

Syntactic transfer in the written English of Finnish students: Persistent grammar errors or acceptable lingua franca English?

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This paper discusses syntactic L1 influence in the learner English of Finnish students in the light of the changed context for learning English in today's Finland. Finns' increased exposure to and use of English along with communicative language teaching methods have led to an improvement in some aspects of their English competence. However, the results of this study show that deviant L1-induced syntactic patterns in Finnish students' written English during 1990-2005 have not decreased, which indicates that their mastery of these syntactic constructions has not improved. This implies that for learners whose L1 greatly diverges from the L2, informal learning and communicative language teaching methods alone may be insufficient for enhancing their L2 grammatical competence. The implications for English teaching will be discussed.

The context of learning English in today's Finland

The spread of English as the global lingua franca has given rise to a new context for learning English in Finland. A couple of decades ago, English was a foreign language studied in Finnish schools, and the formal classroom learning context may well have been the primary source of English input for Finnish pupils. The situation today is different. For today's Finnish youth, English is not merely a foreign language learnt and used in formal classroom settings. Firstly, increased exposure to English outside the classroom context through, e.g., media and the internet has increased the learners' opportunities for informal learning. Secondly, Finnish youngsters have also become active users of English in the context of various youth sub-cultures, such as internet-forums and fan communities (see Leppänen et al. 2008). As Leppänen et al. (2008: 422-427) describe, in some contexts, the status of English in Finland has changed or is changing from a *foreign* language used to communicate with foreigners into a *second* language which is increasingly being used in various domains of life and through which individual language users construct their social identities.

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ISSN: 1457-9863

Publisher: Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä

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<http://apples.jyu.fi>

These societal changes have co-occurred with a shift of emphasis in language teaching. In today's multilingual world, communicative competence has become the goal of foreign language education, and traditional grammar and translation oriented methods have been replaced by communicative language teaching methods. This has, no doubt, been a positive development. Communicative language teaching has, for instance, brought with it a more tolerant attitude towards learner errors; instead of demanding that learners produce grammatically correct language with a perfect native accent from early on, learners are now encouraged to communicate even with limited linguistic resources. With such an approach, learners are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards speaking foreign languages and communicating with foreign people, which is a necessity in today's globalised world and increasingly multilingual societies.

In many respects, these changes that have taken place in the context of learning English as a foreign language in Finland have been positive. Finnish youngsters have now better opportunities to learn and use English than ever before. Due to the presence of English in their daily lives, they are also likely to acknowledge the importance of English in today's world and develop an optimal attitude and motivation for learning it. These societal and pedagogic changes outlined above seem to have given rise to a general consensus that the English proficiency of Finnish students has also improved over the past couple of decades. However, this has hitherto been little investigated. Some evidence can be found in the works of Takala (1998, 2004), whose findings indicate improvement in elementary school students' English listening and reading comprehension skills over the past 30 years. In addition, my earlier findings (Meriläinen 2006, 2008) indicate a decrease in certain lexical transfer phenomena in Finnish Upper Secondary school students' English compositions between 1990 and 2005, which points towards improved lexical idiomaticity during this fifteen-year period. Other aspects of Finnish students' English competence have not, to my knowledge, been investigated.

This paper discusses patterns of syntactic L1 influence in the written English of Finnish students, and what the frequencies of these patterns in the students' compositions from 1990, 2000 and 2005 reveal about their current grammatical competence in English. The findings are a part of my doctoral dissertation (Meriläinen 2010), which examines lexical and syntactic transfer patterns in Finnish Matriculation Examination candidates' compositions between 1990 and 2005. The findings will be discussed in the light of the changed context of learning English in Finland, and the effects of this learning context on different aspects of Finns' English competence will be evaluated.

L1 influence in Finnish learners of English

Language transfer in Finnish learners of English was a popular object of investigation in the 1970s in the framework of contrastive studies (see, e.g., Sajavaara & Lehtonen 1977, Sajavaara, Lehtonen & Markkanen 1978). However, more recently, the study of transfer phenomena in the cognitive framework has evoked little interest among Finnish scholars. The study of L1 influence in Finnish learners of English would, nevertheless, be important not only because

of its obvious pedagogic applications to the teaching of English in Finnish schools, but also because of its import to transfer studies in general: the acquisition of an L2 typologically distant from the learners' L1 may reveal new aspects on the process of transfer and on second language acquisition (SLA).

