6 Language Contrasts, Language Learners and Metacognition

Focus on Norwegian Advanced Learners of English

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Introduction

Anyone who learns a new language brings at least one other language into the learning process. Hence, any language learning situation, including the foreign language classroom, can be considered a multilingual setting. Theories and practices of second and foreign language teaching have differed in their views on the role of the learner's first language (L1) in the process of acquiring the new language, both as a medium of communication and as a basis for comparison. In brief, the use of the language learners' first language in second language teaching is a contentious issue; see Hall and Cook (2012) for an overview of the debate and Scheffler et al. (2017) for a recent survey of student attitudes. Particularly in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) in English-speaking countries there has been a tradition of monolingual foreign language instruction (Hall and Cook 2012, 272). Beyond being a practical issue, the monolingual approach, i.e. the exclusion of the learner's L1 from the language classroom, is rooted in an assumption that immersion in the L2 is beneficial to learning, while frequent use of the L1 may cause negative transfer. In other words, attention to—or use of—the learner's first language is seen as a detour rather than a shortcut to L2 learning (Hall and Cook 2012, 275). By contrast, Cummins concludes that “when students' L1 is invoked as a cognitive and linguistic resource through bilingual instructional strategies, it can function as a stepping stone to scaffold more accomplished performance in the L2” (2007, 238). In language teaching contexts where most (or all) of the learners share a common language, it is likely that the instruction is to some extent bilingual, and that parallels are drawn between the language to be learnt and the language(s) already known by the learners. This common language need not be everyone's first language, but nevertheless one that is shared and used for general communication, such as Norwegian in Norwegian schools; see Hall and Cook (2012, 274), who prefer the term “own language” to, e.g. “first language” or “native language”.

This chapter focuses on crosslinguistic contrasts in the light of L2 proficiency and language awareness among advanced learners of English in

Norway. The study has two main research questions: First, to what extent are contrasts between learners' L1 and the language being learnt (L2) visible in L2 learner writing? Second, how do advanced learners think about the relationship between their L1 and L2 in connection with language learning? Following a brief discussion of language comparison (contrastive analysis) and language learning, including a review of some relevant studies, I turn to evidence from corpora to (a) identify some areas of difference between English and Norwegian, and (b) investigate how these differences are handled by Norwegian advanced learners of English (see below for a description of the corpus material). The second research question is addressed in a separate section which presents reflections from a group of Norwegian university students of English: To what extent do these advanced learners of English possess crosslinguistic awareness, and how do they exploit this awareness in their language learning? Although my focus is on English and Norwegian, and on English as an L2 in a Norwegian context, the points raised should be transferable to other language pairs.

Literature Review: Language Comparison and Language Learning

The Norwegian school curriculum for English identifies "Language learning" as a main subject area, describing it as follows:

The main subject area Language learning focuses on what is involved in learning a new language and seeing relationships between English, one's native language and other languages. It covers knowledge about the language, language usage and insight into one's own language learning.

(The Norwegian Directorate for Education
and Training 2013)

The rationale for this is that knowledge about, and reflection on, relationships between the languages (presumably similarities and differences) can feed into strategies for learning and using the English language. This is in line with the emphasis on plurilingualism found in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR 2001). Plurilingualism implies that somebody who has experience with several languages and cultures does not keep them "in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact" (CEFR 2001, 4).

In this context, it is important to distinguish between implicit and explicit linguistic knowledge, i.e. the learner's intuitive or conscious knowledge of linguistic norms (see, for example, R. Ellis 2008, 418; Jessner 2006, 54). Only intuitive knowledge is needed to use language, but in order to reflect on language, explicit knowledge is needed. N. Ellis (2005) argues that

implicit and explicit linguistic knowledge are distinct and dissociated; for example, explicit metalinguistic knowledge does not automatically lead to correct language production (implicit knowledge), or vice versa. However, the two types of knowledge can interact fruitfully: Metalinguistic information connects with implicit learning in a dynamic interface (N. Ellis 2005, 325). James makes a similar point when defining language awareness as “having or gaining explicit knowledge about and skill in reflecting on and talking about one’s own language(s), over which one hitherto has had a degree of control and about which one has also a related set of intuitions” (1999, 102).

According to James (1996, 139) “one never knows a second language in isolation from one’s first”; however it is only if one also has “knowledge of the *relationships* holding between one’s two languages” that one can develop so-called crosslinguistic awareness. In the context of language learning (and teaching), crosslinguistic awareness is an important component of metacognition, i.e. “knowledge and beliefs about one’s own cognitive processes” (Colman 2015); see Haukås (2018, this volume) for a more extensive discussion of the concept in a language learning context. Metacognitive reflection can only take place if knowledge is explicit and verbalisable, whether in terms of linguistic metalanguage or more ad hoc-based categorisations.

The idea that knowledge of language contrasts can benefit the learning and teaching of foreign languages is not new. Already in the 1940s, Fries (1945, 9) argued that “the most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner”. Similarly, Lado (1957, 2) claims that “the teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of the students will know better what the real learning problems are and can better provide for teaching them” (see also Wardhaugh 1970). More recently, Neuner (2004) advocates explicit comparison of the L1 and the L2 (and/or the L3) in language teaching to raise students’ awareness of similarities and differences between their first language and the language(s) to be learnt.

