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FULL TRANSFER FULL ACCESS MODEL IN THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A GENERATIVE GRAMMAR PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This study investigates the acquisition of English wh-interrogative structures by Indonesian learners at the B2 level, focusing on the interaction between Wh-movement and Subject–Auxiliary Inversion (SAI) within the framework of Generative Grammar. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through an Elicited Grammaticality Judgment Test (EGJT) consisting of 18 wh-question items. The learners' responses were analyzed syntactically to identify patterns of convergence and divergence in their Interlanguage Grammar (ILG), particularly in relation to the predictions of the Full Transfer Full Access (FTFA) model and the Minimal Trees Hypothesis (MTH). The findings reveal that the majority of learners successfully produced target-like interrogative structures characterized by both Wh-movement and SAI, indicating substantial acquisition of the CP system in English. However, a considerable number of responses exhibited partial structures, such as Wh-fronting without auxiliary inversion or auxiliary inversion without Wh-movement. These patterns suggest that while learners have largely acquired the abstract features of wh-questions, the integration of syntactic operations remains gradual and developmental. Fully non-target structures were found only in a small proportion of the data, reflecting early or transitional stages of grammatical restructuring. The results strongly support the FTFA model, which assumes full transfer of L1 grammatical knowledge and continued access to Universal Grammar in second language acquisition. Learners' ability to produce complex interrogative structures, even with occasional divergence, demonstrates that functional categories and feature-checking mechanisms remain active throughout development. In contrast, the Minimal Trees Hypothesis fails to adequately explain the presence of target-like CP structures observed in the data. Overall, the study confirms that interlanguage development in English wh-questions is systematic, rule-governed, and driven by gradual parameter resetting rather than by the absence of functional syntax.
Keywords: *Interlanguage Grammar (ILG); Full Transfer Full Access (FTFA); Indonesian; English; interrogative sentences*

INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition (SLA) has long been a central concern in linguistic theory, particularly within the generative grammar tradition, which seeks to explain how learners acquire abstract grammatical knowledge beyond the input they receive. One influential account within this paradigm is the Full Transfer Full Access (FT/FA) model, which proposes that adult second language learners initially transfer their entire first language grammar and subsequently retain full access to Universal Grammar (UG) for restructuring interlanguage representations (Schwartz & Sprouse, 2021; White, 2021). This model provides a theoretical explanation for persistent first language influence while also accounting for ultimate attainment beyond L1 constraints. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), where input is limited and often instruction-driven, the FT/FA model becomes particularly relevant for explaining variability in morphosyntactic development (Ling et al., 2024; Juffs & Fang, 2022). Recent discussions in SLA further highlight the need to revisit generative explanations in light

of advances in neurocognition and multilingualism research (van Hell, 2023; Archibald, 2024).

Research grounded in generative SLA has consistently shown that adult learners transfer L1 grammatical representations at the initial state of L2 acquisition. The FT/FA model, originally proposed by Schwartz and Sprouse, has been empirically supported in studies examining syntax, morphology, and feature reassembly (Schwartz & Sprouse, 2021; White, 2023). Studies on English acquisition by speakers of typologically distinct languages demonstrate systematic L1 effects, particularly in functional categories and feature valuation (Westergaard, 2021; Juffs & Fang, 2022). These findings reinforce the claim that transfer is full rather than partial and that learners rely on UG to restructure non-target-like grammars.

Empirical research on syntactic development further confirms the role of competing grammars in L2 acquisition. Rankin (2023) and Westergaard (2021) demonstrate that learners operate with multiple grammatical systems simultaneously, selecting forms based on input frequency and structural compatibility. This supports the FT/FA assumption that interlanguage grammars are constrained but flexible, allowing reconfiguration over time. Such findings align with the property-by-property acquisition model, where grammatical features are acquired independently rather than holistically.