Finland also offers an ideal setting for the investigation of L1 influence because of its two language groups, Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking Finns. In previous studies (see, e.g., Ringbom 1987, Jarvis 2000, Jarvis and Odlin 2000, Odlin and Jarvis 2004), these two groups of English learners have been found to be ideal comparison groups because of their educational as well as cultural homogeneity and, most of all, because of their divergent L1 backgrounds; Swedish belongs to the Germanic branch of Indo-European languages, thus sharing many typological similarities with English, whereas Finnish as a Fenno-Ugric language is very distant from both Swedish and English. Differences between these two learner groups in their acquisition and use of English can, thus, be reliably attributed to L1 influence. As seen in Ringbom's (1987) seminal work on the effect of language distance on SLA and Jarvis' (2000) work on different types of evidence in transfer research, studies within the Finnish context may offer important theoretical and methodological contributions to the study of L1 influence in SLA.

In addition to being important to SLA researchers internationally, the study of L1 influence in Finnish learners of English is also important in the domestic context because the acquisition of English has been found to be difficult for Finns due to the great genetic and typological distance between the L1 and L2 (see Ringbom 1987). Despite the fact that we have known this for more than 20 years, the various manifestations of language transfer in Finns' English production still remain undiscovered. The studies that were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s did reveal many aspects of Finns as learners of English and certain transfer errors in their English production, but it is another question whether these findings are applicable to today's Finnish youngsters, who, as described above, are learning and using English in a different context and in different ways, as compared to the youngsters of the 1970s and 1980s. Although the focus in language education has shifted from grammatical structures and formal accuracy to overall performance and the ability to use language in communication, identifying the typical learning difficulties that arise from the L1-L2 typological distance is still beneficial for pedagogic purposes. One of the objectives of the present study is to discover how L1 transfer manifests itself in the written English production of today's Finnish students, and whether the transfer patterns observed in the students' compositions from 1990, 2000 and 2005 indicate any development in their English proficiency.

The setting of the study

The material for this study consists of a 96,787 word corpus of written English compositions by Finnish Upper Secondary School students. The corpus contains 500 English compositions written as a part of the Finnish national Matriculation Examination in the years 1990, 2000 and 2005.

The verification of syntactic transfer relies on the work of Jarvis (2000), in which learner groups of different L1 backgrounds are compared in order to identify L1 influence. The comparison corpus (28,225 words) for this study

consists of English Matriculation Examination compositions (N=136) by Swedish-speaking Finns.

The selection of the syntactic features to be examined was a three-stage process. The first stage involved a preliminary selection of incorrect or atypical syntactic features that were most often encountered in the corpus. After this, these features were analysed contrastively in order to determine whether they differ between Finnish and English. Finally, in order to verify that these features were transfer-induced, the comparison corpus by Swedish-speaking students was analysed. The data obtained from the Swedish-speaking students was statistically compared against the data from Finnish-speaking students by using the t-test.

The usage of the selected syntactic features in the corpus by Finnish-speaking students was analysed qualitatively, and the frequencies of these patterns amongst the data from 1990, 2000 and 2005 were then compared statistically by using analysis of variance.

Patterns of syntactic transfer in the written English of Finnish students

The analysis and comparison of the corpora from Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking students resulted in the selection of five syntactic features that differ between Finnish and English but are similar between Swedish and English, and the incorrect or atypical usage of which was frequent in the Finnish corpus but very marginal in the Swedish corpus. *These features are: the passive construction, expletive pronoun constructions, certain subordinate clause patterns, expressions for future time and prepositional constructions.* Table 1 below shows the frequencies of these features per 10,000 words among Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking students, as well as the statistical differences between these two learner groups.

