

Metalinguistic awareness and the cross-linguistic influence of L2 English as resources in the  
acquisition of L3 Swedish: perspectives from Finnish university students

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is concerned with *metalinguistic awareness* (MLA) and *cross-linguistic influence* (CLI) and how they could potentially be utilized by Finnish students in their acquisition of L3 Swedish. Metalinguistic awareness has been defined as the ability to think about language, while cross-linguistic influence refers to the way in which acquired languages affect one another. The research questions set for the study contemplated whether Finnish students could utilize their metalinguistic awareness of L2 English in their acquisition of L3 Swedish, and whether the cross-linguistic influence of L2 English has a positive or negative effect on the acquisition process. In this qualitative study, four university level students pursuing L3 Swedish participated in a semi-structured interview regarding their past and present language studies. They were first presented with general questions about their language studies, after which they were tasked with translating English and Swedish sentences as a way to activate their MLA and to enhance their recollection of cross-linguistic similarities. Finally, they were prompted to assess how L2 English has affected their acquisition of L3 Swedish and whether they had consciously utilized English in some manner during their TLA process. A thematic analysis of the interviews produced findings that would suggest that the participants had benefitted from their earlier L2 English competence in their acquisition of L3 Swedish. The participants had utilized their metalinguistic awareness of English to enhance their acquisition and production of Swedish. Additionally, the CLI of English had aided the acquisition of linguistic features that are similar to those used in Swedish, although some interference had also occurred. These instances of MLA and CLI were most notable in the earliest stages of the third-language acquisition (TLA) process, potentially warranting future research on individuals who are at an earlier stage of their TLA process.

## **Tiivistelmä**

Tämä tutkielma käsittelee *metakielellistä tietoisuutta* (*'metalinguistic awareness'*), *kieltenvälistä vaikutusta* (*'cross-linguistic influence'*) ja niiden mahdollisia sovelluksia suomalaisopiskelijoiden ruotsin omaksumisessa. Metakielellinen tietoisuus on määritelty kyvyksi ajatella kieltä tietoisesti, kun taas kieltenvälinen vaikutus viittaa tapaan, jolla omaksutut kielet vaikuttavat toisiinsa. Tutkielmalle asetetut tutkimuskysymykset liittyivät suomalaisten ruotsinopiskelijoiden kykyyn hyödyntää metakielellistä tietoisuuttaan englannista heidän ruotsin omaksumisessaan sekä aiemmista englanninopinnoista aiheutuvaan positiiviseen ja negatiiviseen kieltenväliseen vaikutukseen. Kvalitatiiviseen tutkimukseen osallistuneita neljää yliopistotason ruotsinopiskelijaa haastateltiin

heidän entisiin ja nykyisiin kieliopintoihinsa liittyen. Heille esitettiin ensin yleisiä kysymyksiä kieltenopiskelusta, jonka jälkeen he suorittivat englannin- ja ruotsinkielisiä käännöstehtäviä metakielellisen tietoisuuden aktivoimiseksi ja kieltenvälisen samankaltaisuuksien muistamisen parantamiseksi. Lopuksi heitä pyydettiin arvioimaan miten englantia toisena kielenä on vaikuttanut ruotsin omaksumiseen kolmantena kielenä ja miten he ovat mahdollisesti hyödyntäneet englantia tietoisesti ruotsinopinnoissaan. Haastatteluista tuotetun temaattisen analyysin tulokset implikoivat, että haastateltavat olivat hyötäneet aiemmista englannin opinnoistaan ruotsin omaksumisessa. Haastateltavat olivat hyödyntäneet metakielellistä tietoisuuttaan englannista parantaakseen ruotsin omaksumista ja tuottamista. Tämän lisäksi englantia oli auttanut haastateltavia omaksumaan ruotsin kielestä englannin kielen kaltaisia ominaisuuksia kieltenvälisen vaikutuksen kautta, vaikkakin myös interferenssiä oli ilmennyt. Metakielellinen tietoisuus ja kieltenvälinen vaikutus vaikuttivat ruotsin omaksumiseen eritoten kielenomaksumisen varhaisimmissa vaiheissa, joten aiheeseen liittyviä jatkotutkimuksia voisi mahdollisesti kohdistaa varhaisemman vaiheen kielenoppijiin.

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# 1. Introduction

Finnish students are typically acquainted with at least two languages other than Finnish. English is usually learned as the first foreign language in Finnish schools, making it the *second language* (L2) of the individual learner. The other language is Swedish, one of the two national languages of Finland, which is typically acquired after L2 English as the *third language* (L3). In linguistic terms, these two languages could also be identified as the *secondary* and *tertiary* languages of the individual learner. In addition to these two languages, some students might also choose to pursue to learn additional tertiary languages, such as German or Spanish.

