

Aceitabilidade de perguntas não-invertidas por aprendizes
brasileiros de língua inglesa

Acceptability of non-inverted questions by brazilian learners of
english

Aceptabilidad de preguntas no invertidas por estudiantes brasileños
de lengua inglesa

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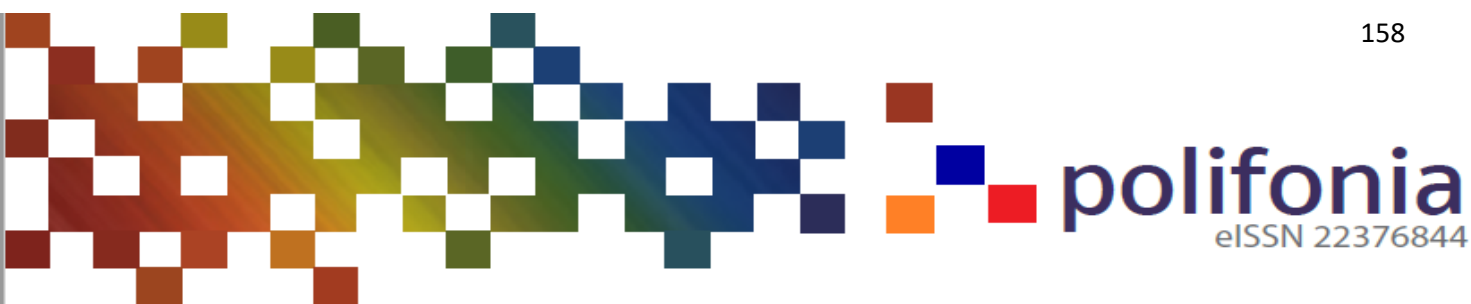
Resumo

Estudos sobre a gramática do inglês falado têm crescido consideravelmente desde os anos 90. Pesquisadores dessa área afirmam que a aprendizagem de línguas com base em dados de corpus linguístico, extraídos de conversas de falantes nativos em contextos informais, proporciona um melhor entendimento da língua alvo, contribuindo para que a fala desses aprendizes seja mais natural. Neste estudo, 60 brasileiros aprendizes de inglês responderam a uma atividade escrita na qual eles declaram se aceitam ou não o uso de perguntas nas quais não há auxiliares na posição inicial da oração, como mostrado nos seguintes exemplos: *You remember me?*, *Everyone well?*, *You have formed some conclusions?*, pois essas estruturas são bastante utilizadas no dia a dia de falantes de inglês como primeira língua, tanto na fala quanto na escrita informal. Nossos resultados mostram que um grande número aprendizes consideram essas estruturas não-aceitáveis, mesmo em usos informais de fala. Portanto, torna-se crucial que professores tenham um maior conhecimento da gramática do inglês falado e que utilizem, sempre que possível, materiais autênticos em suas aulas.

Palavras-chave: gramática do inglês falado, aceitabilidade linguística, formação de perguntas.

Abstract

Studies on spoken English have grown substantially since the 90's. Researchers of this field claim that language learning based on linguistics corpus data, extracted from native speakers in informal contexts, offer the opportunity to a better understanding of the target language, contributing to a more natural speech by the learners. In the study, 60 Brazilian learners of English answered a written activity, in which they had to declare if they accepted or not the construction of questions without inversion auxiliaries, as shown in the following examples: "You remember me?", "Everyone well?", "You have formed some conclusions?", for this kind of structure is largely used in every day conversations by speakers of English as a first language, both in their speech, as well as in their informal writings. Our results indicate that a great number of learners consider these structures not acceptable, even in informal spoken contexts. So, it turns to be crucial that teachers have a better



knowledge of the grammar of spoken English, and that they use, as much as possible, authentic materials in their classes.

Keywords: spoken English grammar, linguistic acceptability, question formation.

Resumen

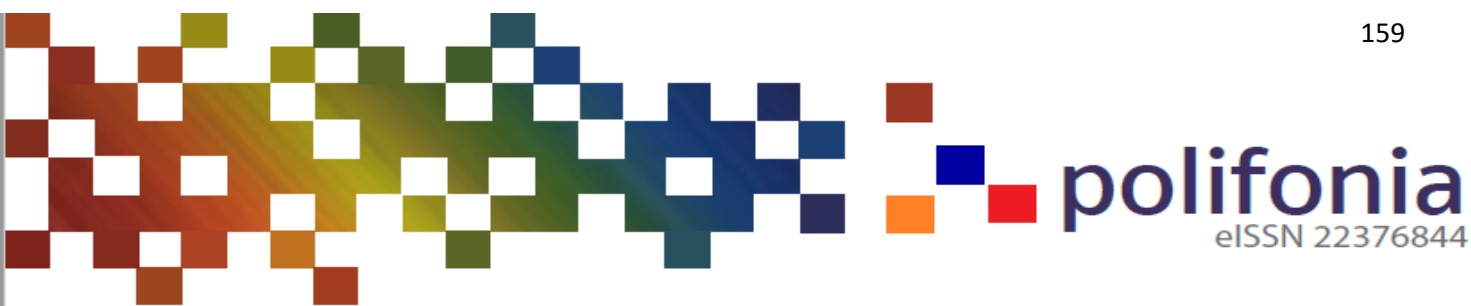
Los estudios de gramática del inglés hablado han crecido considerablemente desde la década de 1990. Investigadores en este campo afirman que el aprendizaje de idiomas basado en datos de corpus lingüísticos, extraídos de conversaciones de hablantes nativos en contextos informales, proporciona una mejor comprensión del idioma de destino, ayudando a que el habla de estos alumnos sea más natural. En este estudio, 60 aprendices de inglés respondieron a una actividad escrita en la que declararon si aceptan o no el uso de preguntas en las que no hay auxiliares en la posición inicial de oración, como en los siguientes ejemplos: *You remember me?*, *Everyone well?*, *You have formed some conclusions?* pues dichas estructuras se utilizan ampliamente en la vida cotidiana de los angloparlantes, tanto en el habla como en la escritura informal. Nuestros resultados muestran que un gran número de aprendices encuentran estas estructuras inaceptables incluso en usos informales del habla. Por lo tanto, es crucial que los maestros tengan un mayor conocimiento de la gramática del inglés hablado y usen materiales auténticos siempre que sea posible en sus clases.

Palabras clave: gramática del inglés hablado, aceptabilidad lingüística, formación de preguntas.

Introduction

This article is part of a research project that aims to study the acceptability of some linguistic structures of spoken English by Brazilian speakers. Nevertheless, this piece of work will cover just one grammar feature: uninverted questions¹. Other structures such as the use of double negatives, contractions, flexible positions of adverbs, and use of null subjects will be discussed in future works. For now, we believe that it is crucial to check if Brazilian learners admit the use of some linguistic structures, because native speakers are using them massively, mainly in informal situations. On the other hand, we do not know if teachers are using authentic materials, in which these structures are shown, and we also do not know if teachers explain the differences we can find out in formal and informal English. Our

¹ This term has been used since the 80's by linguists such as Chalker (1984), Quirk et al (1985), Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999).



