

**MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND  
TRAINING  
UNIVERSITY OF DANANG**

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**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE  
LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF STUDENT'S  
QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH CLASSROOM AT  
HIGH SCHOOLS IN BUON MA THUOT CITY**

**Field : The English Language  
Code : 60.22.15**

**MASTER THESIS IN THE ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE  
(A SUMMARY)**

**DANANG - 2011**

**The thesis has been completed at the College of Foreign  
Languages, University of Da Nang.**

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The thesis to be orally defended at Examining Committee.

Time: July 2011

Venue: Tay Nguyen University

The original of this thesis is accessible for purpose of reference at the College of Foreign Languages Library, Da Nang University and the Information Resources Centre, Da Nang University.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

It is undeniable that question (interrogative sentence) plays a significant role in communication. Thiem [2, p. 222] states that the main purpose of question is to seek for unknown information. Particularly, question plays the role of drawing the interlocutor's attention, and getting him/her involved in the topic that the speaker is addressing [1].

Pedagogically, the role of question is often highlighted. McGrew [26] believes that "Question-and-answer interactions have characterized pedagogy since the most ancient of teachers". Painter [30] also asserts:

*Questioning is a valuable part of the teaching and learning process because it enables participants (teachers and students) to establish what is already known, to use and extend this knowledge and then to develop ideas. It also provides a structure to examine ideas and information.*

In Vietnam, since the open door policy and the recent integration into the World Trade Organization, foreign language, especially English, has become a vital means for international communication due to the growth in political, economic, and cultural exchange with foreign countries all over the world. Accordingly, the demand for English learning has also elevated. Phuoc and Hau [43, p. 72] state:

*Among the popular languages, English has been undoubtedly in the leading position with the highest number of learners in Vietnam.*

With such a demand for English learning in Vietnam, it is significant to take into consideration the issues of the classroom language, of which students' English questions are of those to count. This will probably shed light on exploring Vietnamese students' difficulties in the acquisition of English, which as a consequence makes certain contribution to improving the teaching and learning of English in Vietnam.

### 1.2. RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

#### 1.2.1. Research aims

This research aims to study the students' language in general and the students' in-class English questions in particular, which is supposed to help students improve their skills in making English questions, thus their communicative competence in English.

#### 1.2.2. Objectives

This study seeks to investigate the syntactic and pragmatic features of the students' English questions in English classes at Cao Nguyen and Le Duan high schools in Buon Ma Thuot city. Based on the findings, suggestions are given to develop students' strategies for making English questions.

### 1.3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the syntactic features of the students' English questions in English classes at Cao Nguyen and Le Duan high schools?

2. What are the pragmatic features of the students' English questions in English classes at Cao Nguyen and Le Duan high schools?

#### **1.4. SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The research aims to investigate the linguistic features of the students' classroom questions; the emphasis, however, was placed mainly on the syntactic and pragmatic features of the students' English questions in classroom. Additionally, this study was conducted on students of grade ten to grade twelve at Cao Nguyen and Le Duan high school. The data were thus limited in scope, and could not be generalized to other contexts.

#### **1.5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This project helps gain information about the syntactic and pragmatic features of the students' classroom questions. On the basis of the findings, suggestions were given to develop students' strategies for making English questions, thus enhance students' communicative competence in English, contributing to the teaching and learning of English at Cao Nguyen and Le Duan High School.

#### **1.6. STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY**

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Chapter 2 – Literature review and Theoretical background

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Chapter 4 – Findings and discussion

Chapter 5 – Conclusions

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. PREVIOUS STUDIES**

Remarkably, White, Spada, Lightbown, and Randa [44] looked at students' L2 question formation as part of a study of whether input enhancement could improve question formation. Pica, Evans, Jo, and Washburn [33] looked mainly at the phenomenon of teachers correcting students' questions, interactions which take the form: student questions, teacher corrects, student rephrases question, teacher responds.

In Vietnam, studies on questions have been conducted by some researchers such as Nguyen Thi Hong Ngan [1], Tran Pham Ngoc Quynh [42], Phan Thi Anh Van [32], Pham Thi Mai [31]. However, there seem to be no research relating to describing and analyzing the linguistic features of the students' English questions used in classroom.