Finnish students typically display great competence and interest in English, which enjoys a status as a global *lingua franca*. Conversely, motivation towards studying Swedish is much more limited; for instance, YLE reported in 2018 that more than half of the upper secondary school graduates chose not to take the matriculation exam in Swedish in the spring of 2017 (Kosonen, 2018). Despite this, there have been plans to reinstate the mandatory status of Swedish in the Finnish upper secondary school curriculum. With this in mind, it might be appropriate begin considering ways to enhance the education of L3 Swedish in Finland.

When considering the high English competence of Finnish students, a question arises: could Finnish learners of L2 English somehow make use of their English competence when learning L3 Swedish? After all, English and Swedish are both Germanic languages that share various lexical and morphosyntactic similarities, such as the use of definite/indefinite articles and a broad selection of prepositions. These features are in stark contrast to Finnish which, as a Finno-Ugric language, utilizes vastly different morphosyntactic systems. Based on studies regarding second language acquisition (SLA) and third language acquisition (TLA), previously acquired languages will typically affect the acquisition of subsequent languages through *cross-linguistic influence* (CLI), which can lead to both positive and negative effects on the acquisition process. In this sense, earlier experiences with L2 English could aid the acquisition of L3 Swedish. Furthermore, the acquisition of a foreign language will typically lead to an enhanced ability to perceive languages as systems that can be compared and analyzed, an ability which is commonly referred to as *metalinguistic awareness* (MLA). An awareness of this kind would allow the learner to make conscious comparisons and reflections upon their learned languages and the target language, thus allowing the learner to utilize their earlier linguistic experiences in their language acquisition and to derive positive CLI from their priorly learned languages. Enhancing this awareness among Finnish students could lead to improved acquisition of tertiary languages.

The pedagogical potential of MLA and CLI forms the rationale for this qualitative study: metalinguistic awareness could prove to be a valuable resource in Finnish language education, which is why studies on MLA and CLI from a Finnish perspective are necessary. The current study aims to research the effects of L2 English on the acquisition of L3 Swedish with a focus on metalinguistic awareness and cross-linguistic influence while exploring the following research questions:

1. Do university language students consider English and Swedish to be cross-linguistically similar? If so, has it helped or hindered their TLA of Swedish?
2. Have university language students utilized their metalinguistic awareness of L2 English in their TLA of Swedish? If so, how?
3. How has the cross-linguistic influence of L2 English affected the TLA of Swedish among the participating students?

In the current study, four university students pursuing L3 Swedish were interviewed in order to assess how expert language learners experience the studied phenomena. The study is presented in this thesis, which begins with an exploration of the analytic framework in section 2. Section 3 details the materials and analysis process of the current study, while the findings of the study are presented in section 4. Finally, section 5 discusses the findings and their implications while assessing the successfulness and limitations of the current study.

## 2. Analytic framework

The following section introduces the central concepts of the current study. The first subsection (2.1.) defines the concepts of metalinguistic awareness and cross-linguistic influence and discusses their acknowledgment in linguistics and pedagogics. The second subsection (2.2.) briefly reviews previous studies on MLA and CLI and discusses how their methods and findings have influenced the design of the current study.

### 2.1. Metalinguistic awareness (MLA)

Metalinguistic awareness (MLA) is a concept within the wider field of language awareness. Gass (1983, as cited in Angelovska, 2018) defined MLA as “the ability to think about language” (p. 136). Huang (2018) used a similar definition, characterizing MLA as “the understanding that language is a system which can be analyzed” (p. 331). The exact definition of MLA varies slightly between researchers, but it could be summarized as the ability to understand language at a structural level. It also relates to the ability to make a conscious reflection upon the differences and similarities between languages, which was identified as a subtype of MLA by Angelovska (2018), who asserted that this type of MLA “gives L3 learners the possibility to exploit all available prior language resources” (p. 138). Angelovska (2018) referred to this subtype of metalinguistic awareness as *cross-linguistic awareness*. This subtype is relevant to the current study; however, for the sake of clarity, this subtype is referred to as metalinguistic awareness in this thesis.