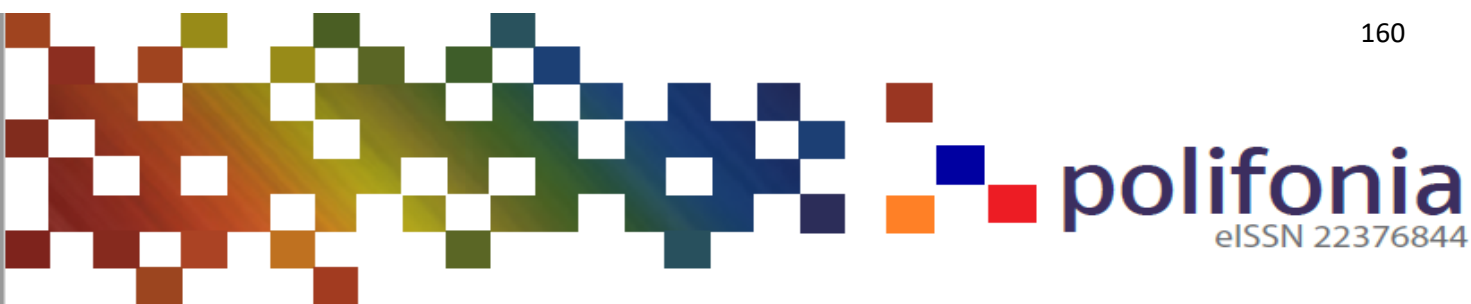
starting hypothesis is that a great number of learners are very conservative, not accepting linguistic constructions that are not seen in traditional or prescriptive grammars.

A brief overview of the status of spoken grammar

Since late 90's, the importance of spoken grammar has been discussed more intensively, showing that this field has been gaining momentum in the academic field. Some decades before, however, other researchers had highlighted the need to be aware of the importance of spoken grammar in formal education. Late in the 60s, Labov persuasively argued that, in primary and secondary schools in the USA,

it is assumed that the teacher speaks the standard English of the textbook; that the students should all acquire this standard, and that it is sufficient for the teacher to correct any departures from the model as they occur. Little attention is given to the question of **why** (author's emphasis) the student makes a particular departure from standard English. (LABOV, 1969, p. 7)

We can easily perceive that Labov's ideas about standard and spoken English are followed by Carter and McCarthy's (2006), Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999), among other linguists who are not only worried with the written grammar. It is important to know that Carter and McCarthy (1995, 2006) do not have the intention to criticize the importance of written grammars or "educated" English. Their focus is to elucidate that learners need to have access to other grammatical choices, apart from the traditional or the prescriptive ones. These options must be written and spoken, offering the learners more flexibility to choose the way they will communicate with others in different situations in real life. According to those authors, we can unfortunately predict that "popular conceptions of the spoken language are often that it is corrupt [...] and 'correct' English grammar is what is codified in grammars of English." (CARTER; MCCARTHY, 1995, p. 207). They also state that most learners of English are speaking "like a book" and have problems when facing communication on a regular basis.



Fortunately, nowadays, plenty of structures found in spoken English are being added in some grammar books. Cambridge Grammar of English (CGE), by Carter and McCarthy, 2006, and Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English, by Biber et al, 1999, have been the most consistent and well-acclaimed so far.

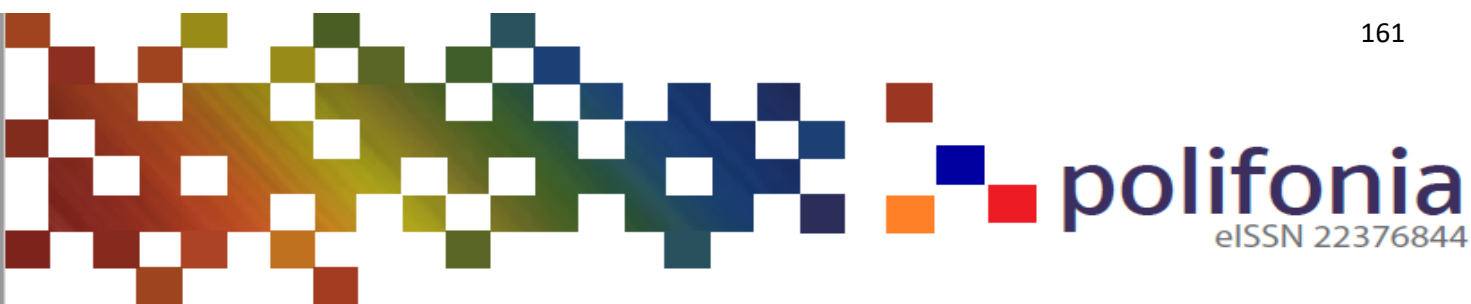
The role of spoken grammar (SG) has come to make us reflect about the hegemony of written English² in class. Researchers and linguists (CARTER; MCCARTHY, 2006; HILLIARD, 2014; GOH, 2009; OHLANDER, 2008; TIMMIS, 2002) have claimed that it is crucial to focus in spoken structures and to discuss its appropriateness in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)³.

Although numerous researchers and teachers agree on the importance of these studies, we still find several ones who do not agree with the introduction of the spoken structures in the classroom. A study by Goh (2009) compared pronouncements by teachers from Singapore and China, concerning the pedagogic relevance of introducing spoken English (SE) in class. The author's goal was to discover if Asian teachers think SE is useful for students of varied linguistic levels (elementary, intermediate, and advanced). When asked to answer a questionnaire about SG, around 75% of the teachers declared it is important to show and discuss spontaneous native speakers' (NS) speech with learners but, surprisingly, around 25% were clearly against SE introduction in class.

In Goh's study, there were unconditional responses which showed the worries of teachers with the mandatory hegemony of British English: "It is rather artificial and an uphill task to force down the throats of our pupils to speak English using the linguistic information based on British English" (GOH, 2009, p. 6). There were also declarations that showed

² In this article we consider written English the one that is based on standards of traditional written grammar. Written communication such as informal emails, notes, mobile phone messages and colloquial uses on social nets are very close to spoken English. In fact, sometimes these kinds of communication are considered spoken language as well.

³ In this work we consider second languages and additional languages as any language learned or acquired after the first one.



preoccupation with sociolinguistic matters: “We could add more variety, by using American, Australian, Canadian English, etc. to the teaching of spoken grammar” (Ibidem). Quite the opposite, there were teachers’ opinions that revealed lack of Linguistics’ knowledge, such as the following: “I don’t think spoken grammar should be taught. We want ourselves to speak fluent educated English not broken English” (our emphasis), as well as “I am against explicit teaching of such characteristics as it would confuse students’ knowledge of written grammar” (ibid., p.10).