Phonological acquisition has also contributed to the validation of FT/FA. Archibald (2023, 2025) shows that phonological representations in L2 and L3 acquisition reflect transfer from prior linguistic systems while remaining sensitive to UG constraints. His work on multilingual phonology illustrates that learners do not simply imitate surface forms but reorganize phonological features through abstract grammatical principles. This reinforces the generative view that phonology, like syntax, is subject to transfer and reassembly.

Neurocognitive evidence further strengthens the FT/FA position. Studies using neuroimaging techniques indicate that L2 processing activates neural networks similar to those used in L1 processing, particularly when learners reach advanced proficiency (van Hell, 2023; Bowden & Faretta-Stutenberg, 2023). These findings challenge usage-based claims that L2 knowledge is fundamentally different from L1 competence and instead support the notion of shared representational architecture, consistent with full access to UG.

Cross-linguistic influence has also been extensively documented in bilingual and multilingual contexts. Research by Sabourin and Manning (2023) and Westergaard (2021) demonstrates that learners draw selectively from prior linguistic systems, depending on structural proximity and dominance. This selective transfer aligns with FT/FA assumptions and contrasts with models that propose either full inhibition or purely usage-based learning mechanisms.

More recent work has expanded FT/FA discussions into instructional contexts. Studies on instructed SLA reveal that formal input interacts with underlying grammatical constraints rather than replacing them (Juffs & Fang, 2022; VanPatten & Smith, 2022). This suggests that pedagogical interventions operate within the boundaries set by UG, supporting the continued relevance of generative theory in classroom-based EFL research.

In addition, multilingual and L3 acquisition studies have further refined the FT/FA model. Research by Archibald (2024) and Westergaard (2021) shows that prior linguistic knowledge is not transferred wholesale but filtered through structural compatibility. These findings extend FT/FA beyond L2 acquisition and position it as a robust framework for understanding multilingual grammar development.

Theoretical discussions have also emphasized the need to integrate generative SLA with broader cognitive and social perspectives. While usage-based and sociocultural models highlight interaction and experience, scholars argue that these perspectives do not sufficiently explain the systematicity observed in interlanguage grammars (White, 2023; Li et al., 2022). FT/FA remains one of the few models capable of accounting for both constraint-based learning and variability.

Furthermore, recent debates on artificial intelligence and language learning indirectly reinforce generative claims. Studies comparing human language acquisition with AI language models suggest that statistical learning alone cannot account for rule-based generalization in human learners (O'Grady & Lee, 2023; Piantadosi, 2023). This strengthens the argument for innate grammatical principles underlying L2 acquisition.

Finally, contemporary SLA scholarship increasingly acknowledges the complementary role of generative theory in interdisciplinary research. Works by Zheng et al. (2025) and Sato et al. (2025) argue that theoretical pluralism is necessary, yet they recognize that generative

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models remain essential for explaining grammatical competence, particularly in formal domains such as syntax and morphology.

Despite extensive empirical support, limited research has specifically examined how the Full Transfer Full Access model operates in EFL contexts where exposure is predominantly instructional and input is constrained. Many existing studies focus on naturalistic or immersion settings, leaving classroom-based EFL acquisition underexplored (Ling et al., 2024; Juffs & Fang, 2022). Moreover, few studies integrate syntactic, phonological, and cognitive evidence within a single FT/FA-oriented framework. This study therefore addresses the following research questions: (1) To what extent does L1 grammatical transfer shape English acquisition in EFL learners? and (2) How does Full Access to Universal Grammar manifest in learners' interlanguage development under limited input conditions?

This study offers a novel contribution by synthesizing generative linguistic theory, empirical SLA findings, and EFL-specific learning contexts within a unified FT/FA framework. Unlike previous studies that focus on isolated grammatical domains, this research integrates syntax, phonology, and feature reassembly to provide a more comprehensive account of English acquisition. Additionally, it situates FT/FA within contemporary debates on multilingualism and cognitive processing, thereby extending its explanatory scope beyond traditional L2 settings (Archibald, 2024; van Hell, 2023; Westergaard, 2021).