### **2.2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

#### **2.2.1. Definitions of question**

*[Question] is a form of language that invites a reply, marked in spoken English with specific patterns of intonation and in written and printed English by a closing question mark (?). grammar, question is a term in the classification of sentences, referring to types distinguished by form and function from such other sentence types as statement and command [25, p. 833]*

### 2.2.2. The Importance of students' questions

In language classrooms, questions may be the most acceptable way for students to initiate topics. In such classrooms, student questions will be the main source of genuine, unsolicited student utterances. Those questions are thus a rich source of information to teachers—both the form and the content of the question can be windows into the students' learning processes.

### 2.2.3. Theory of syntax

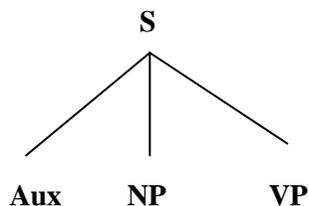
#### 2.2.3.1. Syntactic features of questions

##### a. Types of English questions

Based on the categorizations of English questions, it can be generalized that English questions can be syntactically divided into three major types consisting of Yes-No questions, WH-questions (information questions), and alternative questions.

##### b. Structures of English questions

English questions normally require the inversion of the auxiliary verb to the position before the subject noun phrase (NP) [41], [14]. Thus, the general constituent structure of English questions can be illustrated as follows:



*Figure 2.1 Constituent structure of English questions (Adapted from Finnegan, 2004)*

For Yes-No questions the structure is as follows: **Auxiliary verb + Subject (NP)+ Verb (infinitive without to)**

For example: *Do you like Mozart?*

*Are you a student?*

Information questions (WH questions), normally have the structure as follows: **Question word + Auxiliary verb + Subject (NP) + Verb (infinitive without to)**

For example: *What does she want?*

However, when the question word is the subject of the verb, the question structure changes into: **Question word + Verb + (Complement/Object)**

For example: *Who left the door open?*

### 2.2.4. Pragmatic theory

#### 2.2.4.1. Theory of speech act

#### 2.2.4.2. Classification of speech acts

#### 2.2.4.3. Politeness theory

##### a. Face

##### b. Face threatening act (FTA)

##### c. Positive politeness and negative politeness

##### d. Politeness strategies for doing FTA

### 2.2.5. Learner language and error analysis

#### 2.2.5.1. Learner language

Learner language was “a sort of hybrid between his first language (L1) and the target language” [10, p. 2] formed during the process of acquiring the second language through trial and error, and hypothesis testing.

### 2.2.5.2. Error analysis

Error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis which places its emphasis on the learners' errors. It consists of a comparison between the errors made in the target language (TL) and that TL itself.

### 2.2.5.3. Classification of errors and model for error analysis

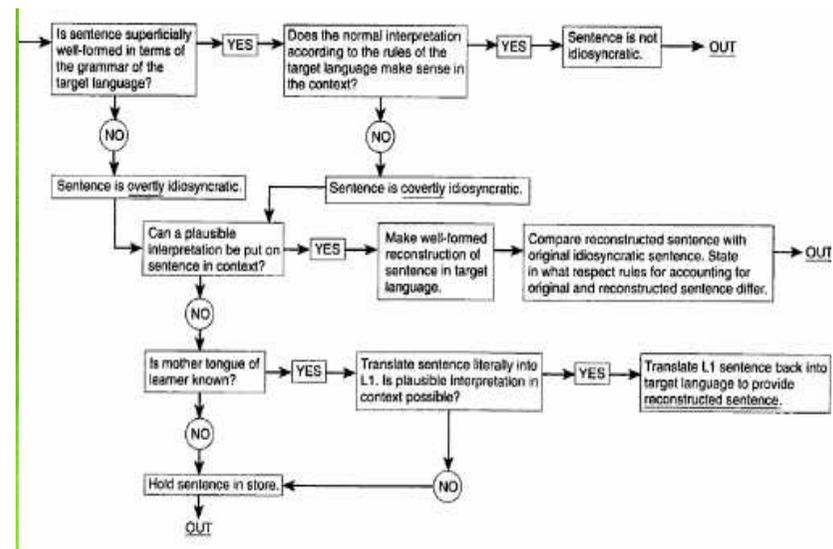


Figure 2.2 Corder's Model of Error Identification

### 2.2.5.4. Source of errors

Brown [6] assumes that errors emerge during the process of language transfer which he categorizes into interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer.