The supremacy of written over spoken language is a well-known fact regarding first and second language teaching. Even though there are still languages which are just spoken in several small communities around the world, the prejudice against studies on oral communication remains evident. Carter and McCarthy synthesize this idea in their introduction to the CGE:

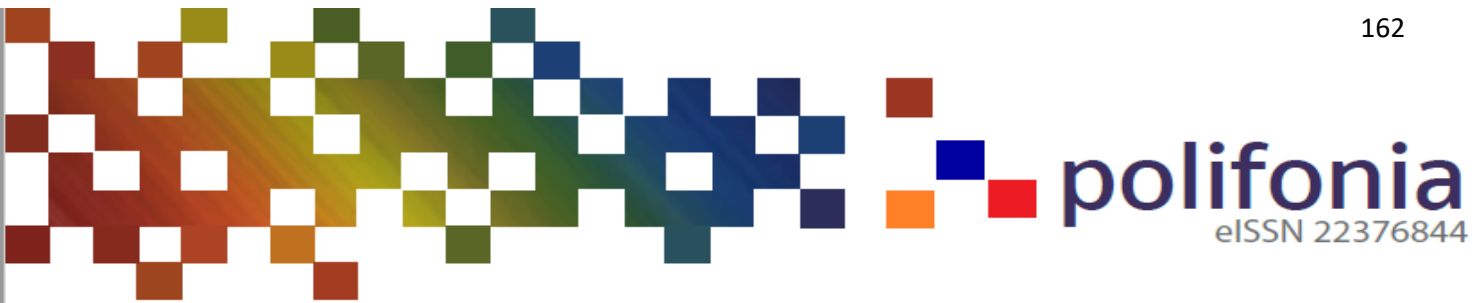
The spoken language has been downgraded and has to be regarded as relatively inferior to written manifestations. Both in the teaching and learning of first, second and foreign languages, and in educational institutions and society in general, oral skills are normally less highly valued, with linguistic expertise being equated almost exclusively with a capacity to read and write. (CARTER; MCCARTHY, 2006, p. 9)

The fact that researchers and teachers should be more aware on the pedagogic relevance of spoken grammar is clear, but there are surely different opinions about its use in the classroom, and it is a matter of a great amount of discussion for future works.

In the next section, we are going to discuss briefly about descriptive and prescriptive grammars.

Descriptive and prescriptive grammars

To develop this study, we have chosen two descriptive grammars of Standard English: The grammar book, by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), and Cambridge Grammar of English (CGE), by Carter and McCarter (2006). The first one is based on studies of



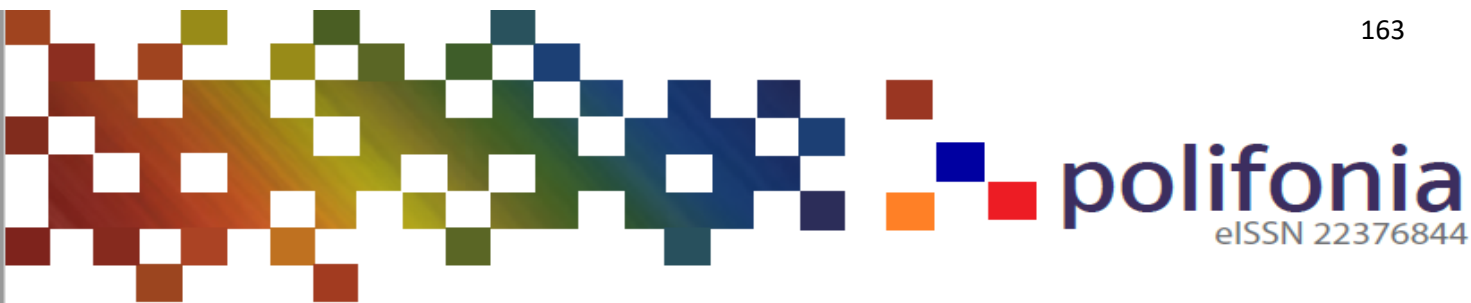
American English (AmE), and the latter is based on studies of British English (BrE). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman emphasize that their grammar is descriptive because they describe what speakers really do; they are based on researches in which native speakers judge what can or cannot be acceptable.

They make clear their grammar is not a prescriptive one because their goal is not telling what people should say. In their view, “a prescriptive grammar can be abused by those who insist on outdated conventions or those who try to tell others what a form ought to mean rather than the meaning understood in general usage”. (CELCE-MURCIA; LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1999, p. 9).

However, it is important to remark that these authors do not consider prescriptive grammar useless or that it has less value than the descriptive ones. They say that prescriptive grammars can be useful for students who need to take examinations such as TOEFL - Test of English for foreign learners, the certificates of Cambridge University, among others. In their grammar, like in this article, they consider ungrammatical what is unacceptable to native speakers of English. Sentences such as “They no speak Turkish” and “He no say” would be good examples of them. Examples of sentences accepted by some nonstandard dialect of English, like “He didn’t say nothing” or “She is more fat than her mother” would not be labeled as ungrammatical in anyway.

The Cambridge Grammar of English, known nowadays by CGE is a very comprehensive grammar of spoken and written English, grounded on the Cambridge International Corpus. In its introduction, Carter and McCarthy expose that they will consider ungrammatical only structures which are not acceptable, either syntactically or morphologically, bringing examples like “I my sister gave a sweater for birthday her” and “I gives my sister sweater a for her birthday” (CARTER; MCCARTHY, 2006, p. 9)

That is, sentences not spoken or written by any native speaker at all. The same way as Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), Carter and McCarthy (2006) assume their book is a grammar of standard English, even though they admit that standard British English is



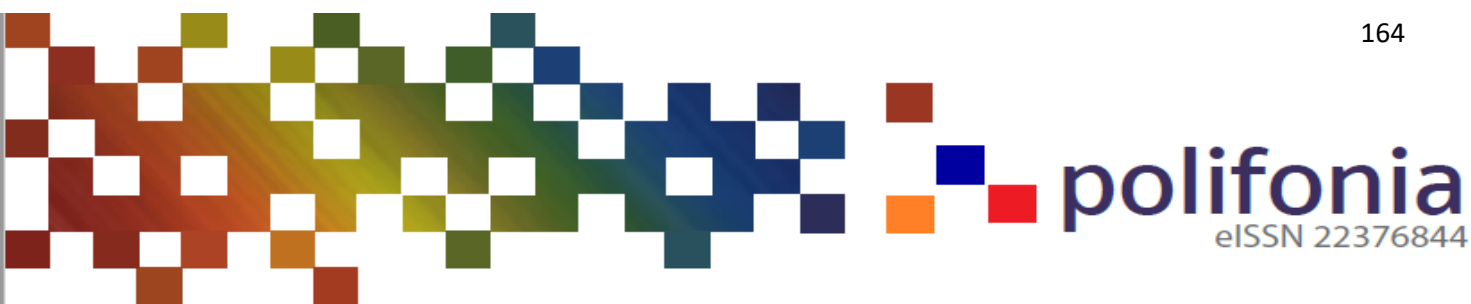
just a variety of that language. Australian, American, Indian, Jamaican English can differ considerably in terms of pronunciation but not much when grammar (syntax) is concerned.