The optimistic belief, expressed by contrastivists in the 1940s and 1950s, in the direct connection between contrastive analysis and language teaching (and learning) soon turned out to be exaggerated. It became clear, for example, that “not all L2 errors could be predicted by identifying the differences between the learners’ native language and the target language” (R. Ellis 2008, 360), nor could all learner errors be explained by recourse to a contrastive analysis. For example, errors may be intralingual, i.e. associated with the language to be learnt rather than with transfer from the L1 (James 1998, 138), or they may be caused by features of the learning situation and/or other compound or ambiguous factors (1998, 200). Furthermore, not all differences between a learner’s L1 and the L2 cause learning difficulties or errors (Gilquin 2000/2001, 101). For example, it has been suggested that perceived language distance can act as a constraint on negative

transfer (R. Ellis 2008, 397). That is, if learners do not perceive or assume any degree of similarity between their L1 and the L2, transfer does not take place (Ringbom 2007, 26). Errors may of course still occur when “relevant L2-procedures are not available” (2007, 25).

Greenbaum (1988, 31) observes that “the foreign learners’ first language is both a help and a hindrance to their learning of English: a help because they understand the nature of language and can draw analogies with the patterns and processes in their own languages; a hindrance because sometimes the analogies are false.” False analogies result in negative transfer, a phenomenon that has been shown to be pervasive even at advanced stages of L2 proficiency (Laufer and Girsai 2008, 700; Paquot 2013). Correct analogies, by contrast, can result in positive transfer. A foreign learner’s first language can be a stepping stone for learning a new language, but for this to happen, the two languages need to be connected, and the knowledge of the relationship needs to be conscious (R. Ellis 2012, 281).

Ringbom claims that linguistic similarity is much more important than difference in the process of learning a new language. “The L2-learner is constantly seeking to facilitate his task by making use of previous knowledge” (1987, 33). This is particularly useful for receptive skills (reading and listening), as pointed out by Ringbom (2007) and elaborated and operationalised by Hufeisen and Marx (2007). However, Ringbom (2007, 118) argues that the learners’ reliance on their L1 is helpful only if the two languages are related: “across totally unrelated languages . . . there is little or no facilitation” (see also Ringbom and Jarvis 2009). Furthermore, in learning a third language related to the L2, both positive and negative transfer can take place between the L2 and the L3 if the two are related to each other (Jessner 2006 *passim*; Ringbom 2007, 78). As Otwinowska-Kasztelanica (2009, 133) points out, the condition for language learners to take advantage of similarities between their L1 (or an L2) and the language to be learnt is that they “recognize opportunities for transfer”. Thus, in an active process of language learning, “learners need to be metacognitively aware of what they are doing” (Anderson 2005, 267). Simply put, they need to know what they know, and also what they do not know, in order to progress (Haukås 2018, this volume; James 1996, 141).

The Current Study

Much of this chapter is devoted to the interface between crosslinguistic comparison and learner language analysis. The corpus-based studies presented in the next section are carried out according to the Integrated Contrastive Model (Gilquin 2000/2001; Granger 1996), which combines contrastive analysis with the investigation of learner language. In this model, contrastive analysis is undertaken to predict and diagnose learner problems (or the lack thereof). The learner language analysis typically explores differences and similarities between learner data and native speaker data. The

juxtaposition of the two analyses can uncover potential and actual (positive and negative) L1 transfer. However, there is no assumption that language contrasts will translate directly into learning problems or that similarities will automatically lead to error-free performance in the L2. Furthermore, differences between L1 and L2 usage are not necessarily seen as a problem (Granger 2009). I believe, however, that the model is useful for identifying and explaining interlanguage behaviour at different levels of proficiency. The learners investigated in this study are rather advanced, which means that most non-nativelike features of their English are non-trivial: They are not a matter of simple vocabulary deficiencies or imperfectly mastered grammatical constructions, but rather a case of non-targetlike discourse construction. The integrated model of contrastive and interlanguage analysis can serve as a needs-analysis in which linguistic and discursive features that differ contrastively and cause learner problems can be identified and in turn become part of an increasingly proficient learner's cross-linguistic awareness.

The learner corpus cannot reveal the students' reflections on their linguistic choices and (meta-)linguistic knowledge; it only shows the final product. Therefore, I conducted a small-scale analysis of student responses to the question of whether language learners can benefit from knowledge of similarities and differences between their L1 and the language being learnt. The students' responses shed light on their crosslinguistic language awareness as well as on the relevance of conducting the type of study presented in the following section, which explores language contrasts in the light of language learning. Because the two investigations use completely different methods and examine different populations, the descriptions of materials and methods are given in separate sections below.

A Corpus Perspective on Language Comparison and Language Learning

This section presents explorations of three lexicogrammatical phenomena: the modals *shall/will* and their Norwegian cognates *skal/vil*; the collocation of modal verbs with the modal adverbs *kanskje*, *perhaps* and *maybe*; and finally, a type of expression labelled "topic identifier", such as *when it comes to*. These constructions are studied both crosslinguistically, using a parallel corpus of English and Norwegian, and in terms of L2 proficiency, comparing a corpus of advanced learner English produced by Norwegian students to one of English L1 student writing. The main research questions for all three studies are the same:

- What are the differences and similarities between Norwegian and English in the area investigated?
- To what extent do Norwegian advanced learners differ from native speakers of English in this area of language use?

- Does usage in L2 English reflect the predictions drawn from the contrastive study? In other words, is there evidence of (potential) transfer from the L1?

