

Interrogative Clauses across CEFR Levels in Finnish and Swedish as an L2

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The present study investigates the frequency of three types of interrogative clauses in 329 semi-formal email messages written by language learners of Finnish and of Swedish spoken in Finland. All the written messages were assessed according to the Common European Framework of Reference by trained language professionals. The study is part of a larger research project, Topling, conducted at the University of Jyväskylä. For the purpose of the study, the interrogative clauses were divided into three categories: yes/no questions, wh-questions and subordinate interrogative clauses. We examined the frequencies according to the levels of language proficiency. The findings show that, in both languages, the proportion of wh-questions decreased with increasing proficiency, while the proportion of subordinate clauses increased. This finding indicates that the interrogative clauses used at higher proficiency levels are more complex. Furthermore, the interrogative clauses were transformed into more polite requests concerning willingness and ability through the use of subordination as well as through the use of modal verbs (in Swedish) and the conditional mode (in Finnish).

Keywords: interrogative clauses, learner language, proficiency levels, Finnish, Swedish

1 Introduction

Research combining language testing and second language acquisition has over the years increased (see e.g. Bachman & Cohen, 1998; Alanen et al., 2013, Huhta et al., 2014). Empirical studies have become more relevant in Europe as the influence of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR 2004) has grown in language education and assessment. In Finland the need for research is particularly important, because the CEFR scales were adapted for the National Core Curricula for schools. Furthermore, the citizenship requirement of skills in one of the national languages (Finnish or Swedish) is based on the CEFR (Finnish National Board of Education, n.d.). At the university of Jyväskylä two subsequent research projects, Cefling (Combining Second Language Acquisition and Testing Approaches to Writing) (University of Jyväskylä, April 2013a) and

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Topling (see below), were set up to study the linguistic features of the proficiency levels described by the CEFR scales. There is an ongoing interest to find out whether connections exist between specific linguistic features and specific proficiency levels and whether such connections can be traced to the learner's first language or the language being learnt. The CEFR scales are function based. Still, there is relatively little knowledge how various linguistic features by which different functions are expressed develop by growing language skills especially in Finnish learner language but also in Swedish.

The aim of the article is to enhance the knowledge of different types of interrogative clauses at different levels of proficiency. The clauses that are the target of our analysis were produced by language learners of Finnish and of Swedish in imagined email messages from the language learners to their language teacher. The context of the writing task was semi-formal and the communicative purpose of the writing task was included in the instructions. The messages were written in a school context as part of a language class and assessed by trained raters according to the scales of the CEFR 2004. The two groups of writers that were the focus of this study differed from each other in both the context of their language learning and their L1 backgrounds. The L1 of all the writers of the L2 Swedish¹ messages was Finnish, and they were learning Swedish in Finland in a range of educational contexts: in basic education, comprehensive schools (Grades 1–9), in general upper secondary schools (Grades 10–12) or they were first-year university students majoring in Swedish. In contrast, the writers of the L2 Finnish messages had a heterogeneous L1 background; what they had in common was that they all received their schooling in Finnish within the Finnish educational system.

The study presented in this paper is part of a larger research project, Paths in Second Language Acquisition, known as Topling (University of Jyväskylä, April 2013b). The project is conducted by the Department of Languages and the Centre for Applied Language Studies at the University of Jyväskylä. The main objective of the project is to compare cross-sectional and longitudinal sequences that represent the acquisition of writing skills by learners of Finnish, English, and Swedish as second languages in the Finnish educational system. For the purpose of the research project, various kinds of written data of language learners as well as of L1 speakers have been collected. For this article only a part of the language learner data was used.