Table 1. Differences between Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking students (Meriläinen 2010: 113)

	Finnish-speaking students		Swedish-speaking students		p-value
	N	N/10,000	N	N/10,000	
<i>The passive construction</i>	69	7.1	1	0.36	< 0.001
<i>Expletive pronoun constructions</i>	93	9.6	2	0.7	< 0.0001
<i>Subordinate clause patterns</i>	88	9.1	7	2.5	< 0.01
<i>Future time</i>	63	6.5	6	2.1	< 0.01
<i>Prepositional constructions</i>	358	37.0	33	11.7	< 0.0001
Total	671	69.3	49	17.4	< 0.0001

¹ Corpus: 96,787 words (500 compositions)

² Corpus: 28,225 words (136 compositions)

As the above table indicates, the incorrect or atypical usage of these syntactic features displayed statistically very significant differences between the Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking learners. These statistical differences together

with contrastive analysis of Finnish-English differences and Swedish-English similarities were regarded as evidence for L1 influence.

These five syntactic features are presented and exemplified in the following. The results obtained from the quantitative and statistical analysis of these transfer patterns in the samples from 1990, 2000 and 2005 are then presented and compared.

The passive construction

Deviant usage of the English passive construction by Finnish-speaking students involved the usage of the active voice instead of the passive voice, or their omission of generic pronouns (e.g. *one, you, they*). These amounted to 69 instances in the corpus (7.1 instances / 10,000 words), whereas only one such example was detected in the Swedish-speaking students' data (0.36 instances / 10,000 words). The acquisition of this syntactic structure seems to be easier for L1 Swedish learners because Swedish and English make use of similar types of structures in expressing passivity, including periphrastic constructions and generic pronouns (see, e.g., Holmes & Hinchliffe 1994: 309-317; Quirk et al. 1985: 159-171). Finnish, on the other hand, has a so-called impersonal passive which is realised as a distinct verb form with the passive morpheme -TA- fused into the verb stem (see, e.g., Hakulinen et al. 2005: 1254-1269). In addition, Finnish also uses other means for expressing passivity, such as the zero-person construction, which is a third person singular form with a generic meaning similar to that of the impersonal passive (Hakulinen et al. 2005: 1284-1299). For Finnish learners, hence, the English periphrastic passive construction represents a complex multi-word construction, the various parts of which they tend to omit. This is illustrated in examples (1) and (2), in which the students' usage of the active voice instead of the passive voice can be derived back to Finnish impersonal passive. Examples (3) and (4), on the other hand, reflect the Finnish zero-person construction.

- 1) There is a lot of animals in the world, which *use* an awful way (pro *are used*, cf. Fi. *käynte-TÄ-än* 'use-PAS')
- 2) There *need* help very much (pro *is needed* / *people need*, cf. Fi. *tarvi-TA-an* 'need-PAS')
- 3) Pets *can't leave or free* because they need people (pro *can't be left or freed*, cf. Fi. *ei voi jättää tai vapauttaa* 'no-3SG can leave or free')
- 4) Nowadays nature is so polluted, especially air, that something *have to do* (pro *has to be done*, cf. Fi. *täytyy tehdä* 'have to-3SG do')

Expletive pronoun constructions

Expletive pronoun constructions involve the omission of the anticipatory *it* pronoun or existential *there*. With regard to the omission of the expletive subjects *it* and *there*, Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking students exhibited statistically extremely significant differences. In the Swedish corpus, there were

only two instances where expletive subjects had been omitted (0.7 / 10,000 words), whereas the Finnish corpus displayed 93 such instances (9.6 / 10,000 words). The acquisition of the extraposition and existential constructions seems, hence, to be considerably more effortless for Swedish-speaking ESL learners because their L1 contains similar structures (see, e.g., Holmes & Hinchliffe 1994: 526-529; Quirk et al. 1985: 1391-1395; 1404-1414). For Finnish-speaking learners, on the other hand, there are no L1-L2 similarities to facilitate the learning of these constructions. As Finnish tolerates late placement of clausal subjects, there is no syntactic need for an anticipatory pronoun construction such as that of English (see Hakulinen et al. 2005: 868-881). Therefore, Finnish learners might perceive the English anticipatory *it* pronoun as redundant and omit it (examples 5 and 6). The Finnish existential sentence, on the other hand, displays a constituent order very different from English: it begins with an introductory adverbial which is followed by a verb and the subject is placed sentence-finally (Hakulinen et al. 2005: 850-852). Example (7) directly reflects this constituent order. In connection with a so-called manifestation sentence, which is a subtype of existential sentence, the clause may begin with the verb followed by the subject (Hakulinen et al. 2005: 855-856). This can be seen in example (8).