### 2.2. Cross-linguistic influence (CLI)

Languages are not acquired in isolation from one another, but rather through a multilingual process that provokes a certain level of interplay between the previously acquired languages and the target language. According to Angelovska (2018), the acquired languages influence one another through *cross-linguistic influence* (CLI), which can affect the production and acquisition of the language. Ideally, CLI can act as an aid in the acquisition process by helping the learner to better understand the systems and features of their target language, leading to enhanced acquisition and production; however, instances of negative transfer and interference are just as possible (Angelovska, 2018). The process of third language acquisition may thus become influenced by the L1 and the L2 of the learner. This phenomenon is explored in the current study, which is concerned with the cross-linguistic influence between L2 English and L3 Swedish.

### **2.3. Acknowledgment of MLA and CLI in linguistics and pedagogics**

Prior linguistic competence has not always been viewed as having a positive influence on the acquisition of subsequent languages. According to Cenoz (2003), bilingualism was commonly seen as a cognitive hindrance to language acquisition prior to the 1960's, which is when the benefits of bilingualism became more acknowledged in the field of linguistics. Contemporary linguists have a much more positive view on prior linguistic competence when it comes to the acquisition of subsequent languages. In fact, the results of a neurological study by Grey et al. (2018) suggested that there is a concrete, physiological basis for the enhanced language processing of bilingual learners: a review of event-related potentials (ERPs) revealed that bilinguals displayed “ERP patterns for an additional language that are more similar to those of native speakers of languages” (p. 970). Others, such as Jessner (1999), have argued that metalinguistic awareness should be utilized as a resource in multilingual language education and that “prior language knowledge should be reactivated in the classroom” (p. 206). The benefits of bilingualism on the acquisition of subsequent languages have thus been acknowledged and underlined in contemporary linguistic research.

### **2.4. Previous research on the metalinguistic aspects of language acquisition**

A wealth of studies have been conducted on the effects of prior linguistic competence on the acquisition of a foreign language, though a majority of the existing studies focus on the acquisition of a second language rather than on the acquisition of tertiary languages. The effects of bilingualism on the learning of an L3 were recognized by Jessner (1999), who underlined the metalinguistic differences between second and third language acquisition and the fact that students are able to make use of conscious reflection on prior learning strategies used during their SLA to enhance their TLA process. This notion has a prominent role in the cumulative-enhancement model for language acquisition, as presented by Flynn et al. (2004), which aims to explain the effects of SLA on the acquisition of additional languages. The model in question suggests that the characteristics of the L1 are not the only factor when it comes to the acquisition of subsequent languages, but rather that all previously acquired languages have an effect on the learning process. The model also proposes that having learned an L2 will have either a neutral or positive effect on the acquisition of subsequent languages.

Several studies, conducted in a variety of linguistic contexts, have produced results that are supportive of the cumulative-enhancement model as presented by Flynn et al. (2004). Such results were displayed in a longitudinal study by Haenni Hoti et al. (2011), which concerned the acquisition of



French as a foreign language by German-speaking students; students who had studied English as a foreign language displayed higher reading and listening competence in French than the students who had no previous experiences in studying a foreign language. A recent study by Arıbaş and Cele (2021) found that L1 Turkish students with German as an L2 and English as an L3 displayed an improved acquisition of English articles when compared to students with L1 Turkish/L2 English. These studies suggest that bilingual learners of a tertiary language have an advantage over monolingual learners, possibly owing to enhanced MLA.

Schepens et al. (2016) argued that not all bilinguals have an equal advantage when it comes to TLA. The results of their study would suggest that cross-linguistic differences between the prior learned languages and the target language correlate with reduced levels of acquisition; this may be related to a lack of positive CLI between the prior languages and the target language. Despite this, the researchers noted that the results of the study are not contradictory to the cumulative-enhancement model since having acquired an L2 before learning an L3 seemed to have “either neutral or positive” effect on the acquisition of the L3 (Schepens et al., 2016, p. 247). On the other hand, Huang (2018) suggested that morphosyntactic differences between the learned languages may actually benefit the learner in their acquisition process, since said differences can help to activate the metalinguistic awareness of the learner. In light of these studies, it is difficult to conclude whether it is better for the acquired foreign languages and the target language to be similar or different. Nonetheless, all of the studies point to the same conclusion: having learned a foreign language is likely to have a positive effect on the acquisition of subsequent languages.

The metalinguistic aspects of language learning have been acknowledged and researched within the Finnish context as well. Ringbom (1987), who reviewed research on the effects of L1 on the learning of English among Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking Finns, underlined the significance of cross-linguistic influence on language acquisition. His understanding of the L1 as a major factor in the acquisition of subsequent languages seems to reflect the findings made by Schepens et al. (2016) nearly three decades later. More recently, a study on the language awareness of Finnish student language teachers was conducted by Nupponen et al. (2019), which underlined the importance of language awareness and multilingual consideration in the education and training of language teachers in Finland.