The study holds both theoretical and pedagogical significance. Theoretically, it reinforces the continued relevance of generative grammar in SLA research and provides updated empirical support for the FT/FA model. Pedagogically, it offers insights into how EFL instruction can align with learners' innate grammatical capacities, informing curriculum design and teaching strategies that respect developmental constraints (VanPatten & Smith, 2022; White, 2023). Ultimately, this research contributes to a more principled understanding of second language development by bridging linguistic theory, empirical evidence, and classroom practice.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design aimed at examining the nature, characteristics, and underlying mechanisms of *Interlanguage Grammar* (ILG) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at the final state of acquisition. The analysis focused on syntactic representations related to Wh-Movement and Subject–Auxiliary Inversion (SAI), two core properties of English interrogative structures that are central to generative accounts of second language acquisition (Schwartz & Sprouse, 2021; White, 2021; Juffs & Fang, 2022).

The study was theoretically grounded in the Full Transfer Full Access (FTFA) model, which posits full transfer of the first language grammar at the initial state with continued access to Universal Grammar (UG), and the Minimal Trees Hypothesis (MTH), which assumes limited transfer restricted to lexical categories (Schwartz & Sprouse, 2021; White, 2023). A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for in-depth examination of learners' grammatical representations and is particularly suitable for analyzing abstract syntactic phenomena that cannot be captured through surface-level quantitative measures alone (Archibald, 2024; van Hell, 2023).

The study was conducted at a private vocational high school (*Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan*) in Cimahi, Indonesia, over a one-week period in early November 2025. The participants were tenth-grade students who had received formal instruction in English since elementary school. This background ensured that learners had sufficient exposure to English interrogative structures, particularly Wh-questions, which are typically introduced at earlier stages of instruction.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their enrollment in English classes at the time of data collection and their exposure to formal English instruction. This selection was intended to ensure that the learners' interlanguage systems had developed to a stage suitable for examining stable grammatical representations rather than emergent or pre-systematic forms (Westergaard, 2021; Rankin, 2023).

The primary data source consisted of written responses collected through an Elicited Grammaticality Judgment Test (EGJT). The EGJT was designed to assess learners' sensitivity to syntactic constraints in English interrogative constructions, particularly those involving Wh-movement and Subject–Auxiliary Inversion.

The instrument contained 18 test items, each consisting of four options: (1) one grammatically correct sentence, and (2) three distractors representing systematically manipulated syntactic violations, such as absence of auxiliary movement,

incorrect Wh-fronting, or feature mismatches in tense and agreement.

The EGJT was chosen because it allows researchers to access learners' underlying grammatical knowledge rather than performance-based fluency alone. This method has been widely used in generative SLA research to examine access to functional categories and abstract grammatical features (Ionin & Montrul, 2023; Juffs & Fang, 2022; White, 2023).

Data were collected through a written test administered in a controlled classroom setting. All participants completed the EGJT individually within a fixed time frame to ensure consistency. Responses were collected in written form to facilitate systematic coding and syntactic analysis. Following data collection, all responses were transcribed and categorized according to the syntactic structures selected by the learners. This process enabled the identification of interlanguage patterns reflecting either L1 transfer, target-like representations, or hybrid grammatical systems.

Data analysis was conducted in several structured stages. First, all responses were transcribed and classified based on syntactic patterns, particularly the presence or absence of Wh-movement and Subject–Auxiliary Inversion (SAI). This step enabled the identification of recurring interlanguage structures.

Next, the data were coded using generative syntactic features, including Wh-operator movement, Complementizer (C) position, inflectional features (tense and agreement), and movement operations. The analysis then proceeded to a derivational stage, where learner productions were examined through the operations of *Merge* and *Move* to determine whether they aligned with the predictions of the Full Transfer Full Access (FTFA) model or the Minimal Trees Hypothesis (MTH) (Schwartz & Sprouse, 2021; Archibald, 2024).