- 5) In our culture is *unusual* if some twenty years old women is married (pro *it is unusual*, cf. Fi. *on epätavallista* 'be-3SG unusual-PAR')
- 6) Nowadays are only a few place where *is possible* to swim (pro *it is possible*, cf. Fi. *on mahdollista* 'be-3SG possible-ELA')
- 7) Almost every home *is pet* (pro *there is a pet in almost every home*, cf. Fi. *melkein joka kodissa on lemmikki* 'almost every home-INE is pet')
- 8) But *are* people, who don't care nothing about animals (pro *there are people...* cf. Fi. *on ihmisiä...* 'be-3SG people-PAR')

Subordinate clause patterns

The subordinate clause patterns under study include subordinate interrogative clauses and *that*-clauses. The corresponding Finnish syntactic structures involve features not shared by English or Swedish (see Hakulinen et al. 2005: 1092-1110; Holmes & Hinchliffe 1994: 532-540; Quirk et al. 1985: 1049-1050; 1053-1054). As seen in table 1, deviant subordinate clause patterns (i.e., subordinate interrogative clauses and *that*-clauses) occurred in the compositions written by Finnish-speaking students significantly more often (9.1 / 10,000 words) than in those written by Swedish-speaking students (2.5 / 10,000 words). As seen in examples (9) and (10) below, the deviant subordinate interrogative clauses observed in the corpus often involved the omission of the subordinators *if* or *whether*, and reflected the constituent order of Finnish subordinate interrogative clauses (VS). Finnish influence also manifested itself in the manner in which the students used the conjunction *that* before a subordinate interrogative clause, which reflects the usage of the conjunction *että* preceding a subordinate interrogative clause in spoken Finnish (example 11). Sometimes the students had

also inserted the pronoun *it* before a subordinate interrogative clause or *that*-clause (example 12). This reflects the usage of the pronoun *se* as a supporting pronoun at clause boundaries in Finnish.

- 9) It is never easy to divorce so it's same to you *are you married or not* (pro *whether you are married or not*, cf. Fi. *oletko naimisissa vai et* 'be-2SG-CL married or not')
- 10) I do not know *have I enough courage and skills* (pro *if I have*, cf. Fi. *onko minulla* 'be-CL I-ADE')
- 11) If you asked the animals *that do they want to do that* (cf. Fi. *että haluavatko he...* 'that want-3PL-CL they')
- 12) Nowadays the main reason why people kill animals is usually *it, that it is fun*, isn't it? (cf. Fi. *syy on se, että...* 'reason is it, that...')

Future time

Deviant expressions for future time involved the students' omission of English grammatical constructions expressing future time, '*will + infinitive*' and '*be going to + infinitive*', and their usage of the simple present tense instead. These types of patterns amounted to 63 instances in the corpus (6.5 instances / 10,000 words). There were only 6 such instances in the corpus by Swedish-speaking students (2.1 instances / 10,000 words), which can be explained by the fact that both English and Swedish express futurity with the help of a future auxiliary (see, e.g., Holmes & Hinchliffe 1994: 282-284; Quirk et al. 1985: 213-219). Finnish has no equivalent future marker to that of the English *will/shall*, but it uses the simple present tense combined with a time adverbial, contextual clues or a resultative aspect of the predicate to create future implication (see Hakulinen et al. 2005: 1468-1473). Finnish students had often incorrectly extended the use of the simple present tense to refer to future time in English. In example (13), future reference is created by using the time adverbial *in the future*. In example (14), futurity was expressed by the overall context where this example is taken from; in this composition, the student was speculating what the future of Finland might be like if the mobile telephone company *Nokia* went bankrupt. Example (15) reflects Finnish expressions in which future interpretation is created through the resultative aspect of the predicate; in this particular example, the accusative case of the object (as in *elän elämäni*; live-1SG life-ACC-POS, 'I'll live my life') implies a resultative aspect, which means, in this case, that living one's life is something that takes place on a longer time span, hence extending into the future.