Carter and McCarthy (2006) exclude, in their study, sentences which are unacceptable in all varieties of English, such as “He did must speak” (p.5). They also give some basic explanations about the definition of prescriptive and descriptive grammar, declaring that their grammar is a descriptive one. Their emphasis is on describing the ways people use English to communicate day-to-day. Nevertheless, they agree on the importance of some prescriptive rules, saying that

it is therefore important that learners are aware of the social importance which attaches to certain prescriptive rules while at the same time being aware of the way in which English is used by real speakers and writers of the language. (CARTER; MCCARTHY, 2006, p. 6)

Following these ideas, Bechara (2010) argues that any historical language – English, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish etc. – has several languages in each of them. These differences are evident and must be considered part of those languages. Both native and second language speakers are able to identify, in different levels, such nuances and diversities. The descriptive grammar is always based on linguistic researches. As its name shows, it describes the language as a complex system in all its aspects. This is the main reason why this kind of grammar is not preoccupied in judging which sentences are right or wrong.

Moreover, Bechara emphasizes that the descriptive grammar has its own methodology to register and describe languages, based on empirical samples, either written or oral. Therefore, doing a research based on a descriptive grammar is different from doing a research based on a prescriptive grammar, because this one considers just the judgments of “ideal speakers”, most of time in unnatural situations, or in sentences extracted from old novels, short stories, newspapers editorials and so on.



It is impossible, nowadays, to think in an invariant language, suitable for every kind of situation the speakers face on a regular basis. More than four decades ago, in 1969, Labov claimed that

the rules of standard English and its non-standard relatives are so similar that they are bound to interact. Languages and dialects are not so carefully partitioned from each other in the speakers' heads that the right does not know what the left hand is doing. (LABOV, 1969, p. 35)

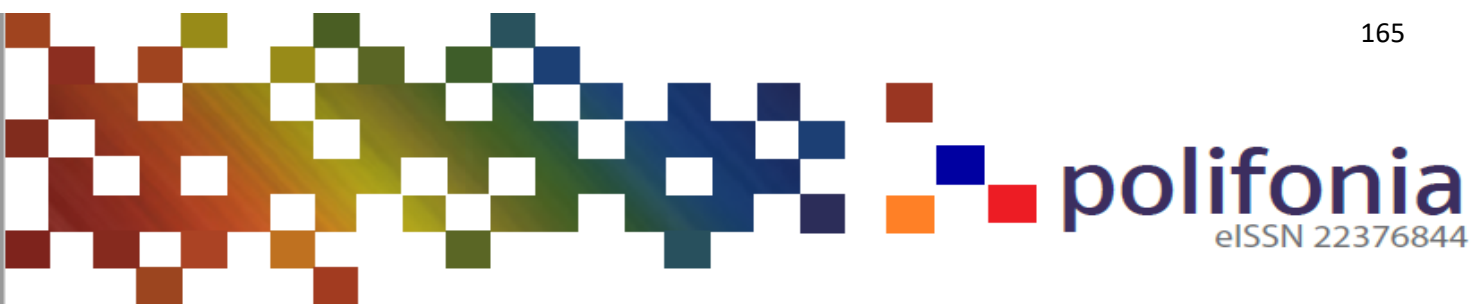
In fact, it is not our goal in this article to discuss about the usefulness of the prescriptive grammar, which surely has given several important contributions to the teaching of first and second languages. Here we are interested on grammars based on observation and analysis, by a linguistic view, the ones which are used for communication with the speech community. That was the reason why the grammars by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, and by Carter and McCarthy were chosen. To illustrate how questions are presented in other grammar books - which can be defined as prescriptive - we will present the explanations of Alexander (1997) and Yule (2006).

In the next session, we will make a concise presentation on the questions' formation and the use of ellipsis in English because that is, in fact, the specific feature being studied for this article.

Questions' formation in English: Yes/No questions

There are several grammars written exclusively for second language learners. Authors such as Alexander (1997) and Yule (2006) wrote some of these books, which are largely used in SLA classes all around the world. Surely learners are able to study and practice through the formal activities usually presented after a brief explanation of the grammar topic of the unit.

Initially, let's examine the considerations about the use of Yes/No questions on Alexander's Longman English Grammar Practice (1997). The explanation is in a box and it



is straight to the point; the author does not allow other interpretations and variances that possibly occur in real life:

Table 1 – Yes/No Questions

1 – We make Yes/No questions from statements. In the case of be, have (auxiliary) and modal verbs like *can* and *must* we do this by **inversion**, that is by putting be, have or can, etc. in front of the subject:

He is leaving. – **Is he** leaving?

She can drive a bus. – **Can she** drive a bus?

2 – With all other verbs, we form Yes/No questions with Do and Does in the simple present and Did in the simple past. The form of the verb is always in the bar infinitive:

We turn left here. – **Do we turn** left here?

He works well. – **Does he work** well?

They arrived late. – **Do they arrive** late?

Source: Adapted by Alexander, 1997, p. 188

As we can notice, the explanation is prescriptive and useful only to practice the inversion of affirmative sentences decontextualized, with no other examples, such as in a real dialogue or in any authentic material. In fact, there is only one activity that is based on a very unnatural conversation. Moreover, the author does not explain why he is just talking about simple present and simple past and does not mention in what kind of communicative situations those questions are used in real life. Even in the introduction and presentation of the book, he does not clarify on what kind of grammar or theory he is based for his descriptions and activities.

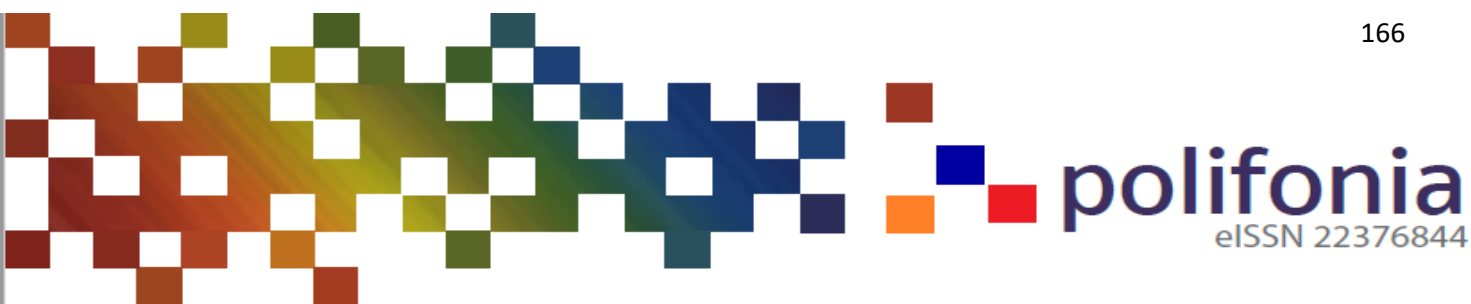
Secondly, we will check the unit about questions at Oxford Practice Grammar by George Yule (2013). Before presenting some tasks based on a text, the author gives the following explanations:

Table 2 – Question Formation

Questions are usually formed with an auxiliary verb (be, do or have) or a modal before the subject and the main verb (**Has** he gone? **Should** we wait?).