Corpus Material and Method

The corpus investigations are based on three sources: The *English-Norwegian Parallel Corpus* (ENPC) is used for comparing English and Norwegian (L1). The ENPC comprises 50 text extracts in Norwegian and 50 in English. Each extract consists of 10,000–15,000 words and is accompanied by a translation into the other language (Johansson 2007, 10ff.). The texts in each language are divided between fiction (30 texts) and non-fiction (20 texts).² The learner language analysis draws on the Norwegian component of the *International Corpus of Learner English* (ICLE-NO), which contains argumentative texts written in English by first-year university students of English whose first language is Norwegian. The corpus comprises 317 texts (about 211,000 words) by students from nine universities and colleges (Granger et al. 2009, 34–5). The same essay prompts, designed to produce argumentative texts, were used across the institutions. 74% of the writers were female (2009, 9), likely reflecting the gender distribution in the student population. Granger et al. (2009, 12) report that 12 of the texts in a random sample of 20 from this corpus have been rated according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR 2001, 24) at C1 or C2 level, and the rest at B2 (or lower).³ The third corpus, the *Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays* (LOCNESS), consists of (mostly) argumentative texts by British and American students. It contains approximately 324,000 words (322 texts).⁴ It was compiled as a native speaker reference for use in conjunction with the ICLE corpora, not to serve as a target norm for learners, but rather as a representation of English L1 writing of the same type as the L2 texts in ICLE (Granger 2015, 18).

Corpus-linguistic methodology is both quantitative and qualitative (Granger 1996). It is common in corpus linguistics to view frequency of use as a feature of linguistic items. Thus, if two languages have similar words or grammatical structures, but use them with different frequencies, this is seen as a language contrast. If learners use a linguistic item significantly more or less often than comparable native speakers, this is regarded as non-targetlike behaviour (described in terms of over- and underrepresentation), even though the language produced may be formally correct (Granger 2015, 18). Particularly when studying learner corpora, however, quantitative results are often insufficient because they cannot indicate whether or not usage is felicitous (Hasselgård and Johansson 2011, 45 ff.). In both crosslinguistic and interlanguage studies, it is important to remember that “formal similarity is no guarantee that there is identity of use” (Johansson 2012, 47). Thus, qualitative analysis of concordance lines (i.e. the output of a corpus

search) is a vital part of learner corpus analysis, as will be illustrated in the studies presented below.

The Modal Auxiliaries will/vil and shall/skal

The first study concerns the cognate modal auxiliaries *will/vil* and *shall/skal* and the corresponding forms *would/ville* and *should/skulle*. Both English and Norwegian refer to future time using these modals plus infinitive, but English prefers *will* and Norwegian *skal* (Dypedahl and Hasselgård 2018, 156–7), as illustrated by example (1). The less common auxiliaries have special conditions of use. Outside questions with a first-person subject, *shall* is rare and denotes strong obligation or necessity (e.g. *He shall not get away with it*). The use of *vil* in Norwegian future expressions is fairly widespread, but tends to evoke the notion of willingness. Some uses of *would* are not matched by *ville*, e.g. “future in the past” and “habit in the past”, as in (2); see Hasselgård (2015, 95).⁵ *Should*, unlike *skulle*, cannot normally express future in the past, see example (3), and in its deontic sense of obligation differs from that of Norwegian *skulle* (Dypedahl and Hasselgård 2018, 157).

- (1) . . . men i februar *skal* det *være* over. (KF1) [. . . but in February *shall* it be over.]
. . . though by February it *will* be over.
- (2) And the dog, most often, *would* be lying on top of his feet. (AT1)
Og hunden *lå* som regel over føttene hans. [And the dog *lay* as a rule across his feet.]
- (3) Hun tok varsomt i døra, som om hun var redd den *skulle* gå i stykker. (HW1) [. . . as if she was afraid it *should* go in pieces.]
She opened the door gently, as if she were afraid it *would* fall apart.

Table 6.1 shows the frequencies of these modals in the fiction component of the ENPC (original texts only), ICLE-NO and LOCNESS. Because the corpora

Table 6.1 Frequencies per 100,000 words of “skal/shall”, “skulle/should”, “vil/will” and “ville/would” in the ENPC, ICLE-NO and LOCNESS.

	ENPC		ICLE-NO L2 English	LOCNESS L1 English
	Norwegian	English		
<i>skal/shall</i>	217	12	10	3
<i>skulle/should</i>	222	71	242	238
<i>vil/will</i> + 'll	138	190	414	353
<i>ville/would</i>	220	394	335	450

differ in size, the numbers represent normalised frequencies per 100,000 words to make them directly comparable. The crosslinguistic comparison of data from the ENPC brings out the expected differences between Norwegian and English: *skal* and *skulle* are much more frequent than *shall* and *should*, while *vil/ville* are less frequent than *will/would*. This cross-linguistic difference gives rise to the hypothesis that *shall/should* will be overrepresented and *will/would* underrepresented in the texts by Norwegian learners of English (ICLE-NO) compared to similar texts by native speakers (LOCNESS).

As expected, *shall* is more numerous in ICLE-NO than in the L1 reference LOCNESS, with 22 occurrences in ICLE-NO (10.4 per 100,000 words) and 11 (3.4 per 100,000 words) in LOCNESS. Although this frequency difference is significant ($LL = 9.96$, $p < 0.01$),⁶ the number of writers who use *shall* is similar between the corpora, thus neutralising the apparent overrepresentation in ICLE-NO.⁷ Furthermore, the degree of transfer is low, since *shall* is far less frequent in ICLE-NO than *skal* in the ENPC.

Almost all the instances of *shall* in the ENPC have first-person subjects, and most occur in questions. Two instances with a third-person subject seem biblical in style. Similarly, four of the sentences with *shall* in ICLE-NO quote a commandment (e.g. *You shall not kill*), and six have a first-person subject, which makes them (relatively) acceptable. The remaining 12, however, are unidiomatic, as illustrated by (4) and (5).