- 13) In my opinion, wars *are* wars also in the future
- 14) So Nokia's collapsing *doesn't* affect the finnish unemployment
- 15) I don't shut out the thought that I *live* my life alone

Prepositional constructions

Prepositional constructions were either concerned with the choice of an incorrect preposition or the omission of a preposition. Prepositions present a difficult category for Finnish students because Finnish makes use of cases instead of prepositions. While L1 Swedish students are familiar with the category of prepositions through their L1 (see, e.g., Holmes & Hinchliffe 1994: 359-459) and, consequently, merely have to learn which preposition to use in certain contexts in English, the learning task for L1 Finnish students begins with learning to use prepositions in the first place. Deviant prepositional constructions in Finnish-speaking students' compositions amounted to 358 instances (37 instances / 10,000 words). Approximately half of these were concerned with the choice of an incorrect preposition, whereas the other half involved total omission of a preposition. Prepositional errors were also encountered in the Swedish-speaking students' corpus, but significantly less often than in the Finnish-speaking students' corpus (N=33; 11.7 instances / 10,000 words). Moreover, the great majority of these were concerned with the choice of an incorrect preposition (N=28), which could be derived back to corresponding Swedish prepositional expressions, whereas the omission of prepositions was very rare (N=5).

Finnish has a very rich inflectional system with 15 cases (see, e.g., Hakulinen et al. 2005: 1173-1214). These case endings do not always semantically correspond to English prepositional phrases, which is when Finnish students tend to choose an incorrect preposition in English based on the semantics of the equivalent L1 expression. The incorrect prepositional constructions observed in the corpus reflected the usage of almost all Finnish cases. However, the majority of these errors were concerned with abstract uses of locative cases, such as those illustrated in examples (16) and (17). The students' omission of English prepositions, on the other hand, involves syntactic simplification; the students seem to assume that the basic form of the English word carries the same semantic and grammatical information as its Finnish inflected counterpart, which causes them to regard English prepositions as redundant. The students observed in this study had omitted prepositions in various kinds of syntactic positions. Most commonly, the omission of preposition occurred in connection with verb complementation (example 18) and adverbial phrases, such as locative expressions (example 19).

16) Watching news *from* TV (pro *on*, cf. Fi. *katsoa televisiosta*, 'watch television-ELA')

17) Instead of being good *in* mathematics, I am pretty good *in* foreign languages (pro *at*, cf. Fi. *olla hyvä matematiikassa / vieraisissa kielissä* 'be good mathematics-INE / foreign languages-INE')

18) The whole of my life I have *dreamed a rich man* with dark hair (pro *dreamed of a rich man*, cf. Fi. *haaveillut rikkaasta miehestä* 'dream-1SG-PST rich-ELA man-ELA')

19) I will go *that country* (pro *go to*, cf. Fi. *menen siihen maahan*, 'go-1SG that-ILL country-ILL')

Comparison of syntactic transfer patterns from 1990, 2000 and 2005

Quantitative and statistical comparison of the syntactic transfer patterns occurring in the students' compositions from 1990, 2000 and 2005 indicated no decrease in their frequencies during this 15-year period (see Figure 1 below). The frequencies of these transfer patterns had either remained at the same level (the passive construction and expletive pronoun constructions) or even increased (subordinate clause patterns, expressions for future time and prepositional constructions). However, the increase was statistically significant only in the category of future time.