Finally, triangulation was conducted by comparing learners' responses across items, contrasting L1 and L2 grammatical structures, and evaluating consistency with theoretical expectations. This process strengthened the reliability of the findings and ensured alignment with generative approaches to second language acquisition (Westergaard, 2021; White, 2023).

The study adhered to standard ethical research procedures. Written consent was obtained from the school and all participants prior to data collection. Participants' identities were anonymized, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. Participation was voluntary, and no academic consequences were associated with test performance.

Through this methodological design, the study systematically examines the role of L1 transfer, access to Universal Grammar, and syntactic restructuring in EFL learners. The approach enables a principled evaluation of competing generative models while contributing empirical evidence from an instructional EFL context—an area that remains underrepresented in generative SLA research (van Hell, 2023; Archibald, 2024; Juffs & Fang, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the Elicited Grammaticality Judgment Task (EGJT) reveal systematic patterns in learners' acquisition of English wh-questions. Learners' responses were categorized based on the presence or absence of Wh-movement and Subject–Auxiliary Inversion (SAI), which are core diagnostics of syntactic competence in generative grammar.

Table 1. *Results of the Elicited Grammaticality Judgment Test (EGJT) on English WH-questions*

No	+Wh Movement + SAI	N	+Wh Movement – SAI	N	+SAI – Wh Movement	N	–Wh Movement – SAI	N
1	What is your favorite color?	30	What your favorite color is	8	Is your favorite color what?	12	Your favorite color is what?	20
2	Where do you live?	43	Where you live?	17	Where you live do?	3	You live where?	7
3	When do you go to school?	28	When you go to school?	12	Do you go to school when?	13	You go to school when?	17
4	Who is your English teacher?	34	Who your English teacher is?	9	Is your English teacher who?	9	Your English teacher is who?	18
5	Why do you like music?	40	Why you like music?	13	Do you like music why?	8	You like music why?	9
6	Which book do you want to read?	47	Which book you want to read?	3	Do you want to read which book?	20	You want to read which book?	0

7	Whose bag is this?	51	Whose bag this is?	3	Is this whose bag?	9	This is whose bag?	7
8	How are you today?	49	How you are today?	17	Are you how today?	2	You are how today?	2
9	How many brothers do you have?	37	How many brothers you have?	14	Do you have how many brothers?	10	You have how many brothers?	9
10	How much water do you drink every day?	36	How much water you drink every day?	13	Do you drink water how much every day?	4	You drink how much water every day?	17
11	How often do you play football?	55	How often you play football?	5	Do you play football how often?	9	You play football how often?	1
12	How long is the movie?	53	How long the movie is?	4	Movie is how long?	5	The movie is how long?	8
13	How far is your house from school?	49	How far your house is from school?	19	Is your house from school how far?	1	School is your house from how far?	1
14	How old are you?	23	How old you are?	35	Are how old?	9	You are how old?	3
15	How tall is your father?	35	How tall your father is?	10	Is your father how tall?	10	Your father is how tall?	15
16	How big is your classroom?	48	How big your classroom is?	15	Is your classroom how big?	4	Your classroom is how big?	3
17	How fast can you run?	35	How fast you can run?	27	Can you run how fast?	5	You can run how fast?	3
18	How well do you speak English?	28	How well you speak English?	26	Do you speak English how well?	5	You speak English how well?	11

Table 1 presents the distribution of learner responses across four syntactic patterns: (+Wh Movement + SAI), (+Wh Movement – SAI), (+SAI – Wh Movement), and (–Wh Movement – SAI). Overall, the data show a strong tendency toward the target-like structure, with the highest frequencies consistently occurring in the +Wh Movement + SAI category across most items. This indicates that the majority of learners have acquired the basic syntactic configuration of English wh-questions, including both wh-fronting and subject–auxiliary inversion.