There are Yes/No questions (**Are** you crying? **Do** they care?) and Wh-questions (**Where** has he gone? **Why** should we wait?).

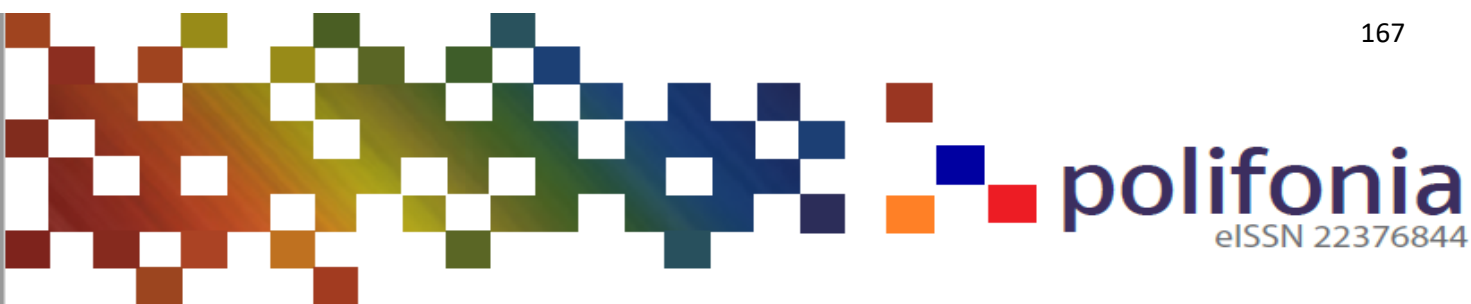
Source: Adapted by Yule, 2006, p.44)



As well as Alexander, Yule does not mention, in his introduction, what type of grammar theory he follows. He says the book is intended for the learners' use either in the classroom or in their own time, and he emphasizes that there are different kind of activities which surely help the learners practicing: the students are asked to summarize, to use the dictionary, to match sentences, to find grammar mistakes, to connect between explanations and examples, and to do some tests to check what they have learned. Nowhere in the book has the author explained the differences of uses in formal or colloquial English, in written or in oral situations.

Carter and McCarthy (2006) cover the aspects of questions formation in quite a few parts of the book, but it is in a chapter called "Questions" that they describe them in a more detailed way. As it is a very comprehensive work, they spend about ten pages to talk about the functions and structures of questions. They affirm that "questions may range from forms involving imperatives, to simple interrogatives, interrogatives with modal verbs, indirect interrogatives, declaratives and reduced questions" (CARTER; MCCARTHY, 2006, p. 715). They declare that prototypical questions have interrogative form, such as in "Do you want one?; Are you nervous?; Would you prefer Spain or Portugal?; What do you want?" (Ibidem, p.716). On the other hand, there are questions with no interrogative form, and they may be declarative or interrogative. The intonation and the written or oral context can indicate if the utterance must be considered a question, and, especially in informal spoken settings, "it is not necessary to include all the clause elements in the question: subjects and auxiliary verbs, or lexical verb *be*, may not need to be present as references will be obvious to the speaker and listener" (Ibidem, p. 719). At that point, the following examples are given:

- You want some more bread, Nick?
- Everybody got three sheets?
- Finished?
- Ready? (Ibidem 719-720)



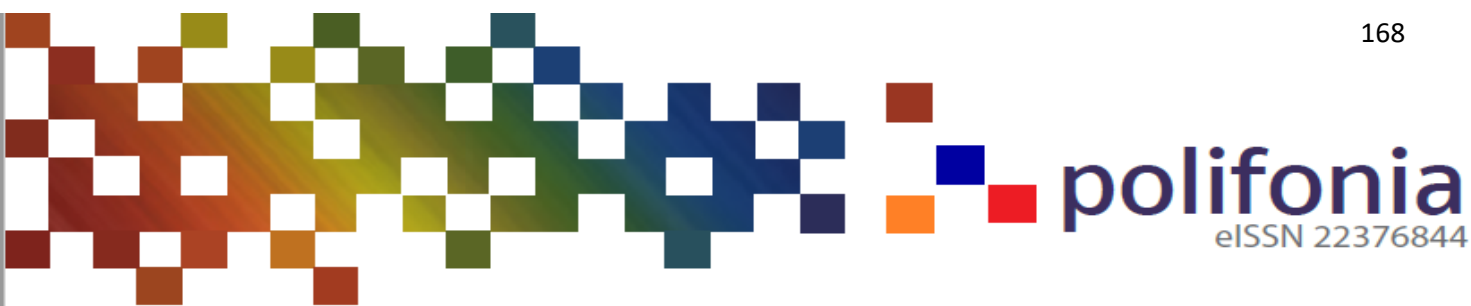
Later, in the same unit, Carter and McCarthy explain that, in informal speech, auxiliary verbs may not need to be present where the meaning is clear, such as in “What you talking about?” and in “Where you going tonight? Anywhere special?” (Ibidem, p. 721).

As Carter and McCarthy’s grammar was published for the first time in 2006, and it is based on a large corpus research, we can say (although it is necessary to do some research to confirm something like that) that after more than 12 years, these simplified structures have been used frequently in informal spoken and written English. We usually see such examples on TV series, films, news, and in everyday conversations in several places in countries where English is the first language, or in places where it is used for business, tourism, academic purposes, etc. So, what is the reason why some teachers do not accept them as an acceptable and meaningful way of communicating?

In The Grammar book, by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), there are three whole chapters about the structure of question formation⁴. Chapter 11 covers yes/no questions (pages 205-225); it is a comprehensive unit, in which the authors make considerations about questions with an auxiliary verb, with the *Be* Copula and other verbs, uninverted questions, use of *Be* as gap fillers and questions with modals. The authors explain that it is not easy for second or foreign language learners to learn how to use inversion in Yes/No questions because this type of structure is rare among languages in the world. They emphasize that

It is not surprising, then, that inversion in English yes/no questions is problematic for ESL/EFL students. Inversion has not always been used in English questions, however. At an early stage in the history of English, questions were made with the use of rising intonation alone. Only much later did inversion in question formation come into being. And the early form of this inversion was with the subject and the verb: Know you the way to Ipswich?. It took much longer for the rule requiring subject and operator inversion to become standard. (CELCE-MURCIA; LARSEN-FREEMAN, 1999, p.205)

⁴ The chapters 13 and 14 describe the use of Wh-questions, and the use of other structures that look like questions. Both units are very important for the readers who want to know more about question formation in English. As in this work our main goal is to explain the use the yes/no questions, we only cite chapter 11.