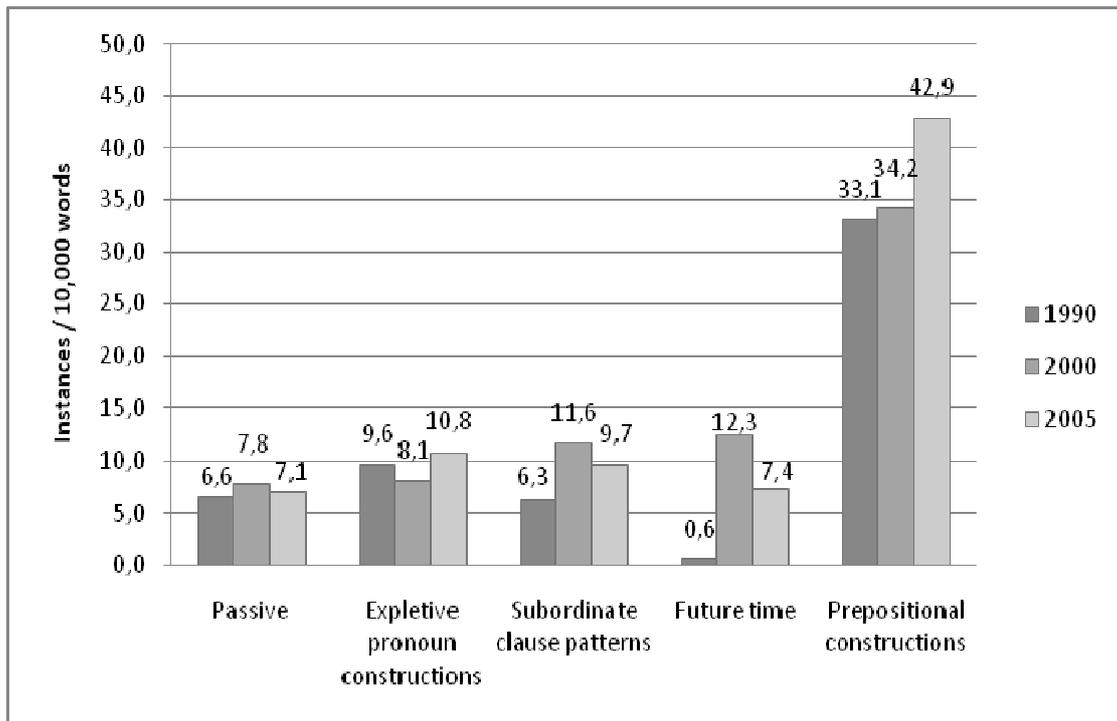


Figure 1. Frequencies of syntactic transfer by categories (Meriläinen 2010: 188)

The examination of the combined frequencies of the five transfer patterns for the three years under study reveals a clearer pattern: syntactic transfer overall had increased from 56.3 instances (per 10,000 words) in 1990 to 74.1 and 77.8 in 2000 and 2005, respectively ($p < 0.05$) (see figure 2 below).

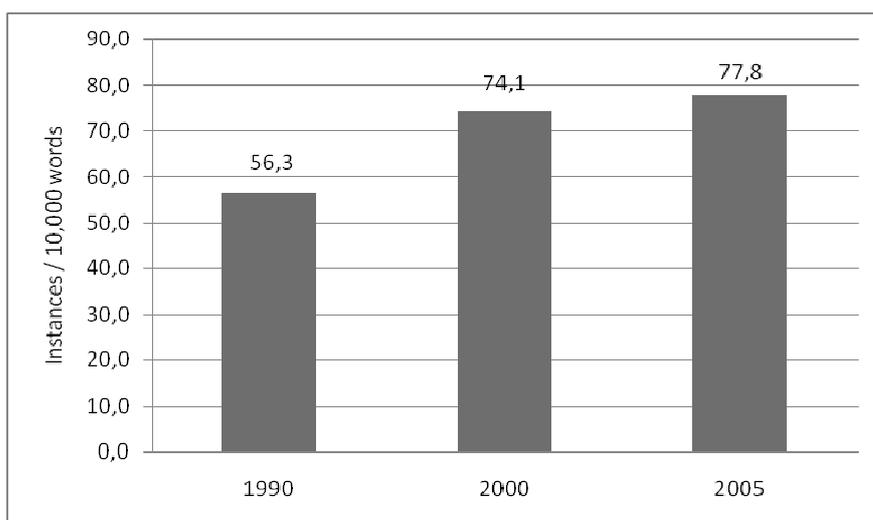


Figure 2. Frequencies of syntactic transfer in 1990, 2000 and 2005 (Meriläinen 2010: 189)

As figures 1 and 2 clearly show, the influence of L1 is still strong in the students' production of these English syntactic structures, and in some syntactic patterns it is even stronger than it was in 1990. This does not point towards an improvement in the students' mastery of these syntactic constructions during the fifteen-year period under study.

