Syntax-Discourse Interface in English Speakers' L2 Acquisition of Chinese Wh-topicalization

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1. Introduction

Chinese has been widely considered a wh-in-situ language, in which the wh-word remains *in situ* in wh-questions, as in (1a). However, the wh-word can be topicalized, moving from the base-generated position to the sentence initial position, as in (1b).

(1) a. Ni   chi le   shenme cai?
        You eat PFV   what   dish
         "What dish(es) did you eat?

   b. [Shenme cai]$_i$ ni   meiyou chi t_i?
       What   dish you didn't   eat
        "What dish(es) did you not eat?"

The wh-topicalization is determined at the syntax-discourse interface, and only D(iscourse)-linked wh-words can undergo topicalization and non-D-linked wh-words cannot (see Li 1996, Pan 2006, Tang 1988, Wu 1999, and Xu and Langedoen 1985). For the wh-topicalization to be felicitous in Chinese, the interlocutors in the discourse must "have a set of things in the presupposition background", whereas in wh-in-situ questions, "no particular set of things… is presupposed" (Wu 1999, p. 83). To answer a question like (1a), one is not constrained by a particular set of dishes from which one has to choose from, and in fact, anything that can be called a *cai* (=dish) can be used to answer the question in (1a). To answer the question like (1b), however, one is restricted to a set of dishes that have already been established in the previous discourse. This makes it possible for the wh-phrase *shenme cai* (=what dish) to be topicalized in (1b).

(2)   a. Ni xihuan shei?
              you like   who
             "Who do you like?"

      b. *[Shei]$_i$ ni xihuan t_i?
           Who you like
            "Who do you like?"

(3)   a. Ni   xihuan na   yi   ge ren?
             You like which one CL person
             "Which person do you like?

      b. [Na   yi ge   ren]$_i$ ni xihuan t_i?
          Which one CL person you like
          "Which person do you like?"

(4) a. Ni zui xihuan shei?
　　　　You most like who
　　　　"Who do you like most?

　　　b. [Shei]$_i$ ni zui xihuan t$_i$?
　　　　　who you most like
　　　　"Who do you like most?

Examples in (2-4) further demonstrate that only D-linked wh-words can undergo wh-topicalization and that non-D-linked wh-words cannot. As *shei* (=who) in (2) is a non-D-linked wh-word, it can only stay *in situ*, as in (2a), and it is not felicitous if it is topicalized in Chinese wh-questions, as in (2b). In (3), the wh-phrase is D-linked, which consists of *na* (=which) and a nominal phrase *yi ge ren* (=one person). In this case, both the speaker and the listener have a shared group of people in mind, and the person who answers the question is expected to choose one person from this group of people. This makes wh-topicalization possible in (3b). The sentences in (4) are identical with those in (2) except for the insertion of *zui* (=most). Here we can assume that the word *zui* (=most) creates a presupposed group of people in (4), converts the wh-word *shei* (=who) to a D-linked wh-word and enables it to be topicalized in (4b).

2. Empirical Study

In recent second language research, the relative difficulty of acquiring interface properties has very much been at the centre of debate (see Belletti et al. 2007; Sorace 2005, 2009; Sorace and Filiace 2006; Sorace and Serratrice 2009; Tsimpli and Sorace 2006; and White 2009), and a distinction has been made between internal interfaces and external interfaces, with the former including syntax-morphology, syntax-lexicon, syntax-semantics interfaces, and the latter including syntax-discourse and syntax-pragmatics interfaces. Internal interfaces are argued to be relatively easier to acquire by L2 learners, but external interfaces are believed to be a locus of persistent vulnerability in L2 acquisition.