- (4) One may ask: Why *shall* some people have more money than others? (ICLE)
 (5) What the society wants is that all *shall* be equal. (ICLE)

Contrary to expectations, *should* is not overrepresented in ICLE-NO. Examining the concordance lines, I found that the learners tend to use *should* felicitously, and that the rare examples of unidiomatic usage occur in specialised contexts, such as that shown in (6). The example may appear correct, but its wider context shows that the student is not making a recommendation, but simply establishes the fact that “this did not pass into history as . . .” An alternative “future-in-the-past” expression would have been *was to*.

- (6) A great man once said: “I have a dream!” This *should* not pass into history as a single sentence quoted by one single man many years ago. (ICLE)

In (7), the learner has combined two modals in English, likely on the pattern of Norwegian, where this is feasible (e.g. *kan måtte*). Though explainable by recourse to contrastive analysis, this error type was found only once in the material, and seems to represent a lower proficiency level than where most of the ICLE writers are: They realise that English modals do not combine with each other.

- (7) The thing is that probably people are too busy and they’re not aware that they *might should* give dreaming and imagination time. (ICLE)

The Norwegian learners' use of *shall* is closely associated with error. However, over 90% of the learners do not use *shall* at all, and thus seem aware of the difference between *skal* and *shall*. The general impression is that the choice among this set of modals is made correctly by most of the learners in spite of the crosslinguistic differences. Transfer errors, except regarding specialised uses of the modals, thus likely belong to more basic proficiency levels.

As expected, *would* is underrepresented in ICLE-NO compared to LOCNESS (LL = 42.55, $p < 0.0001$), while, surprisingly, *will* is overrepresented (LL = 15.86, $p < 0.001$). Further study is needed to find an explanation for this.

Modal Combinations

The second study concerns collocations involving the Norwegian modal adverb *kanskje* or the corresponding English adverbs *maybe* and *perhaps*. The term “modal combination” refers to a combination of a modal verb and a modal adverb, e.g. *may perhaps* and *should maybe* (Aijmer 2002; Løken 2007). The two elements in such a combination may carry similar or different modal meanings (for instance, both *may* and *perhaps* denote probability, while *should maybe* combines obligation and probability). Aijmer (2002, 68) found that Swedish learners use modal combinations more frequently than native speakers and linked this to the fact that such combinations are more common in Swedish than in English (Aijmer 2002, 69). According to Løken (2007, 275), “Norwegian modals expressing ability have a stronger tendency to occur in combinations than the English ones do”. She makes a similar observation for combinations of modal verbs and adverbs expressing probability (Løken 2007, 290). From Aijmer's (2002) and Løken's (2007) findings, I hypothesised that Norwegian would contain more modal combinations than English, and that Norwegian learners would transfer this pattern to their written English. The transferred combinations are usually not ungrammatical, but may contribute to a general overemphasis on modal meaning, thus making the text seem pleonastic and too informal (Aijmer 2002, 72).

The concordancer AntConc (Anthony 2014) was used to identify recurrent clusters of two or three words containing a modal verb in addition to the adverbs *kanskje* or *maybe/perhaps*. As Figure 6.1 shows, modal combinations with *kanskje* are more frequent than those with *maybe/perhaps* in the ENPC, while the combinations are more common in fiction than in non-fiction in both languages. The number of modal combinations in ICLE-NO is closer to that of Norwegian fiction than of non-fiction in the ENPC, but does not differ significantly from either. This suggests that Norwegian learners copy patterns from their L1. No ICLE-text contained more than one modal combination with *perhaps/maybe*, so the usage is not idiosyncratic. The native-speaker students represented in LOCNESS, on the other hand, use modal combinations sparingly, matching the pattern of English non-fiction in the ENPC.

Figure 6.1 Modal combinations with “kanskje” and “perhaps/maybe” across corpora. Frequencies per 100,000 words.

The modal verb that most frequently collocates with *kanskje* is *kunne*, followed by *ville* and *kan*. English fiction contains examples of the combination *maybe* + *could*, but the most frequent combination is *perhaps* + *should*. Thus, the ENPC material indicates that “same-sense” combinations are most frequent in Norwegian, while “different-sense” combinations are more frequent in English. Examples are given in (8) and (9), respectively. Note that *kan/kunne* carries the modal meaning of ability in some combinations, in which case they represent different-sense combinations when collocating with *kanskje*, as in (10).

- (8) Men det *kan kanskje* være verd å merke seg at det var den praktiske matematikk Leonardo var opptatt av. (ANR1) [But it can perhaps be worth to notice. . .]

It *might* be worth noting that Leonardo was interested in applied mathematics.

- (9) *Perhaps I should* join a group and get my consciousness raised. (MD1)
Kanskje jeg skulle slutte meg til en gruppe og få hevet bevisstheten min.
 [Perhaps I should join a group . . .]

- (10) Vi *kan kanskje* sammenligne med en kunstmaler. (JG1) [We can perhaps compare with a painter]
 We *can* make a comparison to painting.

The contrastive evidence suggests that Norwegian learners might favour same-sense modal combinations with *can/could* (and possibly *may/might*). However, the most common combination is *maybe* + *would* (nine instances in nine different texts), possibly reflecting the frequent combination of *kanskje* + *ville* mentioned above; see example (11). This collocation is

not ungrammatical, but it is absent from English L1 usage in the ENPC and LOCNESS. Like the other examples of this modal combination, (11) expresses a hypothetical situation.