All through the chapter, there are explanations about the rules of inversion, and about the use of uninverted questions and elliptical questions. Some examples from the book are cited below:

You're going to the dance?

(Are) You going to the movies?

(Has) She been feeling better? (Ibidem, p.217)

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman remind the reader that if *you* is the subject of the sentence, it can also be deleted in most cases, along with the operator:

(Do you) Wanna study together?

At the end of the chapter, the authors say that

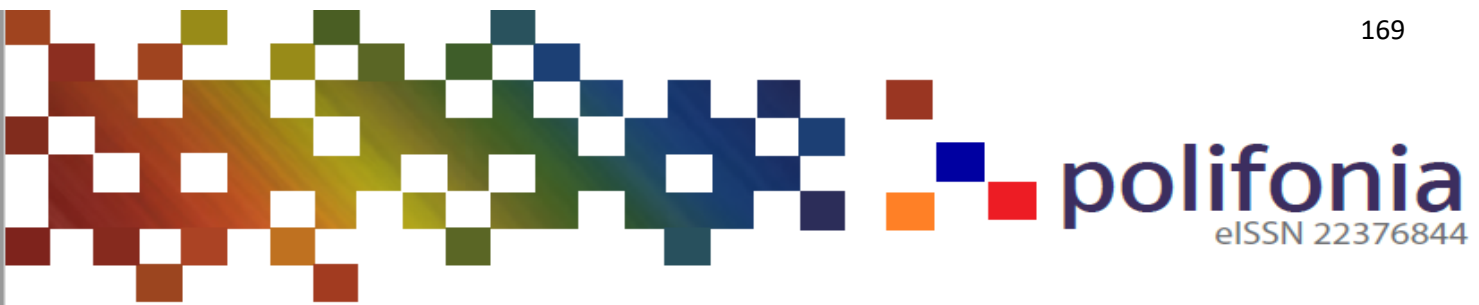
many conversational yes/no questions are uninverted, elliptical, or nonclausal in form. (...) While we might not specifically teach ESL/EFL students to produce these forms, students may be confused by them, and you may need to help them understand their use. (CELCE-MURCIA; LARSEN-FEEMAN, 1999, p.219)

In the following session, we are going to explain how this research was developed, and what are the beliefs of the subjects about the question formation in spoken English.

Data and method for the present study

The instrument

Although there is not enough space to describe all details of the research method used in this work, as well as to analyse every response given by the subjects, it is important to mention that the instrument was piloted by 23 learners of different levels of English proficiency. The researcher told them that the questions were for a SLA research and also asked, in an informal conversation, if there were any sentences hard to understand or not clear enough in the instrument. This is important because we can notice that several times



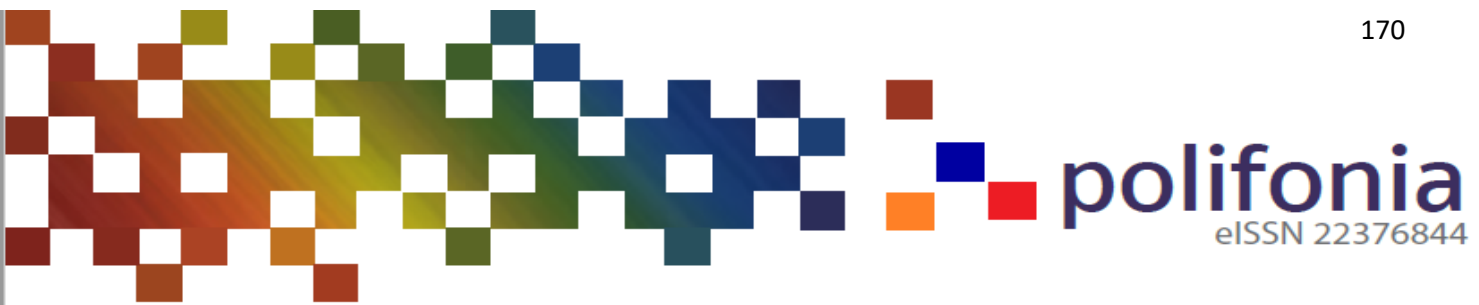
the subjects do not understand the lexicon of some sentences and, because of that, affirm that the structure of the sentence is “wrong”. Twenty learners declared that the activity was easily understandable and that there were not suggestions to be made. Three learners recommended some modifications on the headings of the quiz, and we agreed they were useful, making those changes for the ultimate instrument. All the subjects – even the ones who had informed they had very low knowledge in English – said the vocabulary was easy and did not have any questions on the words’ meaning. In fact, the choice for a simple lexicon was on purpose: as we said above, we did not want the subjects to be stuck on a sentence because they could not know the meaning of a word or expression. The focus of the research is not on the lexicon, it is on the acceptability of uninverted, elliptical questions, where subjects or auxiliaries are often omitted, such as in the following examples given by Timmis, 2002, p. 25:

- Started yet?
- The dog bothering you?
- Anybody want soup?

The questions of the instrument were taken by films and TV series (only one was taken from a British novel), in which the dialogues try to be faithful to the reality of daily conversations in informal environments, by speakers of American and British English. There were 20 different sentences, but 8 of them were fillers that followed the rules of prescriptive grammars, that is, the auxiliaries were not omitted, and they were in the inverted position:

- Are you working now?
- How old is she?
- Can you open the window, please?
- Does she often go to Australia?

There were also some affirmative sentences that did not bring any trouble to the learners because most learners chose A for these fillers, which means they are fully accepted.

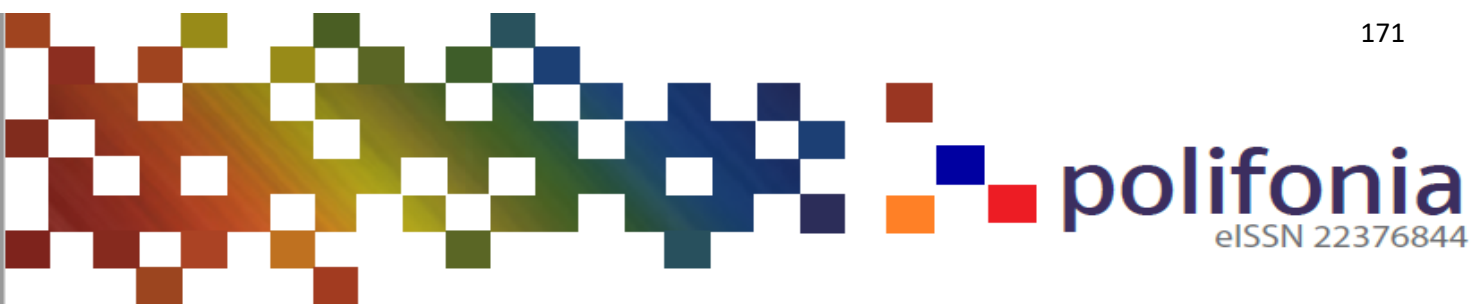


There were only 6 occurrences (from the responses of all subjects) overall for alternative AA (Sometimes acceptable) for those sentences. This data is important because we can infer that the learners – even the ones with less time of formal study in English – probably have good knowledge on syntax and vocabulary.