Persistent grammar errors or acceptable lingua franca English?

The findings discussed above indicate that English syntactic constructions which differ from the corresponding L1 structures pose great difficulties for Finnish students to learn. The students investigated in this study have received English instruction for ten years and, contrary to Swedish-speaking students of the equivalent level, still retain a considerable degree of L1 syntactic influence in their production of these syntactic constructions.

The finding that the frequency of syntactic transfer had not decreased during the fifteen-year period under study can be considered somewhat worrying because it indicates that the students' knowledge of these syntactic features has not improved. Together with the finding that the decrease in lexical transfer patterns in these students' written English indicates an improvement in their mastery of English vocabulary (see Meriläinen 2008, 2010), the results of this study have the following implications. Firstly, this non-parallel development between lexical and syntactic transfer patterns indicates that for learners whose L1 is genetically and typologically distant from the L2 transfer is more persistent at the level of syntax than it is at the level of lexicon. Secondly, this finding also implies that Finnish youngsters' increased exposure to and use of English may have a positive impact on their lexical development in L2 and communicative competence, but it does not seem to help them to acquire an equivalent level of proficiency in syntactic structures which differ from the corresponding L1 structures.

The increase of the investigated deviant syntactic patterns may be considered a surprising finding because the societal and pedagogic changes outlined earlier give rise to the assumption that Finnish students' English competence must have improved during the past couple of decades. This is probably the case in many areas of their English competence, but the results of this study indicate that grammar may not be one of these areas. Admittedly, it may be possible that many important changes do not become apparent by investigating written language. However, when it comes to these types of deviant grammatical patterns, it is highly unlikely that these would not exist in the spoken English of Finns. Given that time pressure in spoken communication makes learners focus on the meaning rather than the form of their utterance, grammar errors tend to be more common in spoken language. The material of this study may even offer an overly optimistic picture of the grammatical competence of these learners because it derives from a written English exam, where the learners are likely to display their best knowledge and carefully monitor their performance.

Since increased informal learning and use of English is supported by formal language education which is undoubtedly of a very high standard in Finnish schools, there is no reason to believe that the current learning conditions would not be as optimal as they possibly can be. This makes one wonder whether there is anything more we can do to enhance Finnish students' grammatical competence in English, or if we have to accept that these deviant syntactic constructions are permanent features in the English of Finnish students. It is another question, however, whether it is even necessary to aim for grammatical accuracy in language teaching. Twenty years ago, these deviant syntactic constructions examined in this study would, undoubtedly, have been characterised as grammar errors, which learners should be helped to overcome through pedagogic intervention. However, according to current, more liberal views on learner language and linguistic norms, these syntactic patterns may be seen as acceptable lingua franca English. According to this approach, the goal of foreign language learning is not the native-like usage but rather communicatively effective usage of the second language. Features which deviate from native speaker norms may be considered acceptable in L2 users' speech as long as they are understood by interlocutors (see, e.g., Jenkins 2000: 158-160; 2009: 202).

The question of whether the syntactic patterns examined in this study could be considered, to borrow Jenkins' (2009: 202) term, "legitimate ELF [English as a lingua franca] variants" is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of the present study, but definitely worth considering in future studies. This study has identified features which are typical of the learner English of Finnish students. The next step worth taking would be to investigate to what extent these types of features can be found in other learner varieties and, more importantly, whether these types of patterns are considered acceptable in terms of their intelligibility, or whether they reduce communicative effectiveness, both in ELF communication contexts and in communication with native speakers of English.

Future challenges for the teaching of English in Finland

Although this study has only focused on one area of Finnish students' English competence, the findings presented here have some pedagogic implications that warrant further investigation. One of the explaining factors for the non-parallel development in lexical and syntactic transfer patterns may be found in language education; if learners are not encouraged to pay attention to grammatical accuracy, they are unlikely to do so. The positive effects of the pedagogic shift from grammar and translation into communicativeness may be seen in Finnish students' improved communication skills in English, which may also explain the decreased negative transfer in certain aspects of their vocabulary knowledge. However, it is another question whether the current approach to language teaching is enhancing their L2 syntactic development. While traditional grammar oriented teaching methods were accused of producing learners with some knowledge of formal grammar rules but no ability to speak in a foreign language, there might be a danger that today's communicative based language teaching produces learners with a readiness to communicate in the foreign language but with relatively weak knowledge of its grammatical norms.