2.1. Research Questions

Following the debate in L2 interface research, we conducted an empirical study of L2 acquisition of Chinese wh-topicalization by English speakers. In the study, we ask the following questions:

　　a. Are English speakers able to acquire the syntax-discourse interface involved in Chinese wh-topicalization by only allowing D-linked wh-words to be topicalized but not non-D-linked ones?
　　b. Does the word *zui* (=most) have a licensing power to make a wh-word D-linked?
　　c. If English speakers are successful in establishing the syntax-discourse interface involved in Chinese wh-topicalization, will the success be across the whole syntax-discourse interface domain?

2.2. Participants

In order to answer the questions above, we conducted an empirical study involving 71 English-speaking learners of Chinese and 20 Chinese native speakers as a control group.

To examine wh-topicalization in L2 Chinese, it is a prerequisite to ensure that general topicalization has been established in L2 Chinese grammars of the participants involved. To do this, we adopt a stringent criterion in selecting participants who are considered to have acquired the topicalization in Chinese. In our study, English speakers have to accept 92% of NP-topicalization sentences (11/12) before they can be included in the analyses of L2 Chinese wh-topicalization.

On the basis of the criterion, 19 out of the 71 English speakers are selected for the study who are considered to have mastered the topicalization in Chinese. Those who do not meet the criterion are eliminated. Detailed information of the English group (English) and the native Chinese group (NS) is provided in Table 1.

Each participant had to do a cloze test and an acceptability judgment test. The result of statistic analysis a two-samples Kolmogorov-Smirnov test[1] indicates that there is no significant difference between the two groups in their performance in the cloze test (Z=1.314, *p*=0.063).

Table 1. *Information of participants who have mastered the topicalization in Chinese*

Groups	No. of participants	Average age	Average months of learning Chinese	Average months in China/Taiwan	Mean scores in the cloze Test (SD in brackets)
English	19	35	178	66	36 (3.47)
NS	20	23	N/A	N/A	39 (1.07)

2.3. Procedures

Examples of the categories and sentence types used in the acceptability judgment test are given in (5).

(5) Categories and sentence types:

I. D-linked *na NP* 'which NP'
  1. Wh-questions with D-linked na NP 'which NP' topicalized (experimental)
      Na   yi   ge nuhai ta bu xihuan?
      Which one CL girl   he not like
      'Which girl does he not like?'

  2. Wh-questions with D-linked na NP 'which NP' topicalized + reinforcement of zui 'most' (experimental)
      Na   yi   ge nuhai ta zui   bu xihuan?
      Which one CL girl   he most not like
      'Which girl does he dislike most?'

  3. Wh-questions with D-linked na NP 'which NP' in-situ (in-situ control)
      Ta zui   bu xihuan na   yi   ge nuhai?
      He most not like which one CL girl?
      'Which girl does he dislike most?'

  4. Affirmative sentences with a topicalized NP (NP-topicalization control)
      Na   ge nuhai ta zui   bu xihuan.
      That CL girl   he most not like
      'He most dislikes that girl.'

II. D-linked *shenme NP* 'what NP'
  1. Wh-questions with D-linked shenme NP 'what NP' topicalized (experimental)
      Shenme dianying ni xihuan kan?
      What   film   you like watch
      'What film do you like (to watch)?'

  2. Wh-questions with D-linked shenme NP 'what NP' topicalized + reinforcement of zui 'most' (experimental)
      Shenme dianying ni zui xihuan kan?
      What   film   you most like watch
      'What film do you like (to watch) most?'

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[1] A two-samples Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is a non-parametric version of an Independent-samples *t*-test which compares two independent groups.

3. Wh-questions with D-linked shenme NP 'what NP' in-situ (in-situ control)
    Ni   zui xihuan kan shenme dianying?
    You most like watch what   film
    'What film do you like (to watch) most?'

4. Affirmative sentences with a topicalized NP (NP-topicalization control)
    Faguo dianying wo zui xihuan kan.
    French film   I most like watch
    'I like (to watch) French films most.'

III. D-linked *sheide NP* 'whose NP'
   1. Wh-questions with D-linked sheide NP 'whose NP' topicalized (experimental)
    Sheide xiaoshuo Zhangsan xihuan kan?
    Whose novel   Zhangsan like read
    'Whose novels does Zhangsan like (to read)?'

   2. Wh-questions with D-linked sheide NP 'whose NP' topicalized + reinforcement of zui 'most' (experimental)
    Sheide xiaoshuo Zhangsan zui xihuan kan?
    Whose novel   Zhangsan most like read
    'Whose novels does Zhangsan like (to read) most?'

   3. Wh-questions with D-linked sheide NP 'whose NP' in-situ (in-situ control)
    Zhangsan zui xihuan kan sheide xiaoshuo?
    Zhangsan most like read whose novel
    'Whose novels does Zhangsan like (to read) most?'

   4. Affirmative sentences with a topicalized NP (NP-topicalization control)
    Luxunde xiaoshuo Zhangsan zui xihuan kan.
    Luxun's novel   Zhangsan most like read
    'Zhangsan likes to read Luxun's novels most.'

IV. D-linked *shei…zui…* 'who…most…'
   1. Wh-questions of shei…zui 'who…most' with D-linked shei 'who' topicalized (experimental)
    (Xiao Wang, Xiao Liu, Xiao Li, zhe   jige nuhai dangzhong,) shei Zhangsan zui xiang jian?
    (Xiao Wang, Xiao Liu, Xiao Li, these few girls   among)   who Zhangsan most like meet
    '(Of the girls, i.e. Xiao Wang, Xiao Liu and Xiao Li,) who does Zhangsan like to meet most?

   2. Wh-questions of zui…shei 'most…who' with D-linked shei 'who' in-situ (in-situ control)
    (Xiao Wang, Xiao Liu, Xiao Li, zhe   jige nuhai dangzhong,) Zhangsan zui xiang jian shei?
    (Xiao Wang, Xiao Liu, Xiao Li, these few girls   among)   Zhangsan most like meet who
    '(Of the girls, i.e. Xiao Wang, Xiao Liu and Xiao Li,) who does Zhangsan like to meet most?'

   3. Affirmative sentences with a topicalized NP (NP-topicalization control)
    (Xiao Wang, Xiao Liu, Xiao Li, zhe   jige nuhai dangzhong,)Xiao Wang Zhangsan zui xiang jian.
    (Xiao Wang, Xiao Liu, Xiao Li, these few girls   among)   Xiao Wang Zhangsan most like meet
    '(Of the girls, i.e. Xiao Wang, Xiao Liu and Xiao Li,) Zhangsan likes to meet Xiao Wang most.'

V. Non-D-linked wh-elements
   1. *Wh-questions with non-D-linked shenme NP 'what NP' topicalized (experimental)
    *Shenme wai yu   Xiao Wang zai   xuexi?
     what foreign language Xiao Wang PROG study
    'What foreign language is Xiao Wang studying?'

2. *Wh-questions with non-D-linked* shenme-NP 'what-NP' *in situ (in-situ control)*
    Xiao Wang   zai   xuexi shenme wai   yu?
    Xiao Wang PROG study what   foreign language
    'What foreign language is Xiao Wang studying?'

3. **Wh-questions with non-D-linked* shenme 'what' *topicalized (experimental)*
    *Shenme ta xihuan chi?
     what   he   like   eat
    'What does he like to eat?'

4. *Wh-questions with non-D-linked* shenme 'what' *in situ (in-situ control)*
    Ta xihuan chi shenme?
    he like   eat what
    'What does he like to eat?'

5. **Wh-questions with non-D-linked* shei 'who' *topicalized (experimental)*
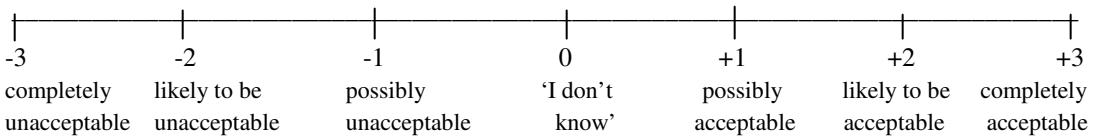   *Shei ni xihuan?
     who you like
    'Who do you like?'

6. *Wh-questions with non-D-linked* shei 'who' *in situ (in-situ control)*
    Ni xihuan shei?
    you like   who
    Who do you like?

    Participants were asked to judge the acceptability of each sentence by circling a number on a scale as given in (6). We take any mean score of '+1' or above as a sign of accepting that type of sentences, and conversely any mean score of '-1' or below as a sign of rejecting that type of sentence. The mean score around '0' is treated as a sign that the participant is not sure.

(6)

-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
completely unacceptable	likely to be unacceptable	possibly unacceptable	'I don't know'	possibly acceptable	likely to be acceptable	completely acceptable

2.4. Results

Table 2. *Mean scores of groups' judgment of Chinese wh-questions with D-linked "which-NP" topicalized, with "most" and "which-NP" topicalized, and with "which-NP" in situ (see examples in (5I))*

	English	NS
Topicalized D-linked "which NP"	1.82	2.49
Topicalized D-linked "which NP" + "most"	2.14	2.73
D-linked "which NP" in-situ	2.98	2.91

    From Table 2, we can see that like the NS group, the English group accepts wh-questions with a D-linked *na-NP* 'which-NP' topicalized. The same is found in wh-questions with a D-linked topicalized *na-NP* "which-NP" that is reinforced by *zui* "most". No significant difference is found between the two groups in either type of test sentences. In the judgment of wh-questions with *na-NP* "which-NP" *in situ*,

no significant difference exists between the two groups, either. These results suggest that a D-linked *which-NP* is allowed to topicalize in English speakers' L2 Chinese grammars.

Table 3 presents results of the judgment of wh-questions with D-linked *shenme-NP* 'what-NP' topicalized, wh-questions with a D-linked topicalized *shenme-NP* "what-NP" reinforced by *zui* "most", and wh-questions with D-linked *shenme-NP* "what-NP" *in situ*. No significant difference is found between the two groups in any of these sentence types. These results demonstrate clearly that it is possible to topicalize D-linked *shenme-NP* "what-NP" in English speakers' L2 Chinese wh-questions.

Table 3. *Mean scores of the groups' judgment of Chinese wh-questions with D-linked "what-NP" topicalized, with "most" and D-linked "what-NP" topicalized, and with D-linked "what-NP" in situ (see examples in (5II))*

	English	NS
Topicalized D-linked "what NP"	1.95	2.43
Topicalized D-linked "what NP" + "most"	2	2.57
D-linked "what NP" in-situ	2.79	2.93

Table 4 presents the results concerning the D-linked wh-argument *sheide-NP* 'whose-NP'. As we can see, the English group is similar to the NS group in accepting all the sentence types, i.e. topicalized "whose-NP", topicalized "whose-NP" reinforced by "most", and "whose-NP" *in situ*. No significant difference is found between the two groups in any of these sentence types.

Table 4. *Mean scores of the groups' judgment of Chinese wh-questions with D-linked "whose NP" topicalized, with "most"and D-linked "whose NP" topicalized, and with D-linked "whose NP" in situ (see examples in (5III))*

	English	NS
Topicalized D-linked "whose NP"	1.88	2.1
Topicalized D-linked "whose NP" + "most"	2.09	2.47
D-linked "whose NP" in-situ	2.86	2.63

However, the results concerning *shei …zui* "who… most" present a different picture, as can be seen in Table 5. Although the English group, like the NS group, allows the D-linked *shei* "who" to remain *in situ* in their L2 Chinese wh-questions, unlike the NS group, they do not accept Chinese wh-questions with D-linked *shei* "who" topicalized, in spite of the presence of the word *zui* "most" in the sentence. The results show that participants in the English group are indeterminate about the acceptability of Chinese wh-questions with D-linked *shei* "who" topicalized. A significant difference exists between the two groups in their judgments of wh-questions of this type ($t(37)=5.029$, $p<0.001$). This suggests that not all D-linked wh-arguments can be topicalized in L2 Chinese wh-questions. No significant difference is found between the two groups in their judgment of the in-situ control sentences ($Z=0.674$, $p=0.755$).

Table 5. *Mean scores of the groups' judgment of Chinese wh-questions with "most" and D-linked "who" topicalized, and with "most" and "who" in situ (see examples in (5IV))*

	English	NS
Topicalized D-linked "who…most"	-0.12	2.12
D-linked "most…who" in-situ	2.56	2.93

The results presented above are all concerned with D-linked wh-arguments. To examine wh-topicalization in L2 Chinese, it is also necessary to find out whether L2 grammars, at the same time, are able to reject topicalization of non-D-linked wh-arguments in L2 Chinese wh-questions. Table 6 presents data of this type. As we can see, the English group, like the NS group, reject incorrect wh-questions with non-D-linked but topicalized *shenme-NP* "what-NP", *shenme* "what" or *shei* "who", and

at the same time, they are also native-like in accepting wh-questions with these non-D-linked wh-arguments *in situ*. No significant difference is found between the two groups judging these types of sentences.

Table 6. *Mean scores of the groups' judgment of ungrammatical Chinese wh-questions with non-D-linked "what-NP", "what" and "who" topicalized, and grammatical wh-questions with non-D-linked "what-NP", "what" and "who" in situ (see examples in (5V)).*

	English	NS
*Topicalized non-D-linked "what NP"	-2.09	-2.38
*Topicalized non-D-linked "what"	-2.21	-2.18
*Topicalized non-D-linked "who"	-1.77	-2.03
Non-D-linked "what NP" in-situ	2.89	2.9
Non-D-linked "what" in-situ	2.91	2.93
Non-D-linked "who" in-situ	2.89	2.93

3. Discussion

Table 7. *Summary of groups' judgments of wh-topicalization*

	English group	NS group
D-linked *which-NP*	√	√
D-linked *which-NP +most*	√	√
D-linked *what-NP*	√	√
D-linked *what-NP +most*	√	√
D-linked *whose-NP*	√	√
D-linked *whose-NP +most*	√	√
D-linked *who +most*	?[s]	√
*Non-D-linked *what-NP*	X	X
*Non-D-linked *what*	X	X
*Non-D-linked *who*	X	X

? = the group's judgment is indeterminate (the mean score being between -1 and +1)

√ = the group accepts the type of sentences (the mean score being ≥ +1)

X = the group rejects the type of sentences (the mean score being ≤ -1)

[s] = the group's judgment is significantly different from that of the Native Chinese group

Table 7 provides a summary of our findings. As we can see, English speakers, in general, are able to topicalize D-linked wh-elements in their L2 Chinese wh-questions. In addition, they also are able to reject ungrammatical Chinese wh-questions where non-D-linked wh-elements are incorrectly topicalized. This suggests that English speakers' L2 Chinese grammars are sensitive to discourse conditions governing wh-topicalization in Chinese and that their L2 Chinese grammars only allow D-linked, but not non-D-linked, wh-elements to topicalize in their L2 Chinese wh-questions.

These findings do not seem to support the distinction between internal interfaces and external interfaces in terms of L2 acquisition difficulty (see Belletti et al. 2007; Sorace 2005, 2006, 2009; Sorace and Serratrice 2002; Tsimpli and Sorace 2006; and White 2009). According to the proposal of the distinction, internal interfaces are relatively easier to acquire by L2 learners, but external interfaces, like syntax-discourse interfaces, are likely to be a locus of persistent difficulty in L2 acquisition. Given the findings in our study here, it seems reasonable to argue that external interfaces may not always be vulnerable in L2 acquisition and that they are acquirable, at least at advanced stages.