For the article, we investigated the frequencies of interrogative clauses in imaginary email messages written by learners of Finnish and Swedish in Finland. The acquisition of interrogative structures in Swedish as a learner language in Sweden has been explored by various scholars, including Philipsson (2007). These studies have focused on accuracy. There have been almost no studies of the acquisition of interrogative structures in Finnish as a second or foreign language. The ability to form questions and to use interrogative clauses is of importance because of the richness of the different functions, e.g. to request, to ask information, they convey (Muikku-Werner, 1994: 153; SAG, 1999). The focus of our study is on the differences in the frequency of different types of interrogative clauses at various proficiency levels in the two languages. To our knowledge, no previous corresponding studies exist. Our research questions are: What kind of interrogative clauses do learners of Finnish and Swedish use at the CEFR levels A1 to B2? How does the use of the different types of questions change from one CEFR level to another? To assist the reader with the recognition of interrogative clauses, we will first explain the basic grammar of

interrogative constructions in both Finnish and Swedish. We will then describe the data and methods in detail. Finally, we will present the results of our analysis. After a summary of the main results, we will discuss the frequencies and also the use of interrogative clauses by L2 learners of Finnish and Swedish.

2 Interrogative clauses in Swedish and Finnish

This section includes the relevant grammatical characteristics of interrogatives and interrogative clauses in Swedish and Finnish. As previous research on interrogative clauses in L2 Swedish has focused on word order and almost no studies of the acquisition of interrogative structures in Finnish as a L2 exist, the theoretical background of the present study consists mainly of the grammatical features of interrogative clauses in Swedish and Finnish.

For this study we divided the interrogative structures into three main categories: *yes/no* questions, *wh*-questions (question-word questions) and subordinate interrogative clauses. The ways in which these categories of questions are constructed in Finnish and Swedish are different. For example, in Swedish, word order is relevant (syntactical means), as well as are question words (lexical means). In Finnish, the case of the question word and the second-position particle *-kO* (morpho-syntactic, lexical means, segmental elements) are essential. The most common function of questions is mainly to acquire information (Philipsson, 2007: 16).

In languages in general, *yes/no* questions can be distinguished from declarative clauses by intonation, word order (syntactic means) or segmental elements (lexico-morphological means) (Ultan, 1978). In Swedish, word order (*i.e.* subject-verb inversion) is used in writing to distinguish declarative clauses (Example 1) from direct *yes/no* questions (Example 2) (Ganuza, 2008: 9). In the following invented examples, a word-for-word translation into English is given in order to make the principles of question formation in Finnish and Swedish clear. Gloss lines identifying grammatical elements are not included in the examples, because the focus of the present article is on the frequencies of various interrogative clauses, not on accuracy or their grammatical elements. The aim of the following examples is simply to show the different ways in which questions can be formed in Finnish and Swedish. As Examples 1 and 2 illustrate, inversion is one means of making a distinction between declarative sentences and *yes/no* questions.

- (1) Irene kommer. (declarative)
Irene comes. (Irene is coming.)
- (2) Kommer Irene? (yes/no question)
Comes Irene? (Is Irene coming?)

In Finnish a segmental element, namely the second-position particle *-kO*, is employed. This enclitic is attached to the first constituent in the sentence. In order to make a neutral *yes/no* question from a declarative clause (Example 3), the verb is fronted and encliticized with *-kO* (Example 4) (ISK 2004; White, 2001).

- (3) Irene tulee. (declarative)
Irene comes. (Irene is coming)

- (4) Tuleeko Irene? (yes/no question)
Comes-ko Irene? (Is Irene coming?)

As for word order, the basic word order in Swedish is SVO; Swedish is a verb-second language (V2), which means that the verb occupies the second position in the main clause. In *yes/no* questions, however, the finite verb is fronted, as shown in Example 2. In *wh*-questions the verb comes after the question word and inversion occurs as the finite verb precedes the subject (Example 5).

- (5) Var är Irene? (*wh*-question)
Where is Irene?