A further factor which may have contributed to the increase of certain syntactic transfer patterns in the data is increased auditive learning influenced by phonetic L1 transfer. Since Finnish students are now being exposed to spoken English input more, they are assumedly also learning more English via the auditive channel instead of studying words and grammatical structures from books. As has long been known, due to phonotactic differences between Finnish and English, Finns often have difficulties in perceiving phonetically reduced and unstressed sounds in English (see Ringbom 1987: 80-90). This shows, for example, in certain types of L1-induced spelling errors in their writing, which had increased in the data (see Meriläinen 2008, 2010). Phonetic transfer may also partially explain the students' increased omission of certain grammatical markers, such as the future auxiliary *will* or prepositions, because these tend to be phonetically unstressed and reduced. Thus, it appears that for Finnish learners of English, acquisition through exposure to TL input may be more effective in relation to L2 vocabulary, but insufficient for acquiring an equivalent level of proficiency in L2 syntax. If we want Finnish students to accurately master the usage of certain English grammatical constructions, informal exposure to English via the auditive channel is insufficient and needs to be complemented by formal grammar instruction.

The importance of explicit grammar instruction for Finnish learners of English is also supported by Ringbom (2007). The studies he has conducted in the Finnish context during the past 30 years have yielded important evidence for SLA researchers worldwide on the role of learners' L1 in foreign language learning and on the relative advantage of learners whose L1 is related to the TL over learners whose L1 is distant from it. As Ringbom (2007:109-110) emphasises, in the absence of cross-linguistic similarities that would aid acquisition, specific guidance is needed for Finnish learners in order for them to understand how English grammatical structures really work.

As the current communicative-based language teaching methods do not favour error correction or explicit teaching of difficult grammatical structures, the types of deviant structures examined in this study may receive little

attention on the part of language teachers. Moreover, even though the pupils might be introduced to grammar rules and the norms of Standard English in language classrooms, they will be exposed to the more liberal rules of *lingua franca* English in informal learning contexts. This means that both the informal and the formal learning contexts may be encouraging learners to regard grammar as unimportant and consider the English they use for their own communicative purposes as sufficient for all contexts. As to the goals of future language education, it is worth considering if good grammatical competence is among those competences we should require from Finnish students in the future. Learning to use English effectively for communication may well be an appropriate goal at the very initial stages of English studies at elementary school level, but as the learners approach academic studies and professions, grammatical accuracy and knowledge of the norms of standard English gain more importance.

The challenges of future language education and the role of informal learning are also discussed by Leppänen et al. (2008: 426). They propose that if Finnish youngsters continue to have the opportunity to informally acquire and use English outside the classroom context, we could consider either raising the goals of English teaching in Finnish schools or reducing the number of teaching hours in the English curriculum. In the light of the findings of the present study, reducing the number of teaching hours seems an undesirable decision if we want Finns to have good English competence in the future. The learning environment for English as a foreign language may have become richer, but the typological distance between Finnish and English has not disappeared, which is why the importance of formal instruction has not diminished.

The increased informal learning should be taken into consideration when assessing whether current English instruction meets the needs of both Finnish youngsters and the Finnish society. However, before making any far-reaching decisions about the English curriculum in Finnish schools, the English skills of Finnish students and the changes that have occurred in them during the past few decades should be carefully studied. In order to assess the level of their current English competence, we should not only look at their use of English (cf. studies in Leppänen et al. 2008), but also their learner language and its development at a structural level. Despite Finnish students' increased fluency and confidence in the use of English, there might still be room for improvement in various aspects of their lexical and grammatical knowledge of English. The English produced by today's Finnish youngsters may be communicatively effective and fluent *lingua franca* English, but the issue of whether this kind of language competence is sufficient for their future needs in various domains of life should be critically examined.

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