- (11) What would a book be like that was written without any sense of imagination or fantasy? (*Maybe it would be about fish.*) (ICLE)

While *would* combines only with *maybe* in ICLE-NO, the second-most frequent auxiliary in the modal combinations, *should*, combines with both *maybe* (five times) and *perhaps* (twice). This simply reflects the fact that *maybe* is, overall, over twice as frequent as *perhaps* in this corpus. In fact, all five occurrences of *maybe* + *should* have *we* as a subject and express suggestions, as in (12).

- (12) *Maybe we should* open clinics for “Television-addicted”? (ICLE)

Four of the five instances of modal combination in LOCNESS have *should* + *maybe/perhaps*, a combination that also occurs in English fiction in the ENPC. The combination of *maybe/perhaps* and *can/could* occurs only once in LOCNESS, in (13), where *can* denotes ability and thus produces a different-sense combination. ICLE-NO, however, contains same-sense combinations where *can/could* express possibility, as in (14) and (15).

- (13) If we can learn to be objective about suicide, then *maybe we can* understand why people do this. (LOCNESS)
 (14) *Maybe this can* be an important issue to bring into the discussion about the quality and
 (15) I feel that our education have problems and *could perhaps* have been different . . . (ICLE)

To check whether the tendencies noted above were particular to *maybe* and *perhaps*, I also examined modal combinations with *probably*. Even though these are more common in LOCNESS than combinations with *maybe/perhaps*, they are still less frequent than *probably*-combinations in ICLE-NO. It can thus be concluded that Norwegian learners rely more than native speakers on adverbs to express epistemic modality. While not constituting grammatical errors, the overrepresentation of modal combinations (and epistemic adverbs in general, see Paquot 2013) may seem pleonastic in the case of same-sense combinations and needlessly tentative in certain different-sense combinations (Aijmer 2002). Crosslinguistic awareness of how modal meanings are expressed and combined may thus save L2 writers from lending their text an unintended flavour.

Topic Identifiers

The last study concerns the form and use of topic identifiers. Hasselgård (forthcoming) shows that Norwegian learners of English greatly overuse the

expression *when it comes to*. This expression typically appears sentence-initially, announcing the sentence topic (hence the label “topic identifier”), as in (16), but can also occur in a non-initial position to restrict the validity of the proposition, as in (17).

- (16) *When it comes to death penalty*, i do not think any countries should be allowed to use this kind of punishment. (ICLE)
 (17) The societies’ reactions have always been crucial *when it comes to preventing crime*. (ICLE)

When it comes to is not ungrammatical: The expression is rare in English L1 academic texts, but relatively common in speech and in journalistic texts. It is more widespread in American than British English, and seems to be on the increase (Hasselgård, forthcoming). A wider set of topic identifiers are presented in Table 6.2. The set was developed partly from thesauri and partly by studying translations in the ENPC of *when it comes to* and the closely corresponding *når det gjelder* (“when it concerns”). As these expressions are infrequent in fiction, only the non-fiction part of the ENPC appears in the table. The topic identifiers under study are listed in descending order of preference for each corpus, with the raw frequency given in brackets. Overstrikes show that an expression is absent from the corpus. The last row of the table shows combined frequencies per 100,000 words.

As Table 6.2 shows, the most frequent English topic identifier in the ENPC and LOCNESS is *concerning*. *When it comes to* does not occur in original non-fiction texts in the ENPC (though a small number appear in fiction). The expression *når det gjelder* accounts for 49% of the Norwegian topic identifiers in ENPC non-fiction. Other Norwegian expressions found

Table 6.2 Topic identifiers in descending order of preference across corpora. The raw frequencies of each item are given in brackets and the frequency per 100,000 words of all the expressions combined is given in the last row.

ENPC non-fiction English	ENPC non-fiction Norwegian	ICLE-NO (L2 English)	LOCNESS (L1 English)
<i>concerning</i> (35)	<i>når det gjelder</i> (38)	<i>when it comes to</i> (41)	<i>concerning</i> (38)
<i>as regards</i> (21)	<i>i forbindelse med</i> (34)	<i>concerning</i> (23)	<i>in terms of</i> (19)
<i>with regard to</i> (18)	<i>med hensyn til</i> (6)	<i>in terms of</i> (14)	<i>when it comes to</i> (16)
<i>in terms of</i> (16)		<i>in connection with</i> (8)	<i>as regards</i> (4)
<i>with respect to</i> (4)		<i>as regards</i> (5)	<i>with respect to</i> (3)
<i>in connection with</i> (1)		<i>with regard(s) to</i> (2)	<i>with regard to</i>
<i>when it comes to</i>		<i>with respect to</i> (1)	<i>in connection with</i>
37.7	35.4	42.2	24.7

in the ENPC are *med hensyn til* ("with regard to") and *i forbindelse med* ("in connection with").⁸

Surprisingly, the English and Norwegian ENPC texts contain similar numbers of topic identifiers; fewer than in ICLE and more than in LOCNESS. However, the quantitative comparison probably suffers from a mismatch of genres; in particular, the legal texts in the ENPC appear to contain numerous identifiers with specific discourse functions. Examining the translations in the ENPC, however, I found that topic identifiers are much more frequent in translations than in original texts in both languages (60 and 62 per 100,000 words in English and Norwegian, respectively). This may suggest that topic identifiers are susceptible to contexts of contact between an L1 and an L2—a topic which deserves further investigation in a separate study. In both directions of translation, a topic identifier may be the translation of a simple preposition, as shown in (18).

- (18) And this is true not only of the microbes of two billion years ago. (CSA1)

Dette stemmer ikke bare når det gjelder mikrober som fantes for to milliarder år siden. [This fits not only when it concerns microbes that existed for two billion years ago.]

