TYPES OF QUESTION IN ENGLISH 
AND VIETNAMESE 
A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS 

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Ho Chi Minh City, December 30th 2011
Introduction

In everyday conversation, there are many types of sentences but most of the time we tend to use three basic types that are affirmative sentences, negative sentences and interrogative sentences, i.e. questions. These three ones are also the basic knowledge to be taught at the early stage of learning a new language. Both Vietnamese and English have these types with fundamental purposes. Among them, question seems to be appeared the most frequently in daily life. According to many documents, however, most Vietnamese learners have lots of difficulty in forming a question and they tend to use the exact structure of Vietnamese question when asking a question in English. If we can find out the similarities as well as the differences between the two languages, we will realize that making an English question is not as complex as it is.

Hence, this paper are conducted with the aim of providing you a deep look of the question by comparing the constructions, i.e. Vietnamese and English questions to point out some similarities and differences between them. Furthermore, this also improves the language competence for students and some teaching implications for teachers.

In the first part of the paper, we will give you the definition of question, i.e. the interrogative sentence in general. Then, the second part- the main part- is the categories of questions and the construction of each type. Finally, there are some other problems Vietnamese learners may have and then the implications for ESL teachers when teaching a question lesson.

The definition of question

According to Le Quang Thiem – a Vietnamese linguist, “ in daily communication an interrogative sentence is used to require the unknown information”(p.222) and the signal to recognize it easily is that “an interrogative sentence is a type of sentence which usually asks a
question and use a question mark (?). They may ask for information or for confirmation or denial of a statement.” (Wikipedia). So, base on the definition, we have the examples here:

“Have you got that?”

“Where's my book?”

However, to Vietnamese language, we sometimes can use a question not for asking for any information but for other purposes, for example: greeting each other

“Bạn đang đi đâu thế?”

“Anh ăn cơm chưa?”

In English, we also have such kind of questions like “How are you?” “How are things going?” We use them as a greeting in English without needing to give the answer. There are still many kinds which we also call the question such as rhetorical questions and paradoxical questions. Those are ones which do not need to produce a particular answer, so we ask with the purpose of expressing our feeling, our emotion or to some questions; we can not answer because there is no answer to it. In short, we have many question definitions but a question, generally, is a sentence whose use is “to ask for information and also for request, suggestions, offers…” (Oxford guide to English grammar, p.25) but in this paper, we just study the “question” with the basic function that is to ask for the missing information.

**Types of questions in English and Vietnamese**

We have different ways to classify the type of an interrogative sentence base on many alternative elements such as purpose, foundation, structure…In “A University Grammar of English” Feigenbaum (1985) points out only two types of question “Wh-question” which refers to learn the information and “Yes-No question” which is to confirm the information (p.16). As you can see, the author clearly categorizes it basing on the purpose of using question. However,
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according to “English Grammar”, Bùi Ý and Vũ Thanh Phương have mentioned four general kinds of an English question: General questions (or Yes-No question), Special questions (or WH-questions), Alternative questions, Questions – tags. There is another way of classification. In “System in English Grammar”, Master (1996) divides questions into four types: Yes-No questions, information questions, tag questions and echo questions (p.136). To cut it short, there is still a simple classification. According to Angela (2003), interrogative structures in English are of three main types: polar, alternative and non-polar (p. 185). A polar interrogative, also called yes/no question, non-polar interrogative, also called WH-question and the third one is alternative interrogative, which consists of two polar interrogatives joined by “or”.

A little similar to English question, in the book “Vietnamese Grammar” written by a Vietnamese linguist, Diệp Quang Ban. He classifies Vietnamese question into four types: Câu hỏi có từ ngữ vân (WH-question), câu hỏi lựa chọn (Alternative question), câu hỏi đúng ngữ điều (Declarative questions), câu hỏi có tiêu từ chuyên dụng (Specialized copulative questions).

However, with Le Quang Thiem, he simply categorizes Vietnamese question just into two types: alternative questions and non-alternative questions. Therefore, when compare Vietnamese and English question, Le Quang Thiem synthesized into the following table (p.228):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LANGUAGE</th>
<th>VIETNAMESE</th>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question types</td>
<td>Alternative questions</td>
<td>Non-alternative questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes/no questions</td>
<td>Alternative questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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In any research, the more we study, the more variety and complexity the topic is. Hence, in this paper with the limited time and number of pages, we just focus on the category by Le Quang Thiem. The contrastive scope mentioned here mainly based on the constructional-meaning parts. To be clearer, we will focus on the construction of “Yes-No question”, “Alternative questions”, and “WH-question” then we will make a comparison of Vietnamese and English questions.