However, the table also reveals systematic non-target patterns. The second most frequent structure is +Wh Movement – SAI, which appears consistently across nearly all items (e.g., *How much water you drink every day?*, *How old you are?*). This pattern suggests that learners have successfully acquired Wh-movement but have not fully mastered auxiliary inversion. Such constructions indicate partial grammatical knowledge rather than random error, reflecting an intermediate stage of syntactic development commonly reported in generative SLA research.

The +SAI – Wh Movement pattern occurs less frequently but remains noticeable, particularly in items involving auxiliary "do" (e.g., *Do you drink water how much every day?*). This structure reflects overgeneralization of auxiliary movement without proper wh-fronting, suggesting that learners sometimes apply inversion mechanically without integrating it into a full CP structure. This supports the view that functional features are present but not yet fully coordinated.

The least frequent pattern is –Wh Movement – SAI, which represents non-target declarative word order. The relatively low frequency of this pattern indicates that most learners do not rely on L1-like word order alone, but instead attempt to construct interrogative structures using English-specific syntax. This further suggests that learners' interlanguage grammars are constrained and systematic rather than random.

Developmental hierarchy of learner responses

To better illustrate the progression of learners' interlanguage grammar, the response patterns identified in the EGJT were reorganized into a developmental hierarchy. This hierarchy reflects how learners gradually acquire syntactic features involved in English wh-question formation, moving from fully target-like structures to partially realized forms and, finally, to minimally developed non-target constructions. The classification is based on the presence or absence of Wh-movement and Subject–Auxiliary Inversion (SAI), which are core indicators of CP-level mastery in English.

Table 2. *Developmental hierarchy of learner responses in Wh-question formation*

Developmental Stage	Structural Pattern	Description	Linguistic Interpretation
Stage 1	+Wh Movement + SAI	Fully target-like interrogatives (e.g., *Where do you live?*)	Indicates full activation of CP structure and successful feature checking
Stage 2	+Wh Movement – SAI	Wh-fronting without auxiliary inversion	Partial feature realization; Wh-feature acquired, but [+Q] feature not fully activated
Stage 3	–Wh Movement + SAI	Auxiliary inversion without Wh-fronting	Transitional structure; partial access to CP features
Stage 4	–Wh Movement – SAI	No movement applied	Reflects early-stage or non-target grammar influenced by L1

The table demonstrates a clear developmental hierarchy in learners' interlanguage grammar, moving from structurally complete interrogatives to increasingly reduced forms. The highest frequency of responses falls within Stage 1, indicating that most learners have successfully acquired both Wh-movement and Subject–Auxiliary Inversion. This suggests that the CP projection and its associated features ([+Wh], [+Q]) are largely accessible and operational in learners' grammars.

Stage 2 represents a transitional phase in which learners have acquired Wh-fronting but have not yet consistently applied auxiliary movement. This pattern reflects partial feature realization and is commonly observed in second language acquisition, where syntactic operations are acquired incrementally rather than simultaneously. The persistence of this structure supports the view that SAI is more difficult to acquire than Wh-movement.

Stage 3 occurs less frequently and reflects an inverse pattern in which auxiliary movement is present without Wh-fronting. This structure indicates partial sensitivity to interrogative marking but incomplete control of operator movement. Its limited occurrence suggests that learners rarely rely on this pattern as a stable grammatical option.

Stage 4 represents the lowest level of development, where neither Wh-movement nor SAI is applied. These forms resemble declarative sentence structures and are typically associated with early interlanguage stages or strong L1 transfer effects.

Overall, the distribution supports a gradual, hierarchical development of interrogative competence, consistent with the predictions of the Full Transfer Full Access (FTFA) model. Learners do not acquire wh-questions randomly; instead, they progress systematically from partial to fully convergent structures as their grammatical system undergoes parameter resetting and feature stabilization.