The overrepresentation of topic identifiers in ICLE-NO compared to LOCNESS is significant ($LL = 10.92$, $p < 0.001$). The greatest difference concerns *when it comes to*, which occurs 19.4 times per 100,000 words in ICLE-NO and 4.9 times in LOCNESS. Most ICLE-texts with topic identifiers have one or two, but one text has six instances of *when it comes to*. The frequency with which the Norwegian learners use topic identifiers suggests that the function of these expressions is considered useful. Judging from the contexts of the expressions, the learners seem particularly fond of announcing the topic in clause-initial position. This function is often taken by *when it comes to*. In contrast, the L1 students use *when it comes to* clause-finally more often than clause-initially. The most frequent topic identifier in LOCNESS, *concerning*, more typically occurs in a clause-final constituent, as in (19), a pattern also used by the Norwegian learners.

- (19) Tradition has played an important role *concerning* distinct gender identities. (LOCNESS)

In English, sentence-initial position and subject status are in themselves signals of topic prominence. Halliday (1994, 39) notes that topics are sometimes "announced explicitly, by means of some expression like *as for . . . with regard to . . .*", but even without such a signal, an element in sentence-initial position "is the starting-point for the message; it is the ground from which the clause is taking off". It seems, however, that sentence-initial placement is associated with less prominence in Norwegian (Hasselgård 2005), which may explain why Norwegian learners use explicit identifiers of sentence

topics more often than their native-speaker peers. Example (20) might thus have been paraphrased as in (20a). In English L1 texts, the sentence subject more typically performs the function of topic identification on its own or with the aid of an emphatic adverbial after the subject, as in (21).

- (20) *When it comes to* imagination, my dictionary says that this is “the ability to create mental images or pictures.” (ICLE)
- (20a) Imagination is defined in my dictionary as . . .
- (21) *Genetic engineering however* throws up its own moral problems. (LOCNESS)

In a non-initial position, topic identifiers are often used by learners when a simple preposition would suffice. In (22), the writer may not have known the appropriate preposition. As in many other “unnecessary” instances of *when it comes to*, *about* would have been a good alternative. Although (23) is similar to the native-speaker example in (19), the simple preposition *for* would have been more elegant and concise. It should be remembered, however, that the use of topic identifiers for simple prepositions is also apparent in translations between English and Norwegian, as shown in (18) above.

- (22) What is she going to tell her child *when it comes to* the fatherhood? (ICLE)
- (23) People’s support *concerning* The Royal Wedding were among other events broadcasted all over the world. (ICLE)

From a language learning perspective, topic identifiers have two main functions. First, they are used as “all-purpose” prepositions, as in (22) and (23). To improve their style, learners need awareness of idiomatic verb-preposition and noun-preposition collocations, and possibly a metalinguistic awareness of the distinction between prepositions and similar-functioning expressions. The other, more subtle, function of topic identifiers is their role in discourse organisation. As such, they can be valuable tools for making the information structure of sentences very explicit, both announcing topics in advance and delimiting topics in retrospect, as seen in (17), (19) and (22). Excessive use of sentence-initial topic identifiers, however, may appear either clumsy or overemphatic. To reduce this effect, Norwegian learners may, for instance, be made aware of the “thematic prominence” (Halliday 1994) of sentence-initial position in English, as well as the possibility of using an adverbial after the subject to give it more emphasis, as seen in (21).

A Student Perspective on Language Comparison and Language Learning

Since the analysis of corpus data does not give access to the writers’ reflections, I conducted a small-scale investigation of students’ perceptions of the usefulness of language comparison in language learning to complement the

corpus study. I put the following question to a group of second-year undergraduate students of English at the University of Oslo:

Can you think of any examples from your own experience that knowledge of differences and similarities between English and your first language can be of help in learning or teaching English? Can it be a hindrance?

Participants and Method

The participants in this study were students in a course I taught called *Contrastive and Learner Language Analysis*.⁹ The course is open to students in the English language and the teacher education programmes. Proficiency in Norwegian is a requirement for taking the course. Through their course activities, the students were familiar with the analysis of parallel and learner corpora. Note that they were not the same students as those studied in the previous section.

The question was given to the students in connection with a written course assignment, which may obviously have influenced what they wrote. They were told, however, that this particular question was optional and would be ignored in my overall evaluation of their papers. They were also informed that their answers would be used in the present study in anonymised form. Thus, by submitting a response to the question, they consented to my use of it. No metadata were collected apart from what emerged from the student registrations. I received responses from 12 out of 14 students (four male and eight female), writing on average 250 words each. A slight majority were in the teacher education programme. With one possible exception, the students were native speakers of Norwegian or another Scandinavian language. They all responded in English despite the option of using Norwegian. Because of the limitations of the material, the qualitative analysis of it is rather informal. It is based on a close reading of the texts and focuses mainly on points raised by several students.

Analysis and Discussion of Student Responses

Many of the students noted that the extensive similarities between Norwegian and English “increase the possibility of positive transfer of Norwegian constructions to English”,¹⁰ thus echoing the main argument of Ringbom (2007), namely that crosslinguistic similarity greatly facilitates the learning of a language which is related to the learner’s L1. Some students explicitly draw on their theoretical or metalinguistic knowledge to compare the languages, e.g. “English and Norwegian are quite similar languages because both are Germanic. Many of the words are therefore fairly alike. The syntax is also closely related (SVO) with a few exceptions like the Norwegian V2 rule . . .” As the students point out, such similarities make life easier

for Norwegian learners of English—knowledge about these similarities can make them feel safe in their linguistic choices, particularly in the early stages of learning.

