phenomena observed in the three question types understudy. However, we shall take each in turn, present and analyse.

### Tag Questions

From the data, it was generally realised that these students make use of three dominant deviant interrogative utterances which are: "isn't it", "ok" and "not so". Consider the table below:

**Table 1: Deviant use of tag interrogative**

Number	Pattern	Number. of occurrence	Percentage
1	"isn't it?"	39	48.75
2	"ok?"	26	32.50
3	"not so?"	15	18.75

Each of the items on the table shall be taken and discussed in turn to show their deviant characteristics. A tag question is a short structure that is added to the end of the statement to turn it into a question (Cobuild; 1990). This added structure is not haphazardly done. It follows prescribe rules. From the table, it is glaring that most of the students made wrong use of "isn't it" tag (48.75%). This is followed by "ok" (31.25%) and lastly "not so" (18.75%). In discussing these items we shall try to associate each deviant to a root cause.

### "ISN'T IT?"

From the data, the deviant use of "isn't it" stood the highest. We observed the following deviant forms:

- 1) Bambili has got a harsh climate, isn't it?
- 2) She didn't validate the course, isn't it?

*Instead of:*

- 1) Bambili has got a harsh climate, hasn't it?
- 2) She didn't validate the course, did she?

From our analysis, we could say that the primary cause of such deviant form is language interference. Crystal(1972) posits that when languages come into contact, there is bound to be interference. These students make invariable use of "isn't it?" because of the invariant French tag "n'est-ce-pas". The use of this structure "n'est-ce-pas" in the French language does not necessitate concord. In fact, agreement, with things like subject, verb, gender, and number is not required. Therefore, since this structure is indiscriminately used in the French language, these students equally apply it to the English language. After all, to them, "n'est-ce-pas" in French is "isn't it" in English.

#### **"Ok" realised as "okey"**

From the corpus, "ok" as a tag form was identified 26 times given a percentage of 32.50%. Here, it was realised that "ok" used as tag form in informal situations by the British and especially the Americans, was used by these students with a shift in pronunciation. Most of them pronounced it as "okey" rather than "okay". We had example sentences such as:

- 1) I will be coming, okey?
- 2) It will soon be over, okey?
- 3) They wil bring some rice, okey?

*Instead of:*

- 1) I will be coming, won't I?
- 2) It will soon be over, won't it?
- 3) They will bring some rice, won't they?

The cause of this deviant form can be attributed to what Selinker (1972) calls acculturation. Through the mass media, these students have been availed with the culture of the Americans which they cherish and wish to be identified with. Hence, they turn to use this form.

#### **"Not so?"**

"Not so?" which owes its existence to Pidgin English was equally identified in the speech of these students. It was identified 15 times with a percentage of 18.75%. From the corpus, sentences such as the ones below were noticed:

- 1) He is kind to you, not so?
- 2) There was somebody in his house, not so?
- 3) He didn't come to class, not so?

*Instead of:*

- 1) He is kind to you, don't he?
- 2) There was somebody in his house, wasn't there?
- 3) He didn't come to class, did he?

The use of this wrong form may be attributed to two principal causes. Firstly, it is an indicator to the fact that these students poorly master the language. They lose sight of the fact that "not so?" is not an English expression. Secondly, they are disoriented by Anglophone students who indiscriminately make use of this expression. Since these students (francophones) believe that Anglophone students have a higher proficiency level in English than they do, and hearing them using this expression, they tend to think that "not so" is a proper tag form in English. Just as Dunn(1992) and Slavin(1980) posit that cooperative learning motivates students to teach themselves translating "teacher language" into "student language". This, however, has its own bad side as students learn even the wrong structures from their peers. A case in point is the "not so?" tag.