- There are seven people in this room.
- I started to study English 3 years ago.
- She speaks three languages.

The following interrogatives were the ones analysed in the instrument, that is, the ones which are not the fillers. We will present them below, informing from which book, films or TV series they were taken out. All dialogues from which the questions were taken were supposed to be informal, trying to reproduce colloquial American or British English:

1. I can help you, you remember?
(Film *The hours*, 2002. The dialogue was to be in the 1980's)
2. You remember me?
(*Big Bang Theory*, Sixth Season, episode 2, 2012)
3. I'm coming down. Coming?
(*Downton Abbey*, First Season, episode 2, 2013. The scene was to be in 1912)
4. Everyone well?
(*Big Bang Theory*, Sixth Season, episode 2, 2012)
5. You busy?
(*Downton Abbey*, Fourth Season, episode 2, 2014. The dialogue was to be in 1923)
6. You have formed some conclusions?
(*The Boscombe Valley Mystery – The adventures of Sherlock Holmes – Short Stories* by Conan Doyle, 1892)



Division of groups and answers

There are 4 different groups with 15 learners each, with the total amount of 60 subjects. As our main goal is to check how learners are facing and accepting the use of uninverted questions in spoken English, and since we suppose that this acceptance can change, the groups were separated by the time they have been studying English in a formal set: schools, language courses, private classes: Group 1 (0 – 1 year); Group 2: (1 – 3 years); Group 3 (3 – 5 years); Group 4 (more than 5 years).

Before answering the activity in which the subjects had to make judgments about the questions presented, they were asked to choose what kind of activities they usually do outside the class with the aim of improving their English skills.⁵ The information about those activities have the objective of helping the researcher know if the students have contact with informal English, that is, with uses of English in which the structures being studied in this research happen frequently. If the subjects often watch TV series, read song lyrics, or play online games, for example, we suppose they probably accept uninverted questions more easily. Their responses about this part of the research are shown in the table below:

Table 3. English Activities

Activities - all groups	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	AMOUNT
Books and Magazines	3	3	9	11	26
Lyrics and Videos	15	13	11	11	50
Films and TV Series	15	14	14	16	59
Classes Online	2	1	4	4	11
Digital Games	8	6	5	3	22

Source – elaborated by the author

⁵ All the instructions were made in Portuguese, and the students were able to make questions only before answering the instrument.

We perceive that the favorite activities are watching films and TV series (59 subjects) and watching music videos with or without lyrics (50 subjects). The least favorite activity is watching classes online: only 11 subjects said they enjoy doing that by themselves. The information from this table can help us having some ideas of what activities learners are doing outside the classroom that can help them improve their knowledge about the target language. In fact, we assume these results could be different 10 or 5 years ago because of the massive use of internet and all the kinds of materials in English we can access online nowadays: news, videos, music, films, TV series, articles, books, magazines, games, and so on.

Our next step is to discuss the answers of the instrument given by the four groups, separately. In all tables we will show how many times the questions were considerable Acceptable (A), Sometimes acceptable (AA), I don't know if it is acceptable (NS) and Non-acceptable (NA).⁶

Table 4. Group 1: 0 – 1 year

Group 1	A	AA	NS	NA
1- I can help you, you remember?	6	2	3	5
2- You remember me?	6	3	3	4
3- I'm coming down. Coming?	2	4	7	3
4- Everyone well?	3	7	3	3
5- You busy?	1	3	5	7
6- You have formed some conclusions?	5	1	4	6
TOTAL AMOUNT:	23	20	25	28

Source: Elaborated by the author.

In this table, we examine the responses given by the learners who have studied English for one year or less. The highest number of answers was Non-acceptable with 28 occurrences. Following by that, there were 25 occurrences for I don't know, and 23 for

⁶ As the instrument has all the explanations in Portuguese, the option for the initials in Portuguese was made to be easier to the learners to make their choices: A (aceitável), AA (aceitável às vezes), NS (não sei se é aceitável), and NA (não aceitável). No subject made any concerns about that.

Sometimes acceptable. It is important to note that the highest option for I don't know (7 occurrences) was for the question I'm coming down. Coming?. Maybe this kind of construction makes the students feel insecure because it is not common to find a lose verb as an interrogative sentence, in course books or in traditional grammars. Similarly, there were 7 occurrences of Non-acceptable for You busy?. In that case, it is possible that the students feel it is unexpected to see a question without a verb on it. It is interesting to observe that the most acceptable interrogative sentences were I can help you, you remember? (6) And You remember me? (6). It is probable that the omission of the auxiliary "Do" does not cause oddness to some learners.

Table 5. Group 2: 1 – 3 years

Group 2	A	AA	NS	NA
1- I can help you, you remember?	6	2	3	5
2- You remember me?	7	3	2	4
3- I'm coming down. Coming?	2	2	9	3
4- Everyone well?	2	8	5	1
5- You busy?	2	5	3	6
6- You have formed some conclusions?	5	4	4	3
TOTAL AMOUNT:	24	24	26	22

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Comparing this group to group 1, we realize that more subjects (24) affirm that the sentences are Sometimes acceptable and fewer (22) agree that they are Non-acceptable. In fact, these results have been waited: it is possible that the more the learners study English, the more they accept uninverted questions. Again, questions number 1 (I can help you, you remember?) and 2 (You remember me?) were the most acceptable with 6 and 7 occurrences. Similarly, to group 1, several subjects (9) didn't know if the question number 3 (I'm coming down. Coming?) could be acceptable or not. In this group, the highest number of choices was I don't know (26), although in group 1 the highest number of occurrences was for Non-acceptable (28).

Table 6. Group 3: 3 – 5 years

Group 3	A	AA	NS	NA
1- I can help you, you remember?	4	5	3	4
2- You remember me?	4	7	3	2
3- I'm coming down. Coming?	2	4	4	6
4- Everyone well?	1	8	3	4
5- You busy?	2	5	3	6
6- You have formed some conclusions?	4	2	5	5
TOTAL AMOUNT:	17	31	21	27

Source: Elaborated by the author.

This group has relevant differences from the previous groups. The choices for Sometimes acceptable increased a great deal (31) comparing to group 1 (20) and group 2 (24). It is difficult to say what was the reason for that, but perhaps the learners, after 3 years studying English, have seen - and understood - many different grammar structures presenting in films, TV series, internet, and song lyrics. However, the number of occurrences for Acceptable decreased to 17, comparing to 23 in group 1, and 24 in group 2. Again, the most acceptable questions were number 1 and number 2.