In *wh*-questions in Swedish, inversion (*i.e.* verb–subject word order) is not a question marker, as is the case in *yes/no* questions (see Examples 1 and 2), in which the inversion differentiates questions from declaratives. Thus learners at early stages form *wh*-questions with non-target SVO order. However, these structures can be identified as questions because of the question word. In contrast, word order in Finnish is relatively free, but not totally irrelevant. In Example 4, the word that is in focus and to which the enclitic -ko is attached is fronted. This fronted word can either be the verb or another sentence element. When constructing *wh*-questions in Finnish, the subject (S) follows the question word inflected in the appropriate case and the verb (V) inflected in the appropriate person follows the S (Example 6). The question word in Example 6 is inflected in the inessive case (-ssa).

- (6) Mi-ssä Irene on? (*wh*-question)
Where Irene is? (Where is Irene?)

In Swedish, subordinate questions differ from main clause questions in that they do not call for inversion:

- (7) Jag undrar var Irene är. (subordinate *wh*-question)
I wonder where Irene is.

In contrast, subordinate, indirect interrogative clauses in Finnish do not differ grammatically from ordinary interrogative clauses. Distinguishing a subordinate interrogative clause from an interrogative main clause is not possible by grammatical means. The only difference is that a subordinate interrogative clause is preceded by a main clause. The word order is the same whatever the clause position (main clause or subordinate) (Example 8) (ISK 2004).

- (8) Missä Irene on? (main *wh*-question)
Where Irene is? (Where is Irene?)
En tiedä, missä Irene on. (subordinate *wh*-question)
I do not know where Irene is.

Similarly, the *yes/no* question remains identical regardless of any change from main clause to subordinate clause (Example 9).

- (9) Tuleeko Irene? (yes/no question)
 Comes-**ko** Irene? (Is Irene coming?)
 En tiedä, tuleeko Irene. (subordinate yes/no question)
 I do not know comes-**ko** Irene. (I do not know if Irene is coming)

In Swedish there is a place-holder constraint in Swedish, which means that in subordinate *wh*-questions *som* has to be added if the *wh*-question word is the subject of the clause (Hammarberg & Viberg, 1977) as shown in Example 11. If there were no place-holder, the word order would be the same as in the main clause question (see Examples 10 and 11).

- (10) Vem vinner i OS? (*Wh*-S question)
 Who wins in the Olympics? (Who is going to win in the Olympics?)
 (11) Jag undrar vem som vinner i OS. (*Wh*-S subordinate question)
 I wonder who **som** wins in the Olympics.
 (I wonder who is going to win in the Olympics.)

In subordinate *yes/no* questions, the conjunction *om* is added:

- (12) Kommer Irene? (yes/no question)
 Comes Irene? (Is Irene coming?)
 Jag undrar **om** Irene kommer? (yes/no subordinate question)
 I wonder **if** Irene comes. (I wonder if Irene is coming.)

In writing, questions can also be formed by ending a declarative clause with a question mark. Actually, any written linguistic structure can be presented as a question by ending it with a question mark (ISK 2004: § 1678). In L1 Swedish, declaratives that are being used as questions often include a negation or imply uncertainty (SAG, 4:758, Example 13). Tag-questions (*i.e.* ok?, eller hur?, Example 14) are another type of question.

- (13) Kanske vi kan träffas imorgon?
 Perhaps we can meet tomorrow?
 (14) Klockan åtta, ok?
 At eight o'clock, ok?

The focus of earlier research on the use of questions in Swedish learner language has been on word order (Hyltenstam, 1978; Philipsson, 2007; Ganuza, 2008). For direct questions, Philipsson's (2007) results showed that *wh*-fronting occurs before inversion in *wh*-questions starts to take place, and they both precede inversion in *yes/no* questions. The mastery of *Wh*-S subordinate questions implies correct use of subordinate *yes/no* questions and the use of cancel inversion. In the initial stages of learning, the word order in subordinate questions tends to be correct because learners do not use inversion in main clause questions: the Subject Verb order is used in both direct questions and in indirect ones. The focus of earlier studies concerning interrogative clauses in L2 Finnish, among others, has been on service encounter dialogues and specifically on the requests of goods and services in the service phase of the encounter in teaching materials (Tanner, 2012) and requests and apologies produced by language learners (Muikku-Werner, 1997).