## 2.5. Methodology and perspectives in previous metalinguistic studies

As is apparent from the section above, the metalinguistic aspects of language learning have interested linguists greatly in the past decades. Although they have been studied with differing perspectives and focuses, a major focus within the topic has always been *proficiency*, or how previous linguistic competence affects the acquisition and production of a foreign language. In a wide-ranging review of studies pertaining to the relationship between bilingualism and third language acquisition, Cenoz (2003) made a distinction between studies that focus on general proficiency and studies that are more interested in specific forms of proficiency. The previously mentioned study by Arıbaş and Cele (2021), which focused on the acquisition of English articles, would fit the characteristics of a study on specific proficiency within Cenoz' (2003) categorization. On the other hand, the longitudinal study by Haenni Hoti et al. (2011) could be considered more general in nature, since the focus was on listening and reading skills rather than some specific aspect of L3 proficiency.

Studies that focus on proficiency and the metalinguistic abilities of the participants often utilize linguistic tasks. One such study was the qualitative study by Angelovska (2018), which was primarily concerned with metalinguistic reflections. The participants were first assigned with producing a short text with their L3, after which instances of cross-linguistic influence were identified from the produced texts. Afterwards, these instances of CLI were discussed with the participants in a semi-structured language reflection session. A task better suited for quantitative data collection was utilized by Arıbaş and Cele (2021): their participants were presented with a series of English dialogues from which articles had been omitted. The task, which the researchers referred to as a “forced-choice elicitation task”, was to then select the correct article from the predefined options based on the context of the dialogue. Huang (2018) utilized slightly different type of task in his study of L3-acquisition. The participants, who had Chinese as an L1 and English/Southern Min as L2, were presented with grammatical tasks in a language previously unknown to the participants: Japanese. This research setting, where all participants have a controlled amount of instruction and previous experience with the L3, is an intriguing application that may produce more information about the effects that characteristics of previous languages have on the acquisition of subsequent languages.

Some of the aforementioned methods and approaches are utilized in the current study. Perhaps the most notable inspiration came from Angelovska's (2018) research design, which involved the use of semi-structured interviews and activation of the L3 for data collection and qualitative coding for data analysis. Linguistic tasks are also utilized in the data collection of the current study, although they are different from the ones used by Huang (2018) as well as Arıbaş and Cele (2021).

### 3. Methodology

This section describes the methods and materials that have been employed in the current study. The research participants are discussed in the first subsection (3.1.), while the second subsection (3.2.) details the data collection process. The third and final subsection (3.3.) discusses thematic analysis and its application in the current study.

#### **3.1. Research participants**

Four students pursuing Swedish at university level participated in the current study. University students were chosen as participants due to their relative accessibility and high level of linguistic experience, which was hypothesized to be sufficient for accurately describing experiences with language acquisition. The participants will henceforth be referred to by the arbitrarily chosen pseudonyms Anne, Matt, George and Hannah to protect their privacy. The four participants were presented with a privacy notice and necessary information about the study (topic, methods, data management), after which they were asked to sign an official consent form before the interviews took place. They were aware that the study has to do with studying English and Swedish, but the concepts of MLA and CLI were not discussed or explained to them prior to the interviews, as the intention of the current study was to have the participants recall their experiences in their own words.

This rather small sample is sufficient for a qualitative case study, but due to the limited size of the sample, the results may not be extrapolated to the general population of Finnish university students. The relative representativeness of the data is increased by the differing linguistic backgrounds that the participants had: two of the participants studied Swedish as a major with English as their minor, while the other two studied Swedish as a minor with English and Finnish as their majors. Furthermore, all of the participants had prior experiences with additional tertiary languages, such as French, Japanese and Chinese. Their differing backgrounds and experiences with language learning provided depth to the data.

#### **3.2. Data collection**

Qualitative, remote interviews were used to collect the data for the current study. A semi-structured interview with predefined questions was selected as the data collection method due to the nature of the subject matter. It was hypothesized that a concept such as MLA would be difficult to study through questionnaires and other methods that limit the output of the participants, which is why the

participants were interviewed qualitatively in a manner that allowed them to verbalize their experiences in their own words. The interview form is included as an appendix to this thesis, both in Finnish and in English (Appendix A).

The interviews, which were conducted in March 2021 via Zoom, were video-recorded. They lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and were held entirely in Finnish. The interview consisted of three separate sections. In the first section, the participants were presented with general, semi-open questions regarding their language studies at the university. The participants were asked to recall the languages that they have studied and to identify which of them were the easiest and hardest to learn. They were also asked to identify any possible differences between their learning strategies and manners of acquisition with different languages.