Table 7. Group 4: 5 years or more

Group 4	A	AA	NS	NA
1- I can help you, you remember?	1	7	1	7
2- You remember me?	5	6	1	4
3- I'm coming down. Coming?	Zero	2	7	7
4- Everyone well?	3	4	4	5
5- You busy?	Zero	8	Zero	8
6- You have formed some conclusions?	2	5	2	7
TOTAL AMOUNT:	11	32	15	38

Source: Elaborated by the author.

In group 4 we can notice some unhoped results: The question number 1 has just one Acceptable, although in groups 1 and 2 the number was 6 in both, and in group 3, there were 4 occurrences. Another thought-provoking information is the zero acceptance for question

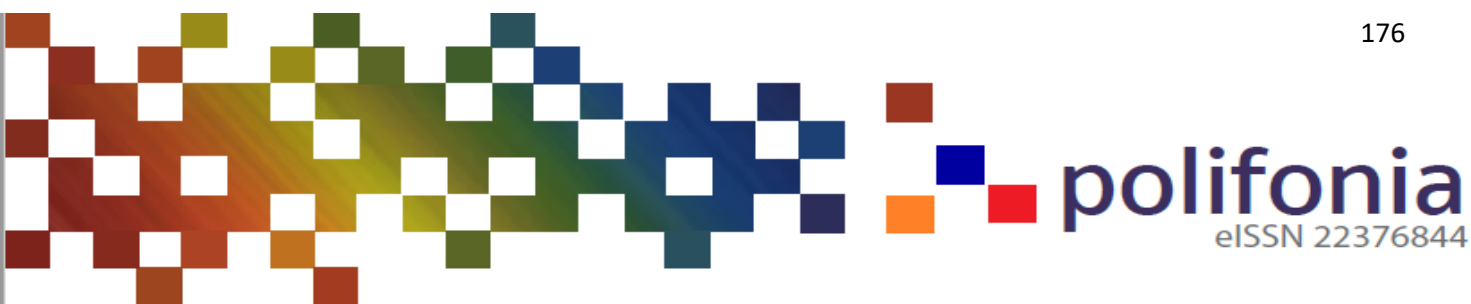
number 5 and zero occurrences of I don't know for the same question. In this group, there is the highest occurrences for Sometimes acceptable (32), and the explanation for that maybe is directly related to the time the learners have been studying English, and also because 16 subjects from this group declared they watch films and TV series, in which obviously it is shown a lot of informal conversations. What makes us curious is the fact that there was a total of 38 subjects affirming that the sentences are Non-acceptable. This result was not really waited because the other groups had 28 (group 1), 22 (group 2), and 27 (group 3) and these subjects have been studying English for a smaller time period than group 4. The occurrences for I don't know were the lowest too: only 15 choices altogether, what shows that probably these learners feel more secure to say what is right or wrong in their view.

Table 8. Answers by the four groups

Total amount - all groups	A	AA	NS	NA
Group 1	23	20	25	28
Group 2	24	24	26	22
Group 3	17	31	21	27
Group 4	11	32	15	38
TOTAL OF ANSWERS	75	107	87	115

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Comparing the answers of all groups, it is difficult to find some patterns. The groups in which the fewer subjects accept the sentences was group 4 (38 occurrences). However, the same group had the highest number of Sometimes acceptable, which shows that they are aware the uninverted questions can be used in some cases, probably in informal occasions. As we have expected, groups 1 and 2 had the highest choices (25, 26) of I don't know, although groups 3 and 4 had the lowest choices at this option (21, 15). This is relevant because we can perceive that the more the learners study the target language, the more they feel comfortable to choose a response different from I don't know. The number of answers for Non-acceptable was high (115) but the result of Sometimes acceptable kind of compensate that result because the learners agree the sentences could be acceptable 107



times. Another result that is inquiring is the following: Groups 1 and 2 were the ones who had more occurrences of Acceptable: 23 and 24 times respectively. On the contrary, group 4 had just 11 occurrences for that.

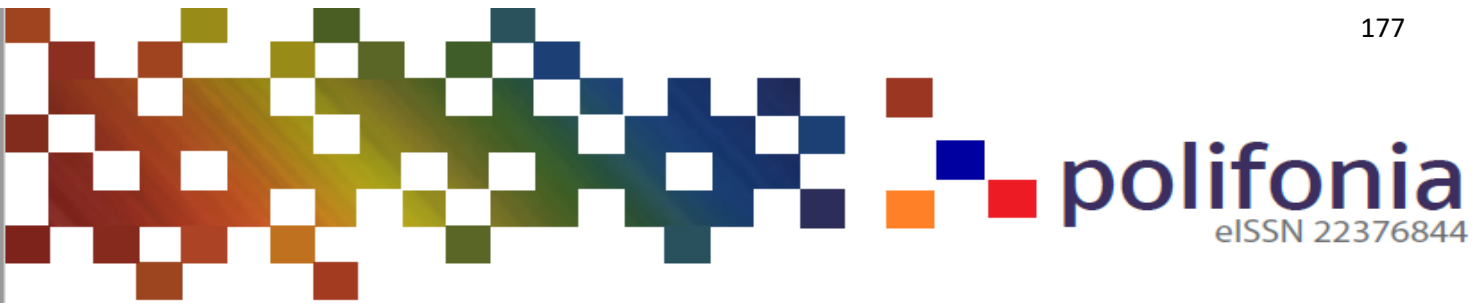
Seeing the numbers from a different view, we have the following results from all groups: 19,6% of all the occurrences were for Acceptable, 27,8% were for Sometimes acceptable, 22,7% for I don't know, and 29,9% for Non-acceptable. Although we have a high percentage for Non-acceptable, there was almost 30% of the amounts for Sometimes acceptable; this result is interesting indeed because it shows the learners are aware there are linguistic structures that can be used in different ways, depending on the situation.

Final Remarks

Our main goal in this research is to check if learners consider uninverted questions acceptable, if they think this kind of construction can be used in English now. Our results show that almost one third of the answers (29,9%) were Non-acceptable. Although there can be several explanations for that, we believe that the students are not being explained about the uses of spoken English. Speaking specifically about uninverted questions, we are sure learners see these structures in films, series, videos on youtube, news, games, books and magazines. The problem is: if teachers do not use authentic materials, and do not talk with the students about the language variations, it is possible that learners will not accept those uses, thinking they are going to be wrong. To study spoken aspects of any language is and always has been a necessity. Hilliard claims that

learning about characteristics of spoken grammar and ways to teach them empowers you to improve your students' overall fluency and face-to-face conversation, increases the authenticity of your speaking lessons, and prevents your students from speaking English like a textbook. (HILLIARD, 2014, p.4)

It is not our task here to suggest what kind of materials and activities teachers should do, and how they should work in the classroom, but we think these classes would be improved if the learners were encouraged to try out a great deal of language production, not being



constrained to use only the language considered “correct” or shown in books and in prescriptive grammars.

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