### 2.2.5.6. Significance of error analysis and interlanguage

Firstly, it helps teachers assess teaching procedures. Secondly, it helps learners to be aware of the steps that they go

through in acquiring second language features. Lastly, it provides a deeper understanding of errors that second language learners make.

### 2.3. SUMMARY

So far in this chapter I have presented the theoretical background relevant to my study. It consists of three major issues namely English question, the importance of students' questions in language classroom, and the theory of syntax and pragmatics. These are supposed to be crucial bases for the analysis and discussion of the findings.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. RESEARCH APPROACH

The researcher chose the descriptive research as the main approach to the research. The main goal of this type of research is to describe the data and characteristics of what is being studied.

### 3.2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study is an investigation into the linguistic features of students' questions, thus using a recording device provides the researcher with a permanent record of data for later analysis. Consequently, a tape recorder was chosen as the instrument to collect data for this study.

### 3.3. SAMPLE SELECTION

In order to collect data for the research, at the beginning of the school year the students were requested to use English only in the English class. The participants of this study consisted of students of three grades from six classes of Cao Nguyen and Le Duan high schools (including male and female students).

### 3.4. DATA COLLECTION

300 questions were recorded from students of three grades at Cao Nguyen and Le Duan high school within a period of two months – from March to April 2011. Most of the students have been learning English for three years at primary schools and four years at secondary schools.

### 3.5. DATA ANALYSIS

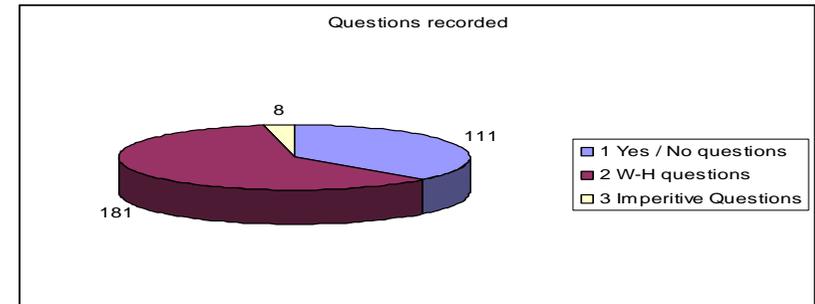
First, the data were collected, classified, and described on the basis of syntactic and pragmatic features. The data were then analyzed and described qualitatively and quantitatively by descriptive method and error analysis. Finally, some implications were given for the teaching and learning English at Cao Nguyen and Le Duan high schools

### 3.6. SUMMARY

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. SYNTACTIC FEATURES OF THE STUDENTS' QUESTIONS

#### 4.1.1. Types of questions often used by students in the classroom



*Figure 4.1: Classification of students' questions*

It appeared from the data collected that the questions can be classified into three types Yes-No questions, WH questions, and Imperative questions.

#### 4.1.2. Syntactic features of the students' questions

##### 4.1.2.1. Yes-No questions

The data shows that of the Yes-No question type the students had the tendency to use the questions beginning with *Can you, Could you*, which take the form of polite requests for information rather than questions that requires simple replies of *Yes* or *No*.

Other Yes-No questions which have the structures like *Auxiliary (do/does) + subject + verb* or *Be + subject + complement?* were also used by the students. However, the frequency of these questions was lower than that of the questions in the form of requests.

It revealed from the data that in making Yes-No questions, the students had the tendency to use the typical structures as follows:

*Can you/ Could you + verb + object + how + bare infinitive, Can you/ Could you + verb + object +preposition + Noun / Noun phrase, Can you/ Could you + verb + object + Noun/ Noun phrase, Can you/ Could you + verb + WH questions+ verb +subject, Would you + verb + object + WH questions + subject + verb, Would you + verb + object +Noun/ Noun phrase, Can you/ Could you help + object +bare infinitive, Would you mind + gerund*

#### 4.1.2.2. Errors in Yes-No questions

Referring to the grammatical structures of the questions taking the form of requests, the students, though, performed well in the first parts of the questions with *Can/Could you tell me* or *Can you help me*, the main parts of the questions which seek for help or guidance of the teacher were almost grammatically inaccurate

These errors are supposed to match the literature about the theory of error analysis. Basically, the errors that the students committed in making the questions can be attributable to the overt errors mostly due to the process of intralingual transfer. The prevalent errors of the students's Yes-No questions can be synthesized and illustrated in the following table