Construction of yes/no questions in English and Vietnamese

According to Wikipedia, in linguistics, a Yes-No question, which formally known as a polar question, is a question whose expected answer is either “yes” or “no”. It is also called polar question because “it is simply the polarity is in question” (Angela, p. 185). The way to form a Yes-No question seems to be more complex and difficult than that of Vietnamese question. Both of them share the basic same rule when asking to confirm some information right or wrong.

“Are you a student? (Bạn là sinh viên phải không?)

Yes, I am” (Vâng, tôi là sinh viên)

“Did you study Chinese last night? (Đêm qua bạn học tiếng Hoa à?)

No, I didn’t” (Không phải)

In English, when mentioning how to construct a question structure, we will meet the word “inversion” many times. More specific, we normally carry the auxiliary verb that appears before the main verb or the verb “be” put after the subject to the position in front of the subject, i.e. we place Operator (auxiliary, modal verb, and “to be”)… before subject, and we have to emphasize that it is much more complex than forming a Vietnamese question. To form a question from a statement, first we have to pay attention to the tense (present simple, past simple,
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present perfect, past perfect, future simple…) then have to consider verb agreement; moreover you have many difficult rules to learn by heart. For example:

**Statement:** *He usually studies English at night.*

**Question:** *Does he usually study English at night?*

(Tense: present simple → use “do/does”, not “did”/ “have/has”/ “will”…); subject “he” → verb “does”; studies (statement) → study (question); question → inversion of “does”)

or:

**Statement:** *They were having dinner at 9 p.m. last night.*

**Question:** *Were they having dinner at 9 p.m. last night?*

(Tense: past continuous → use “were/was” not “is/am/are”; subject “they” → verb “were”; question → inversion of “were”)

More simply than forming English question, for Vietnamese interrogative sentences, we do not use operators (auxiliary verbs) as in English but we use question words (“có… không”, “có phải… không”, or “à, ạ, hà…”) to make the general question. One more important thing is that we do not have any concept of inversion, just keep the order word the same as in statements.

“*Bạn là bác sĩ phải không?*”

In the above question, the phrase “Bạn là bác sĩ” is the same to the order in statement and the speaker just add the question words “phải không?” That is the reason why students feel difficult to produce a question. When making a question, they tend to put the word order the same in the statement and then raise the intonation at the end of the sentence; or they usually fail to put in an incorrect tense and much more difficult, they tend to ignore the verb agreement grammar point. They sometimes have difficulty in auxiliary verb, using the incorrect category of auxiliary verbs, put the wrong tense on the auxiliary verbs or forget to return the main verb into its base form.
Furthermore, in English, Yes-No questions usually have the negative question and the asker expect to hear the affirmative answer. In Vietnamese, any affirmative question or negative question of the general question (Yes-No question), the asker always hope the answer will be appropriate with the real life. Therefore, Vietnamese learners misunderstand and give the answer which is actually opposite to their meaning because there is a tendency of answer “đã, vâng” for all negative questions while in English, the answer must be clear “Yes” for accepting or “No” for refusing or wrong.

A: “Can’t you swim?”

B: “No, I can’t.”

When an English person may ask a Vietnamese that question, they tend to respond “Yes” with the meaning that the answer has an agreement with the meaning of the asker which is I can’t swim while the English think that the Vietnamese is able to swim! In short, at first glance, this kind of question seem to be easy if we learn by heart all things but it gets more difficult to produce a question in practice.

**Construction of alternative questions in English and Vietnamese**

Alternative question is a type of question which has a choice of two or more alternatives for the answer. With kind of the question in English, we use “or” between two words, two phrase or two clauses. Moreover, people often raise their voice in words, phrases, or clauses before “or” and they often lower their voice in those after “or.”

- Would you like tea or coffee? -I like tea/coffee/both
- -I don’t like any thing.
- Do you like playing harmonica or piano? -I like living in the city/countryside

In Vietnamese, the alternative questions are defined as questions whose unknown
information needs to be chosen by the addressee (Lê Quang Thiêm, 2004, p. 223). We use the words such as “là”, “hay là”, “hoặc”, “hoặc là” to replace the word “or” in English and there isn’t any rising or falling intonation like that in English alternative question.

“Chị muốn đi đến đó bằng xe máy hay xe buýt?”

Therefore, we can see both of the English and Vietnamese questions are similar in alternatives which are appeared in the questions. Nonetheless, there is still a bit difference between the two patterns of the questions, which is mentioned by Le Quang Thiem.

Vietnamese: Subject Verb Object **hay** Object?

English: Operator Subject Verb Object **or** Object?

To sum up, both of them are quite the same except for the small difference mentioned above. The alternative question form is actually deprived from Yes-No question. Hence, if the students are able to construct the Yes-No questions, they are also likely to do with the alternative questions and vice versa.