3 Data and methods

Our study was a cross-sectional analysis of the frequency of interrogative clauses across proficiency levels. We collected the data in 2010, during the first year of the Topling research project. All the participants participated in the Finnish educational system and were between the ages of 8 and 22. The data were collected through a simulated writing assignment in which the learners wrote an e-mail to their teacher. The task instructions varied in wording according to the age of the learners, but followed a similar pattern. The instructions stated that the learner had been away from classes for a week. The learner had to send an email message to the teacher in order to explain the reason for being absent. In addition, the instructions told the writer to request two details about an upcoming exam and two details about the previous week's classes. Finally the instructions reminded the learner to begin and end the message appropriately. The authenticity of the task was somewhat compromised by the fact that the so-called email messages were in fact being written by hand as part of a language class.

Our data consist of a total of 329 written messages, of which 208 were written by L2 learners of Finnish and 121 by L2 learners of Swedish. The messages in Finnish were written by learners in Grades 2, 4, 7, and 9 in the nine-year basic education, and in Grade 10 in general upper secondary school. The messages in Swedish were written by learners in grade 8 in the nine-year basic education and Grade 10 general upper secondary school, and by first-year university students majoring in Swedish. In this article the focus is on the proficiency levels of the written e-mails, not on the age of the writers of the e-mails. This focusing is possible because of the fact that the assessment according to CEFR-scale technically was trouble-free. According to the results of analyses carried out with Facets, multifaceted Rasch measurement software, the CEFR-scale functioned well in all age groups (Huhta oral information 15.11.2013 and Huhta et al. 2014). An application of the CEFR scale is also implemented in the national curriculum for basic education (Finnish National Board of Education 2004a, Parts II, III & V) as well as in general upper secondary school (Finnish National Board of Education 2004b), which implicitly tells that the scale is accepted for use in different age groups.;

We applied a form-oriented analysis of learner language. We used frequency analysis but instead of longitudinal data, our data came from different proficiency levels (see Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005: 98). Our first step was to identify and categorize instances of the interrogative structures in the written data. In this process we were guided by the grammatical features presented in Section 2. Due to the fact that the data consist of learner language, there were of course some deviations from the grammatical principles explained above. L2 Swedish interrogative structures with a question word were regarded as *wh*-questions even if the word order was not inverted (verb-subject) and the omission of *om* and *som* in clauses which were meant to be subordinate questions was ignored. Finally, because all the written products in the Topling research project were rated by means of genre-based general descriptors included in the CEFR scale, the different questions in the actual data were then examined from that point of view (more about the assessment procedure in Alanen et al., 2010 and Huhta et al., 2014). The CEFR proficiency scales helped us determine how the frequencies of different interrogative clause types shifted according to writers' language skills.

4 Interrogative clauses across CEFR levels

As explained in Section 3, learners had to request four pieces of information from the teacher. Consequently, all 329 emails included several questions. Some messages included all four of the questions, as instructed, some included fewer. Table 1 shows how the interrogative structures (the *yes/no* questions, *wh*-questions and subordinate interrogative clauses) were distributed in the L2 Finnish and L2 Swedish data.