### **WH-QUESTIONS**

The next question type understudy is WH-Questions. It was equally realised that students made wrong use of this question type. From the corpus, it was discovered that the wh-word "what" posed problems to these students as they usually confuse it use with other wh-words such as (which; when; who;

how). Most of the students, however, replaced “what” with “which” in most of the situations. Consider the table below:

**Table 2: Deviant use of Wh-Question**

Word	Deviant use	No. of occurrence	Percentage
What	Which	15	51.75
	When	5	17.25
	Who	3	10.35
	How	2	06.90
To whom	To who	4	13.85

From the table, “which” was wrongly used 15 times (51.75%) in the place of “what”. Consider the following sentences below:

- 1) How does your father look like?
- 2) Who is your mother, a nurse or a teacher?
- 3) Which kind of drinks were in the party?
- 4) You are talking to who?

*Instead of:*

- 1) What does your father look like?
- 2) What is your mother, a nurse or a teacher?
- 3) What kind of drinks was in the party?
- 4) To whom are you talking to?

From the nature of the errors, we can conjecture that these errors are engendered by what Simo Bobda(1989) calls “rectification”. These students obviously feel that the use of “what” in some of the examples are incorrect and were begging for rectification. They are lured by the belief that “what” is used solely for animal or things and “who” for person uniquely. In fact, the dividing line between “what” and “which” stands as a veritable challenge. They fail to understand that generally speaking we use “which” when we are talking about a small number of possibilities. For example: which way shall we go? “What” is used more generally, for example: What is the longest river in the world?

### **Rhetorical Questions**

From the corpus, 26 Rhetorical question forms were identified. In fact, these were instances where interlocutors provided responses for questions that needed no answer. Consider the examples below:

#### **Speech Act 1:**

- A) Dr Penn is very strict
- B) Do you mean strict or very strict? Do you think there is anybody in that class who likes him?
- A) There is nobody

#### **Speech Act 2:**

- A) You didn’t go to church on Sunday, why?
- B) I was really sick.
- A) Hope you were truly sick else you will die a sinner
- B) Are you sure there is anybody who wants to die a sinner?
- A) Yes, the devil wants to die a sinner.

#### **Speech Act 3:**

- A) Corruption in this country has gotten to its apex
- B) How do you mean?
- A) Do you know how many university campuses 50 Millard can build?
- B) Yes, more than 10.

The above examples are clear testimonies of the kinds of errors these students make when it comes to rhetorical questions. It should be noted that these students all through their academic life they have not been taught rhetorical questions. Hence, it is absent in their scheme of work as well as in their



textbook. However, the cause of this error can be linked to their failure to understand the illocutionary force of rhetorical questions. In fact, rhetorical questions being interrogative in structure have the force of a strong assertion and generally do not need an answer. Therefore, these students fail to understand the pragmatic value of rhetorical questions.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

This study has examined some of the salient features of interrogatives in the speech of bilingual francophone students in ENS Bambili in informal settings. The results from the study show that there exist three observable deviants in the use of tag questions: "isn't it", "ok" and "not so". The study has demonstrated that these students face problems with the use of wh-questions. In fact, from the data, it seen that 'which', 'where', 'what' and 'to whom' are sometimes interchangeably used. Lastly, the data shows that these students hardly understand the pragmatic value of rhetorical questions. We have been able, through this study, to demonstrate that the problems these students face with the use of interrogatives are both caused by the student's linguistic background and their conscious attempt to rectify what they consider the "deficit" of the English language.

From the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed for action by teachers, counsellors and course book designers. The teachers or lecturers in Bambili should expose these students to the various forms or types of interrogatives and increase their motivation towards cooperative learning. The idea that students exposed to cooperative learning perform better than their counterparts who are exposed to lecture method ties in with the proposition of this study. In support of the above view, Slavin (1980) holds that cooperative learning motivates students to do best.

Lecturers should make the environment conducive for learning. In fact, a perfect ground should be prepared for the students to acculturate themselves freely. Schumann (1978, p.34) posits that "... the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language." Therefore, the acquisition of a new language is seen as tied to the way in which the learner's community and the target language community view each other.

Lastly, the students' psychological fillers should be kept low as far as possible. That is, while in class errors committed should be considered as signposts of learning and not errors. This will avoid creating what Schumann (1978b) calls language shock.

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