But particularly at more advanced levels of proficiency it is important to be aware of differences as well, to avoid the pitfalls of false friends and other “mistakes related to negative transfer”. One student connects her metalinguistic knowledge to her teaching practice as well as to her own learning:

The differences in sentence structure, lexis and pronunciation would be the focus of learning, for my own and the student’s advancement. The similarities between the two languages are usually easier for us to learn, and therefore, they do not have to take up the same amount of our time when we learn English.

Other students, too, take the perspective of language teaching, observing, for instance, that explicit knowledge of “form and patterns of the language” help them in explaining “the *whys* and *hows*”.

According to the students, a drawback of relying on their first language is, as Greenbaum (1988) points out, that it is easy to draw false analogies: The partly false friends *mean* and *mene* (“mean”/“think”) are given as an example. One student writes that the “translation learning” s/he was exposed to at school encouraged a type of English that was as close to Norwegian as possible, which may have involved an over-emphasis on similarities. However, crosslinguistically aware teachers can “explicitly point out typical equation errors (false friends) that Norwegians pupils tend to make, as this will make the pupils more aware of instances where the languages differ.” On a different note, one student suggests that “the knowledge of differences might lead to learners treading more carefully around constructions they know are often different from Norwegian, and therefore avoid using these constructions completely in order to minimize the risk of making an error”.

Several students broach the subject of awareness, which may concern particular points of similarity or difference between English and Norwegian, such as progressive verb forms and differences in noun phrases, but may also be more general: “knowledge of differences and similarities has been very helpful in terms of increasing my own awareness of how I express myself in English”. Such awareness is not always helpful, however, as revealed in the following quote:

In general, knowing that most learners of my native language tend to make a particular mistake or overuse a particular construction makes me more aware of this in my own use of English. The downside of this awareness could of course be that I overcorrect and make mistakes I would not otherwise have made had I not been self-conscious about a particular aspect of English.

A similar concern is voiced by another student: “If I have to think of any hindrance this knowledge has given me, I would probably say that it makes me overanalyse my writing and speaking, which could make the language less natural.”

One of the few students who mention languages other than English and Norwegian writes: “Taking an English [course] in France among French learners of English has also made me more aware of the advantages you have as a Norwegian learner of English.” This quote is interesting because it provides evidence that general language awareness can be developed by exposure to more than one or two languages, cf. the notion of plurilingualism noted above (CEFR 2001, 4). Another student reverses the picture: “One very interesting aspect of the differences and similarities between English and Norwegian is actually that knowledge of English can help native Norwegians learn to speak their own language better” (see Forbes 2018, this volume). In other words, crosslinguistic awareness is seen as beneficial to the first language as well as to the second (Cook 2015; Cummins 2007, 234).

In general, the students seem to agree that knowledge of similarities and differences is useful in second-language learning and teaching as it provides a tool for distinguishing between areas involving little effort and those requiring more conscious learning or instruction. In other words, metacognitive knowledge helps learners and teachers benefit from positive transfer and identify features that are prone to negative transfer. They also seem to agree that awareness of linguistic similarities can provide a shortcut for learners at lower levels, but that more advanced learners need to be aware of differences too. The most frequently mentioned disadvantage of explicit knowledge of similarities between the L1 and L2 is that it can make the learner self-conscious and trigger avoidance strategies as a result.

Discussion

The three studies presented in the fourth section of this chapter are relevant at different levels of proficiency and sophistication in the L2 and demand different kinds of crosslinguistic awareness. The use of *vil/skal* vs. *will/shall* is mainly a matter of the *linguistic competence* (CEFR 2001, 13) of knowing how to fill a slot in a grammatical expression of future time—in other words, to be aware of the different functions and meanings of similar vocabulary items. Idiomatic use of modal combinations requires more advanced metacognitive awareness, particularly as the non-nativelike combinations are grammatically correct. The transfer of Norwegian patterns into English makes the style overly tentative or pleonastic in the case of same-sense combinations of epistemic modality (and overly emphatic in other cases, according to Aijmer 2002, e.g. *really must*). Thus, the required knowledge needs to be explicit in the sense that learners need to know about modal meanings, how they are expressed, and what effect they have in the L2 compared to the L1. Finally, the use of topic identifiers represents a mixture of crosslinguistic

differences in preposition use, and less trivially, in discourse organisation (i.e. a pragmatic competence according to CEFR 2001, 13). To produce effective texts in the L2, writers would benefit from conscious awareness of how sentence topics are marked differently in their two languages.

It should be acknowledged that the corpus analyses suffer from a mismatch of genres, between the ENPC and the student corpora. While the two student corpora are closely matched in terms of genre and the age/expertise of the writers, they consist of argumentative texts, a genre not represented in the ENPC. Furthermore, the ENPC represents professional writing. Hence, neither the fiction nor the non-fiction component of the parallel corpus is a perfect match for the student corpora. Thus, particularly the quantitative comparisons between the ENPC and ICLE-NO/LOCNESS need to be taken with a grain of salt.

The comparison of L2 learners to native speakers has been criticised as dubious or irrelevant. For example, Cook (2007, 245) claims that “L2 users have to be credited with being what they are—L2 users. They should be judged by how successful they are as L2 users, not by their failures compared to native speakers”. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (2014, 217) argues that if “identity with idealized native speaker production” is seen “as a definition of success, it is difficult to avoid seeing the learner’s [interlanguage] as anything but deficient”. However, as Granger (2015, 15) points out, the native speaker corpus need not (and in the case of an L1 student corpus, probably should not) be regarded as a learning target norm, but rather as a reference against which L2 performance can be described (see also Granger 2009 for a discussion of the so-called “comparative fallacy” in learner corpus research). It may be added to the debate that the advanced learners represented in the ICLE corpus are university students of English, who aim to work as English language professionals (de Haan and van der Hagen 2013). Even if this may not involve becoming “imitation native speakers” of English (Cook 2007), the aspiration should be competence at C2 level with “the degree of precision, appropriateness and ease with the language which typifies the speech of those who have been highly successful learners” (CEFR 2001, 36).