The second section of the interview consisted of translation tasks. The participants were presented with simple translation tasks between Swedish and English, both from SWE to EN and EN to SWE, that involved the use of structures that have similar functions in both languages: these tasks are attached to this thesis as an appendix (Appendix B). For instance, one of the tasks had the participant translating the English sentence ‘There are no cars on the road. The road is empty’. The sentence, though simple in terms of lexicon, requires the participant to identify certain linguistic aspects of the source text in order to produce an accurate translation. Most notably, both definite (‘the road’ – *vägen*) and indefinite (‘cars’ – *bilar*) forms for nouns are present in the sentence, and an existential verb structure is placed in the beginning of the source sentence (‘There are’). To successfully identify these structures and to carry them over in translation between the two languages would indicate that the participant is aware of these systems that do not appear in Finnish, their native language. The participants were asked to motivate various aspects of their translations – such as word order, definiteness/indefiniteness and the use of pronouns – to give them a chance to verbalize their metalinguistic awareness.

The translation tasks were designed to involve the usage of the following morphosyntactic features that could be considered to be cross-linguistically similar between English and Swedish:

- Definite and indefinite forms for nouns (*en katt, katten*; a cat, the cat)
- Conditional structures (*Jag skulle ha gått* – I would have gone)
- Auxiliary verbs (*Jag har/hade varit där* – I have/had been there)
- Reflexive pronouns (*Jag/mig* – I/me)
- Prepositions (*Inom, på, utan* – Inside (of), on, without)
- Existential phrase (*Det finns* – There are)

- Impersonal subject (*Det regnar* – It is raining)

The purpose of these translation tasks was to activate the metalinguistic awareness of the participants by having them simultaneously utilize their L2 and L3. It also served as a warmup to the third section of the interview, where past experiences with MLA and CLI were discussed with the participants.

The final section of the interview consisted of semi-open questions relating to the participant's own perceptions on cross-linguistic similarities and the influence that L2 English has had on the acquisition of L3 Swedish. The participants were asked to weigh the similarities and differences between English and Swedish and to recall instances where cross-linguistic influence had affected their acquisition in some manner during their TLA process, or where they had utilized some form of MLA to enhance their acquisition. The interview questions in this section were designed to be rather open and to incite the participant to personally reflect upon their metalinguistic abilities and instances of positive and negative CLI. The concepts of MLA or CLI were not outright mentioned in the questions, but the questions were designed to produce answers that relate to the concepts. For instance, the interview question "*Have you ever compared English and Swedish to one another?*" is quite concrete and producing an answer to it would not require the participant to be familiar with metalinguistic concepts even though the question itself is directly related to an application of MLA. The same questions were discussed with all of the participants, either directly or indirectly; for instance, if the interviewee answered two of the intended questions at once, the other question would not be introduced separately.

### **3.3. Thematic analysis**

The current study employs *thematic analysis* as the primary method of data analysis. Thematic analysis involves the creation of *codes* and *themes*, which are used to identify and express the researched phenomena from within the research data (Nowell et al., 2017). Nowell et al. (2017) describe thematic analysis as "a qualitative research method that can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions" (p. 13) and "a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" (p. 13). The 6-phase approach to qualitative thematic analysis, as presented by Nowell et al. (2017), is utilized for the purposes of the current study.

In order to produce representative and accurate codes, the researcher needs to have a comprehensive idea of the information that their data expresses (Nowell et al., 2017). In the current study, the analysis

process was begun by transcribing the raw data from the interviews, with an emphasis on content rather than form: utterances that bore no significance to the current study – such as hesitation markers, dialectal terms and repetition – were omitted or edited to make the transcriptions more coherent and easier to analyze. The transcription process helped to understand the details and nuances of each individual interview.

Once the researcher is properly acquainted with their data, they may begin to assign sections of the data with *codes* that identify ideas, expressions and occurrences that are relevant to the research topic. Nowell et al. (2017) describe coding as “the development of ideas about what is going on in the data” (p. 6). In the current study, the interview transcriptions were reviewed and coded one by one in order to identify sections of interest. In practice, the codes were generated as concise yet representative phrases, which were highlighted in different colors in order to ease the generation of themes. For instance, green was used for codes that represent an aid or a resource, while red was related to hindrances and constraints. This highlighting formed a basis for the thematic framework and helped greatly in the creation of the initial themes.

When it comes to forming codes and themes, Nowell et al. (2017) describe two potential approaches: inductive and deductive analysis. An inductive analysis derives its implications primarily from the data, and the researcher forms their thematic framework based on the emerging features of the research data. Conversely, the thematic framework of a deductive analysis is based on prior research and theories, and the research data is analyzed with this prior information in mind. Both approaches are applicable in thematic analysis as long a consistent approach is utilized across the entire dataset (Nowell et al., 2017). Since the intention of the current study was to research the metalinguistic awareness and cross-linguistic experiences of the participants, it was acknowledged from the beginning of the coding process that the codes and themes would also necessarily be related to metalinguistic phenomena and language acquisition. In this sense, the thematic analysis of the current study was deductive in nature.

In accordance with the instructions presented by Nowell et al. (2017), the codes were collated into a single document, after which unnecessary and inconsistent codes were revised to form a cohesive whole. The aim with this revision was to generate codes that are broad enough to represent all sections relating to that code, but also specific enough that two different codes would not bear identical information. Once the codes were deemed sufficiently representative, they were reviewed and organized into themes and sub-themes, which were similarly reviewed and revised several times to fit the needs of the analysis. The resulting thematic framework and the findings it has provided are explored in the following section.

## 4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the thematic analysis. It is divided into subsections based on the thematic framework: subsection 4.1. discusses the educational background of the participants, while subsection 4.2. discusses their views on cross-linguistic similarities between English and Swedish. Subsection 4.3. focuses on the applications of MLA in L3 Swedish acquisition, while subsection 4.4. discusses the effects of CLI on language acquisition. Finally, subsection 4.5. presents some limitations to metalinguistic language acquisition. The themes explored in these subsections are discussed with regard to the research questions presented in section 1 of this thesis.

As recommended by Nowell et al. (2017), extracts from the interview transcriptions will be presented along with the analysis in order to contextualize the findings. These extracts have been translated from Finnish to English in a manner that aims to retain all relevant information from the original section. An ellipsis ( . . . ) at the beginning of an extract is used to signify an excerpt that has been extracted from a longer section, while [square brackets] are used to signify content that does not appear in the original section in their exact form, but which have been included in the extract to allow the reader to better understand the extract without knowing its full context.

### 4.1. Experiences with SLA and TLA

In order to better understand the interplay between English and Swedish, it is necessary to discuss the nature and extent of L2 English experience that the participants had prior to their TLA process. All participants had acquired English as their L2, beginning in primary school, and Swedish as their L3, beginning in secondary school. Anne, George and Matt indicated that English was the easiest language for them to acquire, while Hannah assessed the two languages to have been equal in terms of difficulty. Three of the participants also indicated media and linguistic exposure to be major contributors to their initial acquisition of L2 English, while the TLA of Swedish has mostly taken place in an academic context. This experience was summarized well by George (Extract 1):

Extract 1.

“I feel that English has been learned in a sort of spontaneous manner, like by following some English series or by playing games, so it has come across more in everyday activities. And studying Swedish has been more conscious in a way, like ‘okay, I will study Swedish now’ – like I will read something in Swedish or study grammar or

something. So English has come more in everyday circumstances so that... I have come across it more often.” - George

Partly due to this high level of exposure to English in extracurricular circumstances, the participants of the current study had acquired a relatively high level of competence with the language prior to their L3 Swedish studies. The participants signified that they had utilized this earlier competence in order to better understand Swedish, especially in the earliest stages of the acquisition process. It became apparent from the data that the positive transfer between L2 English and L3 Swedish is mostly a unidirectional process: none of the participants explicitly mentioned L3 Swedish as having aided the acquisition of L2 English, while Anne and Hannah specifically remarked that Swedish has not had a positive effect on the acquisition of English due to various interferences, which are further discussed in subsection 4.4.2. When asked to assess whether cross-linguistic similarities have ever been an aid in learning, Hannah described her experiences accordingly (Extract 2):

Extract 2.

”Well certainly, yeah. Like, back when I began to study Swedish it definitely was useful to have that English competence as a basis for learning things like articles and prepositions and so on. So I feel that those have given a bit of a basis [for learning Swedish]. And specifically from English to Swedish, but whether Swedish has ever... been helpful for learning English, I am not quite certain whether it has worked in that direction.” - Hannah

Based on the interviews, it seemed like the positive transfer between L2 English and L3 Swedish was unidirectional simply due to higher English competence. By the time the participants began their Swedish studies in secondary school, their English competence was already at a level where new information from Swedish studies could not act as a complement. Conversely, the higher English competence had had a more significant effect on the acquisition of Swedish.

#### **4.2. Assessment of cross-linguistic similarities between English and Swedish**

One of the research questions set for this study was to find out whether the participants consider English and Swedish to be cross-linguistically similar. This question was explored in the third section of the interview, where the participants were prompted to consider the cross-linguistic similarities that exist between English and Swedish and weigh their significance for language acquisition. Generally speaking, all of the participants considered Swedish and English to be quite similar,



although not entirely identical. Hannah, for instance, pointed out that English and Swedish are similar, but not to the same degree as Swedish and Norwegian, which could be considered mutually intelligible. Anne and Matt proclaimed the two languages to be quite similar, while George only acknowledged there to be “some kind of kinship” between the two languages. Hannah and George were both generally less certain about the similarity of English and Swedish. Despite this, all participants agreed that English and Swedish are mutually closer to each other than to Finnish.

The participants were quite able to identify and describe the similarities between English and Swedish. Perhaps most significant of the identified cross-linguistic similarities were deemed to be the various lexical similarities that Swedish and English share. Anne and Matt were aware of the existence of cognates – words with similar etymological roots – between the two languages. Furthermore, all participants were aware that modern Swedish utilizes a large number of loan words from English.

The similar morphosyntactic systems of Swedish and English were also acknowledged by all participants. The use of definite and indefinite articles was identified as a remarkable similarity by all four participants, perhaps owing to the fact that the system is not utilized in Finnish. Anne and Hannah also verbalized the direct connection between the English articles ‘a’/‘an’/‘the’ and the Swedish articles *en, ett, den/det/de*. The extensive use of prepositions in both languages was also acknowledged by George and Hannah, though they had differing opinions on the usefulness of said CLS. The word orders of English and Swedish were also perceived as sharing some level of similarity.

The participants were also aware of more abstract, structural forms of similarity between English and Swedish. When discussing cross-linguistic similarities, Hannah used a cross-linguistic comparison in order to exemplify the differences of morphological typology between English, Swedish and Finnish (Extract 3):

Extract 3.

“And then both of those languages kind of build words with pieces, while in Finnish parts are added to a single word. Like *rakastaisinko*, that is one single word and in English it would be ‘would I love’ – there are three words, and in Swedish it is *skulle jag älska* with three words. So in that sense they are mutually much closer to one another than Finnish is to either of them.” - Hannah

Some of the cross-linguistic differences between English and Swedish became apparent in the interviews as well. In terms of morphology, Matt correctly pointed out that English does not utilize a

grammatical gender for nouns, which is a prominent feature in other Germanic languages, such as Swedish and German. George also adduced the intonational patterns of English and Swedish to be different.

### **4.3. MLA in the acquisition of L3 Swedish**

As is evident from the second research question, a major focus for the current study was to find out whether the participants had utilized their metalinguistic awareness of L2 English in their acquisition process of L3 Swedish. The findings suggest that the participants have utilized metalinguistic awareness in order to enhance their acquisition by consciously considering their L2 during L3 production. Furthermore, the participants also had experiences of metalinguistic awareness being utilized by language teachers in a classroom context to enhance their teaching.

#### **4.3.1. Metalinguistic strategies**

Conscious, metalinguistic methods that have allowed the participants to utilize English in their TLA of Swedish were identified as *metalinguistic strategies* in the coding scheme of the current study. The strategies emerged from the data at various points, although most of them were related to a question in section three of the interview that specifically asked the participants to recall instances where they had consciously utilized English in their Swedish studies.

A significant metalinguistic strategy was that of cross-linguistic comparison, where the language learner consciously compares the systems and features of one language to another. All of the participants were capable of drawing cross-linguistic comparisons between their acquired languages to highlight their similarities and differences. In terms of TLA, the participant with most experience with cross-linguistic comparisons was Anne, who considered the metalinguistic strategy to have significantly benefitted her Swedish studies (Extract 4):

Extract 4.

”... but I do feel that I still use that same system, so that I draw a lot of comparisons like – especially since I study both [English and Swedish] but with English only as a minor subject – so I feel that there is this constant comparison going on. Like what kinds of similarities can be found and how do they compare to the other language. But yeah, all kinds of [similarities] keep appearing, so in a way it feels like the languages support each other.” - Anne

Cross-linguistic similarities were utilized through various metalinguistic strategies. Due to the existence of the various cognates and loan words between English and Swedish, the participants found that it was helpful to look for a missing Swedish lexical item by first considering the English form of the word. Matt presented a vivid description of this metalinguistic strategy (Extract 5):

Extract 5.