Table 1. Interrogative clauses in L2 Swedish and L2 Finnish

categories	L2 Finnish		L2 Swedish		
	Count	%	Count	%	
<i>Yes/no</i> questions	Statements with question mark	10	9		
	-kO/inversion	187	201		
	Subtotal	197	33.9	210	44.3
<i>Wh</i> -questions	282	48.5	204	43.0	
Subordinate interrogative clauses	102	17.6	60	12.7	
Total	581	100.0	474	100.0	

As Table 1 shows, the distribution of the interrogative clauses was relatively similar in the two languages. The major differences between the two L2 learner groups were in the ratios of *yes/no* questions and subordinate questions. The L2 learners of Swedish seemed to favor *yes/no* questions, whereas the L2 learners of Finnish used relatively more *wh*- and subordinate questions. The latter might indicate higher complexity and thus higher proficiency. This observation is confirmed by the fact that only slightly more than one fourth (25%) of the interrogative structures in the L2 Swedish data were extracted from texts rated at the highest proficiency levels, B1 and B2, whereas half of the structures were found at these levels in the L2 Finnish data. The data therefore need to be further examined in relation to CEFR level and language.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the three categories of interrogative clauses in relation to the CEFR proficiency levels (A1, A2, B1, B2) and the language. The figure includes both languages. The abbreviation *Fi* indicates the Finnish data and *Swe* indicates the Swedish data.

As Figure 1 shows, the proportion of *wh*-questions in both languages decreased as the proficiency level rose. In the messages written in Finnish, 70.5% of all the interrogative clauses were main clause *wh*-questions at the lowest level, A1, while the corresponding proportion at the highest level, B2, was only 27.7%. In the L2 Swedish data the amount of *wh*-questions decreased from 58.3% (A1) to 15.9% (B2) as the level of proficiency rose.

