The syntactic properties of English interrogative structures are hard to master for L1 and L2 learners alike. Even at advanced stages of proficiency, L2 learners produce main questions without subject-auxiliary inversion (Example (1)), and embedded questions with non-target inversion (Example (2)). The extent, nature, and causes of these non-target productions are controversial and poorly understood. In this study, we explore whether L1 transfer can accounts for these errors. We examine oral and written production of English main and embedded questions by L1-Spanish and L1-Chinese learners of English. These languages differ from English and each other in terms of verb- and wh-motion in main and embedded questions: Spanish has movement in both, while Chinese has no movement in either. To investigate whether the difficulty in forming questions correctly stems from lack of knowledge or from difficulties with implementation of L2 procedures under real-time constraints, we compare L2 learners’ performance in tasks that tap into different abilities. Specifically, we compare implicit knowledge, as revealed in elicited oral production and explicit knowledge, as revealed in edited written production.

Results and Discussion

Oral Elicited Production: the two L2 groups performed similarly in both main and embedded questions, indicating that L1 transfer is not the major source of non-target inversion patterns. L2 learners differed significantly from native speaker controls only on wh-questions: they often failed to invert in main questions for wh (11%) but not yes/no (2%), and over-applied inversion in embedded questions for wh (29%) but not yes/no (1%). L2 learners’ inversion rates showed an effect of wh-word, with why-questions being associated with significantly lower inversion rates than other wh-elements in both main and embedded questions.

Written Production: L1-Spanish and L1-Chinese learners’ written production was examined via the relevant subsets of the ICLE corpus (International Corpus of Learner English, Granger et al., 2009). The extent and pattern of errors were comparable to those seen in the oral production task for main, but not for embedded questions. In main questions, results were similar for the two L2 groups: learners failed to invert in main questions for wh- (10%) but not yes/no (3%) structures. In line with the oral production results, L2 learners’ inversion rates showed a why-effect, with why-questions being associated with significantly lower inversion rates. In contrast, in embedded questions, both L1-Chinese and L1-Spanish speakers produced few inversion errors (0% and 3% in yes/no and wh-structures, respectively).

Taken together, the results show that difficulties with word order in English main questions (a) are a consistent phenomenon in intermediate/advanced L2 learners in both oral and edited written production; (b) do not stem from L1 transfer; (c) suggest non-target-like representations rather than (or in addition to) implementation difficulties; and (d) occur primarily in specific syntactic structures (wh- vs. yes/no) and with specific wh-words (why). In contrast, inversion errors in embedded questions only surface in speaking, a task in which learners are under hard real-time pressure. Inversion errors in embedded questions might thus be due to (over)-implementation of automatic procedures, rather than to non-target-like representations.
Examples:

(1) Why you are leaving?
(2) I don’t know why are you leaving.

References: