# The Path to Referentiality in L2 Speakers of Spanish: Evidence from Complex Wh-Questions

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Spanish wh- movement is a complex phenomenon that draws from multiple sources of knowledge, from syntax to semantics to pragmatics. Recent studies show a need for a reanalysis of wh- islands that includes issues of referentiality and interface nuances (Cinque 1990, Comorovski 1996, Boeckx and Lasnik 2006, Merchant 2007, Hofmeister et al. 2007). Aside from classic distinctions of argument vs. adjunct asymmetries (Chomsky 1986, Johnson 2002, Truswell 2007), data on Spanish show that within adjunct *wh-* words, there are distinctive patterns of extraction from islands based on the referential nature of each individual word (Rizzi 1990, Baauw 1998). For example, *dónde* is considered to be more referential than *por qué* in nature, and therefore it is more readily extractable from a *wh-* island. This paints a very complicated picture for both native and non-native speakers of Spanish, who need very fine-grained knowledge of syntax in order to correctly interpret and produce questions that contain *wh-* islands.

The current study sets out to show that non-native speakers of Spanish, although initially challenged, are capable of overcoming interface complexity of *wh-* questions with enough exposure and proficiency in the language. In this work, it is not only target- vs. non-target-like responses that display speakers' proficiency and convergence with native speakers. Instead, it is by looking at non-target response patterns for both non-native and control speakers that we can grasp how these L2ers' interlanguage is evolving and merging towards native-like structures.

90 speakers of Spanish participated in this study (30 intermediate, 30 high-advanced, and 30 control native speakers). The experiment consisted of a situation interpretation task, by which participants listened to a brief story followed by a question that contains a *wh-* island. They were asked to answer the question orally, and their responses were recorded for further coding and analysis.

While the intermediate group displays a wide range of non-target responses across all *wh-* words, including *por qué* (considered to be the least referential and therefore the most unextractable adjunct according to previous research). High-advanced speakers, on the other hand, show non-target performance at a higher rate than the control group, but their patterns align quite closely with those of the native group (Figures 1 and 2). The native data, as expected, shows greater response variation in questions fronted by *dónde* and, to a lesser extent, *cuándo* and *cómo*. These patterns confirm previous proposals for a referentiality-based account of argument/adjunct asymmetries in *wh-* extraction, diverging from classic accounts of grammaticality in extraction.

Therefore, these data show that native-like *wh-* island extraction is a path towards which non-native speakers can converge. It is most crucial to note that "grammatical" is a term that varies as research advances, and in the case of this study, it is alignment with control data that shows convergence, rather than with previously established notions of grammaticality.
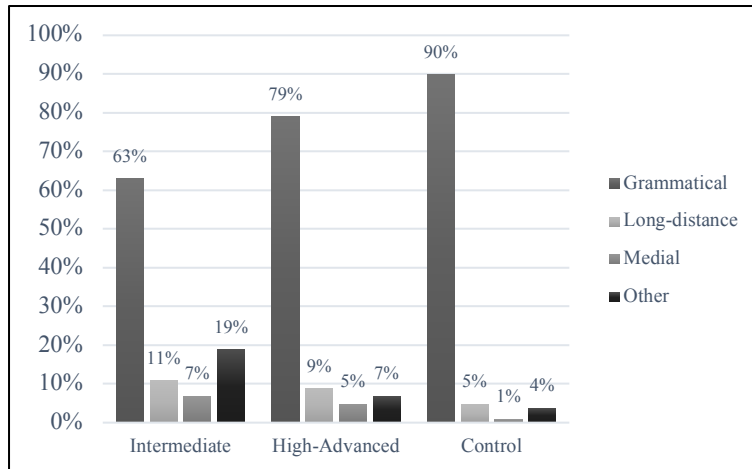
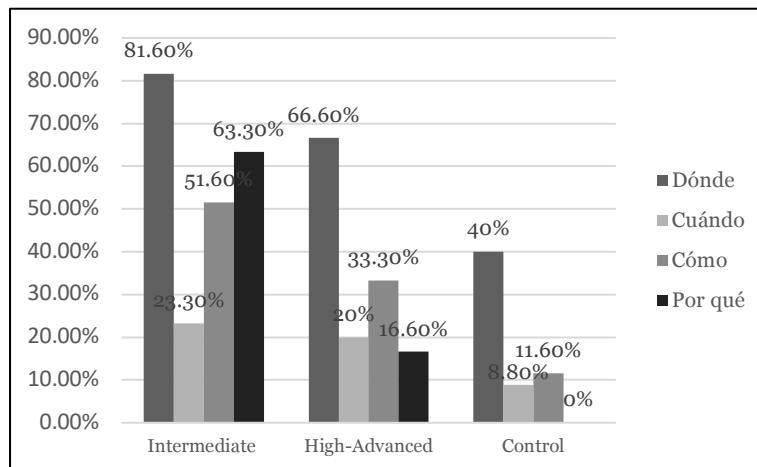*Figure 1: Overall results of interpretation task*



*Figure 2. Non-target responses per wh- word*

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