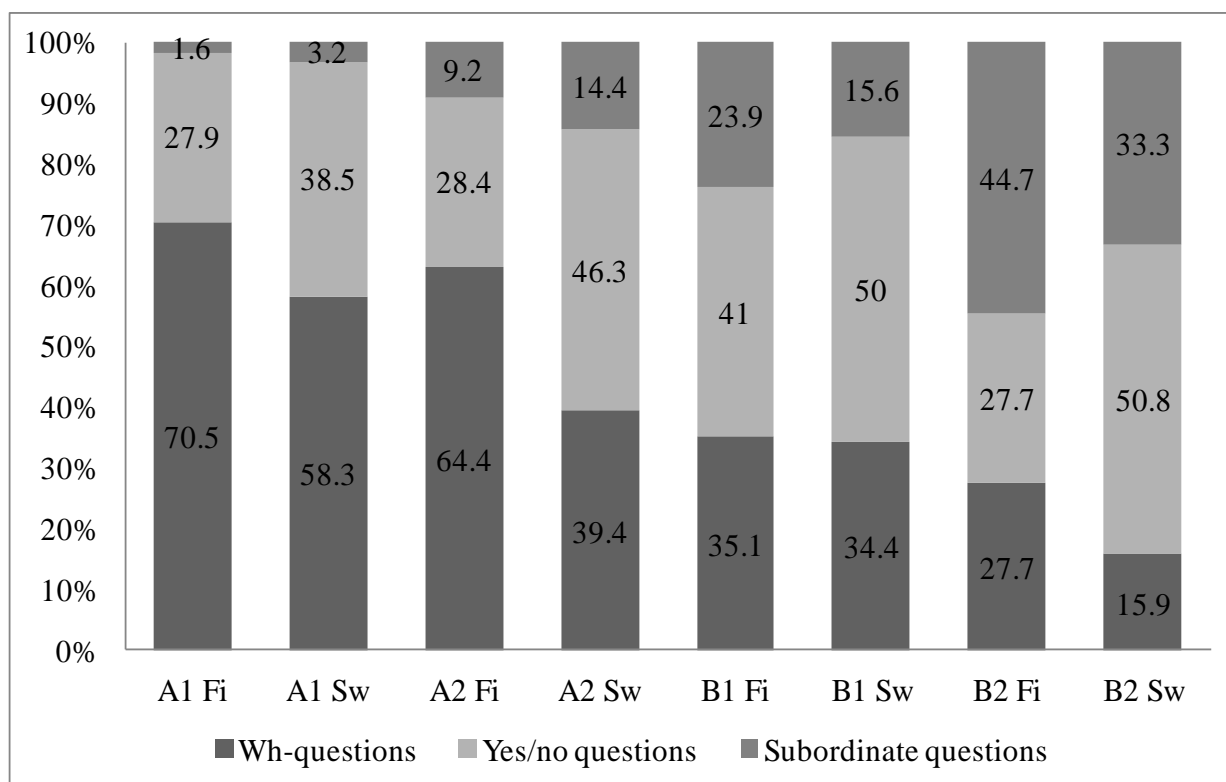


Figure 1. The distribution of yes/no questions, wh-questions and subordinate questions in Finnish (Fi) and Swedish (Swe) in relation to the proficiency levels in the CEFR (A1, A2, B1, B2).

In our data, *wh*-questions were at the lowest proficiency levels A1 and A2 as well as at the highest proficiency level B2 used more by the Finnish learners than by the Swedish learners, while the amount of *wh*-questions was similar at level B1 (35.1% *vs.* 34.4%). The difference between the languages was most notable at level A2, where it was 23 percentage points (62.4% *vs.* 39.4%).

The higher frequency of *wh*-questions at the lower proficiency levels might be explained by the fact that direct *wh*-questions represent the most basic type of information question. The following examples illustrate the questions asked at the lowest level (Examples 15 and 16). In these authentic examples taken from the data, a word-for-word translation into English is given in order to make clear some of the features of the learner language. A target-like version and a translation of the question into English are presented in brackets.

- (15) Vad läxor jag ha? (Swedish) A1
 What homework I have?
 (Vilka läxor har jag?)
 (What do I have for homework?)
- (16) Mikä oli kotitehtävä? (Finnish) A1
 What was homework?
 (What was the homework?)

The questions at the lower levels are understandable even though they do not always follow the grammar of the target language. Example 15 in Swedish shows ungrammatical word order (Subject Verb) and an incorrect question word

(*vad* instead of *vilka*). On the other hand, Example 16 in Finnish resembles the target language, with the question word inflected in the right case (*i.e.* nominative case which this particular context requires).

When the different levels of proficiency were compared, no clear pattern could be observed from the Finnish data. The difference in the frequency of *wh*-questions was largest between the levels A2 and B1. In the Swedish data, the differences between the levels were quite the opposite. The distinction in the use of *wh*-questions was smallest between levels A2 and B1 (5 percentage points), while between A1 and A2 and between B1 and B2 it was in both cases around 19 percentage points.

Turning to the *yes/no* questions, from Table 1 we see that, on a whole, they were more frequent in the L2 Swedish data than in the L2 Finnish data (44.3% *vs.* 33.9%), and this holds across proficiency levels (Figure 1). The differences between the two languages in the use of *yes/no* questions were relatively clear. They varied from 9 percentage points (at level B1) to 23.1 percentage points (at level B2).

As Figure 1 shows, in the Swedish data the proportion of *yes/no* questions increased from the lowest proficiency level (A1: 38.5%) almost linearly to the highest level (B2: 50.8%). Differences between the levels in the Swedish data were relatively small, less than 8 percentage points. Interestingly, the smallest difference in the Swedish data existed between the two highest levels. The Finnish data, however, showed an entirely different pattern. Surprisingly, the amount of *yes/no* questions in the Finnish data was nearly the same at the lower levels A1 (27.9%) and A2 (28.4%), as at the highest level B2 (27.7%). The lowest proportion of *yes/no* questions was in fact found at the highest level of proficiency (B2), but as we have seen, the difference in percentage points was very small. The level B1 differed completely from the other levels with 41.0% of *yes/no* questions. It is hereby worth noticing that the texts at the lower levels were written mostly by language learners in Grades 2 and 4. The amount of texts written by language learners in Grade 10, general upper secondary school, increases at the higher proficiency levels. However, as it is difficult to indicate why the amount of *yes/no* questions is divergent at level B1, more research is needed to find potential explanations.