Obviously, the English group's success in establishing the syntax-discourse interface in their L2 Chinese wh-topicalization is not across the board because the participants in the group generally do not accept the topicalization of D-linked *shei* "who" in the wh-question. This forms a contrast with the behaviours of the other D-linked wh-arguments, which can be readily topicalized in the English group's L2 Chinese. The problem seems unlikely to be due to unsuccessful integration of syntax and discourse in L2 Chinese or due to limited resources available to L2 learners to process various types of

information from different domains. If this were the case, it would be difficult to explain why there are no integration or process problems with the other types of wh-topicalization in English speakers L2 Chinese and why they are able to make a distinction between D-linked and non-D-linked wh-topicalization in the other types of wh-words.

Recall that in the experiment, the word *zui* "most" is inserted into wh-questions with a D-linked wh-element, which is designed to provide D-linking properties to the wh-element in the wh-question. Our data suggest that only in the native Chinese grammar, but not in English speakers' L2 Chinese grammars, can *shei* "who" be licensed as a D-linked wh-argument by *zui* "most" and get topicalized. This suggests that *shei* "who" is generally not licensed as a D-linked wh-word in L2 Chinese wh-questions in spite of the presence of *zui* "most" in the sentence.

A careful examination of the internal structures of the wh-elements involved suggests that it is possible to make a distinction between wh-DPs and wh-NPs. The former include *na-NP* "which-NP", *sheide-NP* "whose-NP" and *shenme-NP* "what-NP", and the latter refer to wh-elements like *shei* "who". In the former, the wh-word is a determiner and selects an NP as its complement, whereas in the latter, the wh-word is the head of the wh-NP. Our results suggest that L2 wh-determiners are sensitive to presupposed discourse information and can get topicalized in L2 Chinese together with its NP complement. However, the wh-NP *shei* "who" in English speakers' L2 Chinese is not susceptible to such discourse information available as far as wh-topicalization is concerned, and as a result, it cannot be readily topicalized in their Chinese wh-questions. The head of DP is typically considered to be the locus of references and it is believed to host expressions related to references. Following this line of analysis, we can assume that the wh-determiner has a [+/-] deictic feature attached to it, which can link the wh-DP to the relevant discourse information and turn the wh-DP to be D-linked, and makes it possible to topicalize in L2 Chinese. In contrast, the wh-NP *shei* "who", having no deictic feature attached to it, is insusceptible to the discourse-related information in L2 Chinese, and the only possible way to make D-linking possible here is for *zui* "most" in the sentence to license *shei* "who" as a D-linked wh-element. However, if the word *zui* (=most) is unable to wire a link between the wh-word and the discourse information available, as is believed to be the case in English speakers' L2 Chinese, then topicalization of *shei* "who" would become problematic in L2 Chinese.[2]

The findings here support the variable-dependent approaches to L2 interfaces in Yuan (2010), who argues that L2 acquisition of interfaces may not always take place in a holistic manner and may depend on different variables. It is found in our study that wh-DPs and wh-NPs differ in their sensitivity to discourse information in L2 Chinese wh-topicalization, and this is likely to be a variable affecting the D-linking properties of wh-elements in the development of L2 Chinese wh-topicalizaton. This analysis has an implication that the vulnerability involved in English speakers' wh-topicalization of *shei* "who" is more likely to be representational in nature than to be related to a processing problem. We believe that interfaces, whether internal or external, are complex enterprises in L2 acquisition and that they may not always lead to domain-wide problems.

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[2] This assumption can be further tested with other wh-NPs, for example, *shenme* "what" in the sentence in (i). We leave it for future research.

(i) (ji,   ya, yu, zhurou, niurou, yangrou,) $shenme_i$ ni xianzai zui xiang chi t_i ?
   (chicken duck fish pork   beef   lamb)   what   you now most want eat

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