*Table 4.1: Types of errors of students' Yes-No questions*

<b>Types of errors</b>	<b>Errors</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Intralingual transfer</b>	<b>Omission of article <i>the</i> before a noun modified by an of phrase</b>	(38) <i>Could you tell me meaning of consequence? (eleven grade student)</i> (39) <i>Hello teacher, Could you tell me pronunciation of "sessions" (Eleven grade student)</i>
	<b>Misuse of <i>to</i> infinitive after noun phrase beginning with <i>how</i></b>	(40) <i>Can you tell me how listen English well? (ten grade student)</i>
	<b>Misuse of noun clause after <i>Can you tell/Could you tell me</i></b>	(41) <i>Can you tell me how do we learn English better? (ten grade student)</i>
	<b>Addition of auxiliary verb</b>	(42) <i>Do you can tell the answer for this question ? (ten grade student)</i>
	<b>Misuse of auxiliary verb</b>	(43) <i>Are you translate into Vietnamese? (Ten grade student)</i>

#### 4.1.2.3. WH questions

The data shows that most of the students' questions began with such question words as *What*, *How* and *Why*. It can be figured out that in making questions with *What*, *How* and *Why* the students expected to gain knowledge from the teacher and to seek help to apply the knowledge they have gained.

It also emerged from the data that the students' WH questions are characterized by the following syntactic features:

With respect to the questions with *What*, students tended to use such structures as: *What + auxiliary + subject + verb?/What + be + subject + verb?, What+auxiliary+subject+ modal verb+ verb?, What + complement?*

Regarding the questions with *How*, the students' questions manifested the typical structures as follows: *How + subject + verb + object ?*

Regarding the questions with *Why*, students had the tendency to use the structures such as: *Why + subject + be + complement ?, Why + auxiliary + subject + verb?*

Referring to the questions with *When*, *Where*, students tended to use the structures such as: *When / where + auxiliary + subject + past participle?, When / where + subject + modal verb + verb + object?*

With respect to the questions with *How many / How much*, the structures which were frequently used by the students is as follows *How many/ How much + Noun / Noun phrase ?*

Regarding the questions with *Who*, students had the tendency to use *Who* as subject and the typical structures is: *Who + be + complement?*

#### 4.1.2.4. Errors in WH questions

**Table 4.2: Types of errors of students' WH question**

Types of errors	Errors	Examples
Intralingual transfer	1. Present tense –s on a verb following do(es)	(47) <i>What does “war” means?</i> (Eleven grade student)
	2. No inversion of the auxiliary verb	(48) <i>Why this sentence is true?</i> (Twelve grade student)
	3. Misuse of auxiliary verb	(49) <i>Where does the 16<sup>th</sup> World Cub held?</i> (Eleven grade student) (50) <i>What is “witness” mean?</i> (Ten grade student)
	4. Omission of the article <i>the</i> before a noun modified by an <i>of</i> -phrase	(51) <i>What meaning of “conference”?</i> (Eleven grade student)
	5. Omission of the verb <i>be</i>	(52) <i>What the best title for this passage?</i> (Ten grade student)
	6. Addition of auxiliary verb <i>do</i>	(53) <i>Why do Vietnamese must learn</i>

	<b>together with modal verb</b>	<i>English? (Eleven grade student)</i>
<b>Interlingual transfer</b>	<b>1. Omission of auxiliary verb</b>	<i>(54)How I learn English at home? (Ten grade student)</i>
	<b>2. Wrong order of adjective</b>	<i>(55)When do the student go to preschool optional or compulsory? (Twelve grade student)</i>

#### 4.1.2.5. Imperative questions

As discussed in the literature review, there are in fact three types of questions in English. However, it revealed from the data that students also employed imperative sentences to make questions for their teachers. This type of questions makes up a small number in the total 300 questions (8 questions) and has the structures as follows:

*Tell + Object + How + to-infinitive, Tell + Object + Noun phrase*

## 4.2. PRAGMATIC FEATURES OF THE STUDENTS' QUESTIONS

### 4.2.1. Direct and indirect speech act

It reveals from the data that both direct and indirect speech acts were embedded in students' questions, of which 189 questions recorded could be regarded as direct speech acts. The rest 111 questions were attributable to indirect speech acts. The questions functioning as indirect speech acts frequently used by students have the form of an interrogative, but not typically used to ask a question.