All the *yes/no* questions at level B2 in the Finnish data were found in messages written by language learners in Grade 10, and all the emails at level A1 were written by relatively young language learners (8 year olds) in Grade 2 of basic education. The questions at these two levels, B2 and A1, seemed to be somewhat different. For example, the most frequent verb at level A1 used in *yes/no* questions was *olla* (to be, to have) (Example 17), while the most frequent at level B2 was *voida* (to be able, can), as in Example 18 below.

- (17) Onko meillä koe? (Finnish) A1
Do we have a test?
- (18) Voisitko kertoa vielä ne aiheet joista pystyi valitsemaan? (Finnish) B2
Could you once more tell the themes from which it was possible to choose?
- (19) Kan du berätta om läxor? (Swedish) A1
Can you tell about homework?
- (20) Skulle det också vara möjligt att få [etc.] (Swedish) B2
Would it also be possible to get [etc.]

Furthermore, the mode of the verb in the Finnish examples changes from indicative (Example 17) to conditional (Example 18). This phenomenon may possibly refer to increased complexity or even to use of politeness. At higher proficiency levels, *yes/no* questions have namely been found to contain modal verbs and to concern willingness and ability (Alanen *et al*, 2013). The Swedish learners exhibited such structures even in lower level performance (Example 19). However, the use of hedges in the interrogative clauses increased and they became grammatically more target-like as the proficiency level increased also in the Swedish data (Example 20).

The third category of interrogative clauses consists of subordinate interrogative clauses, the use of which increased in both languages as the level of proficiency increased. This indicates that the use of subordinate question clauses is a sign of complexity and depends on increased language proficiency (see Norris & Ortega, 2009). However, subordination is not so clearly a sign of increased complexity in Finnish because the structure of subordinate clauses and main clauses is similar (Seilonen, 2013).

As Table 1 shows, the use of subordinate clauses was slightly more frequent in the Finnish data than in the Swedish data (17.6% *vs.* 12.7%). When examined in relation to proficiency levels (Figure 1), we found that L2 learners of Swedish used more subordinate questions at the lower levels, A1 and A2, than L2 learners of Finnish, whereas the opposite was true at levels B1 and B2. One possible explanation could be that the L2 Finnish writers at the lower levels of proficiency were mostly language learners in Grades 2 and 4 of basic education while in L2 Swedish they were in Grade 8. The age of the writers seems to have an effect on the use of subordinate questions.

The subordinate interrogative clauses were preceded by a main clause which was either interrogative (Examples 21 and 22) or affirmative (Examples 23 and 24). The preceding main clauses tended to refer to the question expressed in the subordinate clause by including a verb indicating a request (to tell, to ask).

(Examples 21-24).

- | | | |
|------|---|----|
| (21) | Kan du berätta vad göra ni på skolan? (Swedish) | A1 |
| | Can you tell what do you at school? | |
| | (Kan du berätta för mig vad ni gjorde i skolan) | |
| | (Can you tell me what you did at school?) | |
| (22) | Voisitko kertoa mistä tuli läksyksi? (Finnish) | A2 |
| | Could you tell from where came homework? | |
| | (Could you tell me what the homework was?) | |
| (23) | Jag skulle vilja veta om jag missade något viktigt. (Swedish) | B2 |
| | I would like to know if I missed something important. | |
| (24) | Haluaisin kysyä, että voisitko lähettää minulle ne monisteet? (Finnish) | B2 |
| | I would like to ask that could you send me those handouts. | |
| | (I would like to ask you if you could send me those handouts) | |

At the higher levels of proficiency, the increased use of hedges, or even an increased level of politeness in the main and subordinate clauses, seemed to be significant. Modal verbs (Example 23) and the conditional (Example 24) were often used.