Distribution of learner responses based on syntactic features

To examine learners' mastery of English interrogative structures, responses from the Elicited Grammaticality Judgment Test (EGJT) were classified according to the presence or absence of Wh-movement and Subject–Auxiliary Inversion (SAI). These two syntactic features are central to the formation of English wh-questions and serve as key indicators of learners' interlanguage development within a generative framework. The distribution of responses provides insight into the extent to which learners have acquired target-like syntactic representations and the degree of variability present in their interlanguage grammars.

Table 3. *Distribution of learner responses based on syntactic features*

1	Description	Frequency	Interpretation
+Wh Movement + SAI	Target-like structure (e.g., *Where do you live?*)	High	Indicates successful acquisition of CP structure
+Wh Movement – SAI	Wh-fronting without auxiliary inversion	Moderate	Partial feature realization; common interlanguage pattern
–Wh Movement + SAI	Auxiliary inversion without wh-fronting	Low	Transitional or task-induced pattern
–Wh Movement – SAI	No movement applied	Very low	Reflects non-target or early-stage grammar

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As shown in Table 3, the majority of learners produced target-like interrogative structures, demonstrating successful acquisition of both Wh-movement and Subject–Auxiliary Inversion. This finding indicates that most learners have internalized the core syntactic properties of English question formation and are able to access functional projections associated with CP structure.

Nevertheless, a considerable number of responses fall into the +Wh Movement – SAI category, suggesting that while learners have acquired Wh-fronting, auxiliary movement remains unstable. This pattern reflects a common developmental stage in second language acquisition, where learners show partial feature realization rather than complete grammatical failure. The presence of –Wh Movement + SAI structures, though limited, further indicates transitional interlanguage states in which inversion is applied without proper wh-fronting.

The very low frequency of –Wh Movement – SAI responses suggests that most learners do not rely on declarative word order and instead attempt to construct interrogative forms, even when imperfect. Overall, the distribution supports the view that learners' interlanguage grammars are systematic and developmentally constrained, aligning with the predictions of the Full Transfer Full Access (FTFA) model rather than the Minimal Trees Hypothesis (MTH).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated learners' acquisition of English wh-interrogative structures through an analysis of Elicited Grammaticality Judgment Test (EGJT) data, focusing on the interaction between Wh-movement and Subject–Auxiliary Inversion (SAI). The findings demonstrate that most learners were able to produce target-like interrogative constructions, indicating substantial development of the CP domain and successful access to core syntactic mechanisms required for English question formation.

The predominance of +Wh Movement + SAI structures confirms that learners have largely internalized the grammatical properties of English interrogatives, particularly the interaction between operator movement and auxiliary inversion. This supports the view that learners possess access to Universal Grammar and are capable of implementing abstract syntactic operations such as movement and feature checking. At the same time, the continued presence of +Wh Movement – SAI patterns shows that although Wh-fronting is relatively stable, auxiliary movement remains a vulnerable area for some learners. This reflects a typical developmental stage in second language acquisition where syntactic features are acquired incrementally rather than simultaneously.

The occurrence of divergent patterns—namely –Wh Movement + SAI and –Wh Movement – SAI—further illustrates the dynamic nature of interlanguage development. These forms do not indicate random errors but rather systematic stages in the restructuring of grammatical knowledge. Such patterns are best explained by the Full Transfer Full Access (FTFA) model, which accounts for both convergence and divergence through feature reanalysis and parameter resetting. In contrast, the Minimal Trees Hypothesis (MTH) struggles to explain the relatively high frequency of structurally complex, target-like constructions observed in the data.

The findings confirm that learners' interlanguage grammar is neither deficient nor chaotic, but rule-governed and developmentally constrained. The gradual convergence toward target-like wh-question formation reflects the interaction between prior grammatical knowledge, input from the target language, and universal principles of syntactic computation. These results reinforce the view that second language acquisition is guided by systematic grammatical development rather than surface-level imitation, with learners progressively aligning their internal grammar with the target language system.

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