## 4.2.2. Classification of students' questions in terms of acts of questioning

### 4.2.2.1. Act of asking for knowledge

The act of asking for knowledge normally appeared during the lesson when the students were in need of grasping and broadening the knowledge of the lesson.

### 4.2.2.2. Act of asking for application of knowledge acquired

The act generally occurred at the end of the lesson or during the break time. Students' purpose embedded in these acts was to ask for the teacher's guidance in applying the knowledge they had acquired.

### 4.2.2.3. Act of asking for explanation

The act for explanation frequently took place during the extra class (mainly while students were doing exercises). In performing the act, the students actually would like to seek for the teacher's explanation so as to understand more clearly about what they had been taught.

### 4.2.2.4. Act of asking for confirmation

The act often appeared during the lesson. When students were not sure about what the teacher had told, they expected the confirmation from the teacher.

## 4.2.3. Politeness strategies in the students' questions

The data shows that students opted to use following politeness strategies: bald on record, negative politeness, positive politeness.

### 4.3. SUMMARY

*Table 4.3: Summary of key findings*

MAIN THEMES		FINDINGS
1. Syntactic features	WH questions	Due to the purpose and context of asking, Most WH questions began with What, How and Why
	Yes-No questions	Most of questions used by students were questions in form of request. There were two variants of Can you/ Could you
2. Errors	Interlingual transfer	Errors due to intralingual transfer only appeared in WH questions. The errors can be described as the interference native language such as omission of auxiliary verb and wrong order of adjective
	Intralingual transfer	Errors due to interlingual transfer appeared in both WH questions and Yes-No questions. The errors can be described as the errors of omission, addition and misuse.

3. Pragmatic features	Direct and indirect speech acts	WH questions and imperative questions are direct speech act and Yes-No questions are considered indirect speech act. The questions representing direct speech acts convey students' expectation to gain knowledge of the lesson. While the questions functioning as indirect speech acts express students' desire for help to apply knowledge acquired, explanation, and clarification.
	Acts of questioning	Students' questions can be distinguished into four acts of asking: act of asking for knowledge, act of applying knowledge acquired, act of asking for explanation, act of asking for confirmation
	Contexts of questioning	All the students questions were made during the lesson or in the break time

<b>Strategies of questioning</b>	<p><b>Bald on record</b></p> <p>The student-teacher relationship was friendly and expressed group reciprocity. Students had tendency to use bald on record when making WH questions</p>
	<p><b>Positive politeness</b></p> <p>When the students desired to be clarified and facilitated in dealing with problems while doing their exercises, they chose to use positive politeness strategy in order to minimize threat to the teacher' positive face</p>
	<p><b>Negative politeness</b></p> <p>When making the questions for application of knowledge acquired and desire for clarification, students supposed that they might be imposing on the teacher, and intruding on his/ her space. Thus, negative politeness strategy was chosen in questions with <i>Can you / Could you</i></p>

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

### 5.1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

#### 5.1.1. Syntactic features of students' English questions

It reveals from the data that the English questions posed by the students in English classes include three types - Yes-No questions, WH questions, and Imperative questions. No alternative question was recorded. Of the 300 questions recorded, there were 111 Yes-No questions accounting for 37 percent. The number of WH questions was 181 which made up 60.3 percent. The number of imperative questions recorded was only 8 questions accounting for 2.7 percent.

Referring to the Yes-No questions, the data shows that in order to seek help and guidance from the teacher, the students had the tendency to use the questions that mostly take the form of requests or indirect questions rather than genuine Yes-No questions. The typical structures that the students employed in making this type of questions are as follows: *Can you/ Could you + verb + object + how + bare infinitive, Can you/ Could you + verb + object +preposition + Noun / Noun phrase, Can you/ Could you + verb + object + Noun/ Noun phrase, Can you/ Could you + verb + WH questions+ verb +subject, Would you + verb + object + WH questions + subject + verb, Would you + verb + object +Noun/ Noun phrase, Can you/ Could you help + object +bare infinitive, Would you mind + gerund*

In addition to this, students also employed questions beginning with *How to* or with a statement followed by *Can you help me*. These two types of students can be considered as variants of the above students' indirect questions.