When used in questions, the conditional mode has in Finnish been understood as typical of polite requests (Yli-Vakkuri, 1986; Larjavaara, 2007). In

addition, the preceding main clauses tended to be affirmative at the higher levels (Examples 23 and 24) while at the lower levels interrogative structures seemed to be more frequent in both languages (Examples 21 and 22). Consequently, as the level of proficiency rose, the pragmatic function of the whole interrogative expression (main clause and subordinate clause together) appeared to change from an information question to indirect requests (see Alanen et al., 2013).

5 Discussion

We set out to examine the relationship between the frequency of interrogative clauses and CEFR proficiency level in email messages written by L2 learners of Finnish and Swedish. Finnish and Swedish differ the ways in which *wh*-questions, *yes/no* questions and subordinate questions are formed. Whereas word order and lexical means are central in Swedish, morpho-syntactic and lexical means are used in Finnish.

Our findings indicate that the use of these interrogative structures is constrained by language proficiency. Both L2 learners of Finnish and L2 learners of Swedish exhibited similar tendencies in the distribution of direct *wh*-questions, *yes/no* questions and subordinate questions in relation to CEFR levels. There were fewer *wh*-questions and more subordinate questions in higher level performances. In other words, the results of our study concur, even for Finnish, with the claim put forward by Norris & Ortega (2009) that the use of subordinate clauses indicates an increase in the complexity of learner language which is, in turn, associated with higher proficiency. In the present study, however, the writers' age may well shed light on the variety found in the frequencies of subordinate clauses and should therefore be studied further.

As language skills increase, the nature of questions becomes more polite and grammatically target-like as direct information questions become indirect requests. Interestingly, these tendencies are the same irrespective of the differences in target language and learning context. In this study the L2 learners of Finnish live in the target language environment, whereas the learning context of the L2 learners of Swedish is for the most part a language classroom, and they probably rarely come into contact with the target language outside that classroom (see Kalaja et al., 2011). The results of a previous study by Håkansson & Norrby (2010), which compared a group of L2 learners of Swedish in Sweden and a group of L2 learners of Swedish in Australia, showed that with reference to processability theory, grammar developed similarly but pragmatics and lexicon displayed differences. Our findings indicate that differences in learning context do not appear to affect the use of interrogative structures.

Further analysis, however, is required to determine how various pragmatic functions of questions emerge in Finnish and Swedish learner language. While the present article focuses on the frequency of various interrogative clauses, pragmatic analyses of the use of interrogative clauses will be carried out in later studies. In addition, because our study focused only on semi-formal emails, the use of interrogative clauses in other communicative contexts, such as in formal and informal email writing tasks collected through the Topling project, could also be examined. For language teaching, the relationship between subordinate interrogative clauses and preceding main clauses and other structures is an important one as it concerns politeness. When the perspective turns from

grammatical units to the functional use of interrogatives, the cultural dimensions of language and contextual language skills emerge. In this context, grammatical language skills take on a broader meaning. Once this broader meaning is understood by language learners and teachers, the reasons for the change from direct interrogative expressions to indirect ones will become more apparent.

In addition, teaching and learning politeness requires knowledge of what comprises politeness. According to Tanner (2012), few empirical studies have been carried out about politeness in Finnish and the polite use of Finnish is a challenge in teaching Finnish as a second language. Our results show a tentative use of politeness by language learners in interrogative structures. Analysis of corresponding texts written by native speakers of the same age collected in the research project will in future provide valuable information about the functional use of interrogatives, because then it will be possible to compare the contextual use of interrogative structures in learner language not only to grammatical or adult-like language use. Learning the so-called correct registers for each communicative context is demanding and time-consuming. More research is needed to understand not only what the correct register is for each communicative context, but also what is appropriate for each language learner's age.

Endnote

¹ The term L2 is used as an umbrella term covering both second and foreign languages (e.g. Abrahamsson, 2009:15).

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