It is interesting that the students’ views on conscious knowledge of similarities and differences between their first language and their target language are in agreement with much of the literature cited in the literature review. In particular, the awareness of linguistic similarity—which is highly relevant to the language pair English and Norwegian—is considered an advantage for learning. The possibility that awareness of differences can cause difficulty, or at least self-consciousness, has been voiced in criticisms of form-focused L2 instruction (see, for instance, the discussion in Spada 2011). However, the students acknowledge that metacognitive knowledge of differences is important in order to progress at advanced levels, and to avoid negative transfer. The student comments do not, of course, directly concern the corpus material studied in this chapter, but the fact that they have some

experience with this type of study from their course may have given them relevant insights in this area.

Concluding Remarks

“Knowledge of more than one language in the same mind” has been termed multi-competence (e.g. Cook 2015). Most of the students who participated in the study described above observed that it makes good sense to take advantage of this competence in learners, i.e. to draw on first-language competence when learning or teaching a second language. While a range of studies have shown how (negative) L1 transfer is pervasive in L2 performance even at advanced stages of proficiency, e.g. Paquot (2013), transfer can also be clearly beneficial to language learning (Neuner 2004; Otwinowska-Kasztelanic 2009; Ringbom and Jarvis 2009) and proximity between languages “affects positive transfer; learners find it easier to learn an L2 that is similar to their own language” (R. Ellis 2008, 397). Ringbom argues that language learners (unlike linguists) tend to look for similarities rather than differences between their L1 and the language to be learnt, since especially at the early stages of learning, “L1 is the main source for perceiving linguistic similarities” (2007, 1). Analogies between patterns in the L1 and the L2 are extremely helpful in the case of closely related languages such as English and Norwegian. According to the students, Norwegian learners of English can benefit greatly from such analogies, particularly at basic levels of proficiency, while attention to differences is increasingly important at higher levels.

Granger advocates contrastive and learner corpus analysis as a means to “identify the lexical, grammatical and discourse features that differentiate learners’ production from the targeted norm” (2009, 19). However, she emphasises that not all differences between the learners’ L1 and the L2 (or between learner and native speaker usage) should “lead to targeted action in the classroom” (2009, 22). The selection of features to teach will depend on for example “learner needs, teaching objectives and teachability” (*ibid.*). These variables will in turn depend on the targeted proficiency levels. As Greenbaum (1988, 30) argues, “many students will be satisfied with mutual intelligibility in restricted situations. Many others will be concerned to be correct”. Students such as those investigated in this chapter, however, are already proficient learners (or users) of English, for whom the relevant goal for attainment should be the C2 level, including the ability to “express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations” (CEFR 2001, 24). This clearly extends far beyond mutual intelligibility. For learners aiming to be English language professionals (e.g. language teachers), it is vital to possess a crosslinguistic awareness that enables them to take advantage of the real similarities between languages, filter out misleading parallels, and develop strategies for noticing and verbalising differences in both structure and pragmatics/discourse between the languages so as to develop their linguistic as well as metacognitive skills.

The realisation that “learners will always draw upon their own language in order to learn a new language” (Hall and Cook 2012, 281) should not be seen as a hurdle to be overcome, but as a resource to be valued. This chapter has illustrated the technique of using evidence from corpora to discover differences between the learners’ own language and the language to be learnt, as well as discrepancies between the learners’ interlanguage and the target language. The technique can be used as a tool for “facilitating noticing” (R. Ellis 2012, 281) and enhancing crosslinguistic awareness and metacognition among advanced language students as well as language teachers, who can pass on this knowledge to their students (see Römer 2011). The student responses indicate that such a technique may indeed work. Learners do not need to become “imitation native speakers” (Cook 2007), but the metacognitive ability of learners to notice features of their own language, the foreign language and the relationship between them can be a shortcut to successful language learning, irrespective of the targeted level of proficiency.

Notes

- 1 Translated from Norwegian by the author
- 2 See www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/services/omc/enpc/ for further information on the ENPC.
- 3 See <https://uclouvain.be/en/research-institutes/ilc/cecl/icl.html>.
- 4 For further details, see <https://uclouvain.be/en/research-institutes/ilc/cecl/locness.html>.
- 5 Examples from the ENPC have been given with the original text before the translation. Norwegian examples are accompanied by a word-for-word (unidomatic) translation in square brackets. The bracketed identification tag reveals their origin, e.g. KF1 (example 1), which refers to a text by Knut Faldbakken. For a complete list of tags, see www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/services/omc/enpc/. ICLE and LOCNESS examples are marked as such, and are rendered as they appear in the corpora, meaning that any errors have been left uncorrected.
- 6 The calculation was made using the online log-likelihood calculator at <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html>.
- 7 One ICLE writer produced six instances of *shall*, while nobody else had more than one or two.
- 8 The expression *når det kommer til* (“when it comes to”) is probably a recent translation loan from English. It does not occur in the ENPC texts, which are from the 1980s and early 1990s. *I forhold til* (“in relation to”) was omitted because it tends to be used in its literal meaning—to compare things—rather than as a topic identifier in these texts (there is reason to believe usage has changed here too).
- 9 The course description is available at www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/ilos/ENG2162/.
- 10 The student opinions given as quotations are in the students’ own words, but typos have been corrected.

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