With respect to WH questions, it seems that the students preferred to use a wide variety of question words to make questions. However, the data shows that most of the students' questions began with such question words as *What*, *How* and *Why*. It can be figured out that in making questions with *What*, *How* and *Why* the students expected to gain knowledge from the teacher and to seek help to apply the knowledge they have gained. This type of students' questions is often characterized by the following structures: *What + auxiliary + subject + verb?/ What + be + subject + verb?/ What+auxiliary+subject+ modal verb+ verb?/ What + complement?/How + subject + verb + object ?/Why + subject + be + complement ?/ Why + auxiliary + subject + verb?*

The data shows that there exists a small number of students' imperative question. Only eight questions of this type were recorded and most of them have the structure as follows: *Tell + Object + How + to-infinitive* and *Tell + Object + Noun phrase*

Syntactically, it can be affirmed from the data collected that the students employed a wide variety of structures in making English questions in English classes. However, these structures appear to be grammatically problematic.

Although the students' questions are relatively diversified in terms of grammatical structures, it appears from the data that except for the imperative questions, the students committed great deal of errors in making Yes-No and WH questions. It was recorded that 79 percent of the total 300 questions were found grammatically incorrect. The errors found can be attributable to overt errors as suggested through Corder's model for error identification. It can also be figured out that the errors deeply rooted from both interlingual and

intralingual transfers. In other words, this is due to the interference of the students' mother tongue and the students' overgeneralization of the structures they have experienced in the process of target language acquisition.

### 5.1.2. Pragmatic features of students' English questions

Referring to pragmatic features of the students' questions, it reveals from the data that the students' questions are of directive speech acts based on Searl's model of speech act classification as they express the students' expectation.

In attempting to classify students' questions in to direct and indirect speech acts, the researcher found that 189 questions recorded can be regarded as direct speech acts. The rest 111 questions are attributable to indirect speech acts. It shows apparently that the students' WH and imperative questions function as direct speech acts, whereas students' Yes-No questions represent indirect speech acts.

With respect to the purpose of questioning, the students' questions can be classified into different types of acts. As revealed from the data, the Students' questions can be distinguished into four acts of asking: act of asking for knowledge, act of applying knowledge acquired, act of asking for explanation, act of asking for confirmation.

The data also reveals that in performing the act of asking students chose to employ different politeness strategies which include bald-on-record, positive politeness, and negative politeness. The reason the students chose to use these politeness strategies was due to the fact that the students wanted to show respect to their teacher.

## **5.2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.2.1. For teachers**

Based on the findings, it is suggested that English teachers at Cao Nguyen and Le Duan high schools should: (1) Create more opportunities for students to use English in making questions in the classroom as “practice makes progress”; (2) Select appropriate methods for correcting students’ errors in making English questions, which will help students steadily get acquainted with question structures in English; (3) Provide students with effective strategies for making questions in order to seek help and to gain information and knowledge, which will create favourable conditions for students to use English questions more effectively in communication.

### **5.2.2. For further research**

Firstly, the participants of the study were students from Cao Nguyen and Le Duan high school, the data were thus confined to the setting of Cao Nguyen and Le Duan High School. Therefore, future researchers should expand their research on exploring the same issue in other high schools in Buon Ma Thuot city so as to have more generalized views on the syntactic and pragmatic features of the students’ questions.

Secondly, the research only focussed on the syntactic and pragmatic features of the students’ questions. Future research may place its emphasis on the semantic features and the functional structures of the students’ questions.

## **5.3. SUMMARY**

In conclusion, this research seeks to investigate the syntactic and pragmatic features of the students’ questions at Cao Nguyen and Le Duan high schools. A combination of quantitative, qualitative

methods was used as the main research method for the study. The data were recorded and transcribed, then analyzed and described both quantitatively and qualitatively.

It revealed from the data that the students’ English questions in English classes at Cao Nguyen and Le Duan High School were characterized by varieties of both syntactic and pragmatic features. However, it also emerged from the data that the students’ questions were almost grammatically incorrect. In spite of that, most of the students’ questions were comprehensible as the act of questioning occurred in the communicative context of the classroom and between students and teachers.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that the teachers should create more opportunities for students to practise making questions in English, provide students with careful guidance in order to steadily familiarize them with different English question structures and effective strategies for making English questions for seeking help and gaining information and knowledge in classroom.

Hopefully, this research can make some contribution to improving the teaching and learning English at Cao Nguyen and Le Duan high schools.