**The construction of information questions in English and Vietnamese**

An information question, i.e. Wh- question is an open question, which has any number of answers because the asker does not know any about the information going to be responded from the answer. Both of English and Vietnamese information questions use the interrogative words to request the answer. Question-word can not only be as objects, but also as subjects, complements or adverbials. With this kind of question, English has some question words categorized based on the topic scopes such as: asking about person: “who, whom”; things “what, which”; possession “whose”; manner, condition or quality “how”, the place “where”; time “when”; the reason “why”; etc. (how long, how far, how much, how many…). Here is the question words with many different functions:
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**Subject:** Who can give me some help?

(Someone can give me some help.)

**Object:** What will Tom receive?

(Tom will receive something.)

**Complement:** Whose is that coat?

(That coat is someone’s.)

**Adverbial:** When will he start to study?

(He will start to study some time.)

In comparison with English, Vietnamese information interrogative sentences have similar equivalent question words such as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who, whom</td>
<td>Ai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What</td>
<td>Gì, cái gì</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which</td>
<td>Gì, cái nào</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where</td>
<td>Đâu, ở đâu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When</td>
<td>Bao giờ, khi nào</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why</td>
<td>Sao, tài sao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whose</td>
<td>Của ai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How</td>
<td>Như thế nào</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If an interrogative word plays the role of subject, the word order is the same in both two language questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>You most?</th>
<th>Ai</th>
<th>yêu</th>
<th>bạn nhất?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who</td>
<td>love</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here is the structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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Vietnamese: Subject Verb Object

If wh- word is not subject, they will be different in the operator and word order. In Vietnamese there is no operator before subject like in English, and “ai” is placed after main verb in Vietnamese information question: Who did you love? (Bạn đã yêu ai?). However, in English, we have the inversion and the operator put right after the question word.

“Why did you come so late?” (Tại sao bạn lại đến trễ?)

“What do you want?” (Bạn muốn gì?)

English: Object - Verb - Subject?

Vietnamese: Subject - Predicative - Object?

From two above examples, we can see “tại sao” and “gì” can put at both places. Therefore, except the first position, some questions words are placed in the end of the question such as “khi nào, bao giờ, lúc nào” is placed at both at the beginning and the end. But remember that when placing at the beginning, it mentions the time of action in future. Placing at the end, it mentions the time of action in the past.

A: Khi nào anh đưa tôi bán báo cáo này?

B: Ngày mai.

C: Anh đưa tôi bán báo cáo khi nào?

D: Năm ngoái.

In contrast, “when” in specific and other question words in general appear at the beginning of the question and the answers will be varied depending on the tense, the situation…

A: When will you give me your report?

B: Tomorrow.

C: When did you give me your report?
D: Yesterday.

Moreover, there is a special thing of wh-question in English; there must be a falling intonation at the end of question and take in to consideration that the intonation of Yes-No question is raised at the end. Yet, in Vietnamese, there is still no intonation for this kind of question.

After studying this information question, we can draw out some points that students may meet during the time of learning English. With this kind question, they usually have problem with the question words in choosing and the placing them in the right positions. Moreover, the problem of auxiliary still gets the students in trouble with tense, verb form…

**Conclusion**

There are still other types of questions in English as well as in Vietnamese except for the three main ones I’ve just mentioned above: declarative question, tag question, echo question… and the way to respond a question does not obey to an absolutely patterns. It has to depend on other elements in real life: background knowledge, the context, and the roles of speakers… but here we just focus on the general patterns to help the students master in constructing questions frequently without any fear or hesitation. When starting to learn a new language, the learners have a tendency to be influenced by their mother’s tongue, the culture… So, the contrastive analysis between English and Vietnamese questions with three types studied above will help teachers as well as the learners a lot in conveying and absorbing a language.

Firstly, if the teachers understand thoroughly all types of the questions both in the source and target language, then they will know how different the questions are and create the opportunity for students to compare and draw students’ attention. In addition, once teachers have good knowledge of these types, they will find out the reasons and then work out the solutions to
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help students overcome the problems. Therefore, it is necessary for teacher to raise students’
awareness of cultural similarities and differences in order to help them to use questions in both
languages easily.

Secondly, acknowledge that the questions in English are different and hard to construct in
a good reflex because of the influenced mother’s tongue, teachers should give students more
chance to practice asking, giving, receiving and answer more questions in English or may have
alternative activities such as: role-play in a variety of contexts, first ask-answer couple game…so
that the students will engage in the lesson of questions and create a good reflex to help them talk
in real life.

In conclusion, questions are very important and used in at a high frequency in most
conversations in our daily life. In teaching and learning, question is one of the basic parts for
students to keep moving so the interrogative sentences, to most teachers, are not too complicated
but they should pay attention to this in order to build a firm foundation for a better knowledge in
the future. In short, with some aspects of the contrastive analysis between English and
Vietnamese questions, I believe that it will help the learners much in studying and provide some
information for teachers to be able to apply for their English teaching.
Bibliography