”... but you start experiencing that you can remember a word in one of your foreign languages. It is quite usual that if you are unable to find a word through Finnish, you can find it quite easily through English since English and Swedish are such similar languages. You can find them through dictionaries and so on, especially these technical words – not some basic verbs, but words like ‘climate change’ or something like that can easily be found through English because they are nearly the same to begin with.”

- Matt

On top of finding a Swedish lexical item through English, the participants also had experiences with deriving a Swedish word from an English word. This refers to an instance where the participant produces a Swedish word, which is completely missing from their vocabulary, by taking an English word and applying Swedish conjugation and form to it. Anne successfully utilized this strategy in one of the translation tasks of section 2, where she derived the Swedish equivalent for the English word ‘repair’ (*fixa*) by considering a viable synonym, ‘fix’. The closest Swedish equivalent for ‘repair’ would have been *reparera*, but this word was seemingly missing from Anne’s vocabulary, which prompted her to derive the word instead.

#### **4.3.2. Metalinguistic methods in language education**

Three of the four participants recalled their teacher as having utilized cross-linguistic comparisons in their teaching. Anne and Matt had vivid, specific recollections of such instances, while George had difficulties remembering specific instances but signified that they may have occurred. On the other hand, Hannah asserted that her teachers had seldom utilized cross-linguistic comparisons in their teaching. Anne described her recollections of metalinguistic teaching methods as follows (Extract 6):

Extract 6.

”Well, I am sure that one of my upper secondary school teacher underlined [cross-linguistic similarities] quite strongly since he/she taught both Swedish and English. But then in secondary school I had a teacher who only taught Swedish, and I do not think he/she used those kinds of – I mean, he/she never compared those languages. But this

upper secondary school teacher did, and I think that examples from English were often used during Swedish classes.” - Anne

Matt had similar experiences with cross-linguistic comparisons being utilized in a classroom context, although these experiences took place in secondary school rather than upper secondary school. Both participants found these instances of cross-linguistic comparisons to be helpful for learning. Interestingly, the teachers of Anne and Matt taught both English and Swedish at their respective schools. It is perhaps not surprising that a teacher with linguistic and pedagogic competence in both of the two languages would choose to utilize cross-linguistic comparisons in their teaching.

#### **4.4. Cross-linguistic influence of L2 English on the TLA of Swedish**

As detailed in the subsections above, all of the participants acknowledged there to be multiple cross-linguistic similarities between English and Swedish and they had experiences with utilizing their metalinguistic awareness of L2 English in the TLA of Swedish in some manner. In addition to these conscious, deliberate forms of metalinguistic learning, the participants were also asked to reflect on the direct and indirect cross-linguistic influence that L2 English has had on the TLA process, as per the third research question. These reflections are presented in the following subsection, which aims to present concrete examples of how the cross-linguistic influence of L2 English has affected the TLA of Swedish, both in a positive (4.4.1.) and negative (4.4.2.) sense.

##### **4.4.1. Cross-linguistic influence as an aid**

The consensus amongst the participants appeared to be that cross-linguistic influence from L2 English to L3 Swedish had been ultimately beneficial to the learning process and that there had been a positive transfer from their L2 to their L3. This positive transfer was most apparent in the earliest stages of the third language acquisition process, wherein the cross-linguistic influence of English helped the participants to better understand the features of L3 Swedish. The greatest benefits of CLI from L2 English were related to linguistic features – for instance, the use of prepositions and articles – that do not appear in Finnish. These features of L2 English could then be borrowed and utilized to complement the production of L3 Swedish in the early stages of the TLA process.

A particularly helpful form of cross-linguistic influence related to the cross-linguistically similar use of definite and indefinite articles in L2 English and L3 Swedish, which was also identified as one of the most prominent similarities between Swedish and English in an earlier section of the interview. All of the participants signified that awareness of the English article system had helped them to better

comprehend the articles of Swedish. For instance, Anne described her experiences with this cross-linguistic similarity as follows (Extract 7):

Extract 7.

”... I feel like I originally began to learn the Swedish *en* and *ett* – learning where to place it, that is something I learned through English, that it is always *en bil*, *bilen*, *bilar*, *bilarna*, so that it translates to ‘a car’... hold on, ‘the car’, ‘cars’, ‘the cars’. So I never even attempted [to learn this system] through Finnish, because it somehow did not – it did not make any sense for me like that, so it came to me much easier through English because the structure is so similar.” - Anne

The participants also signified that a lack of positive CLI had hindered their TLA, although this mostly became apparent through discussions that concerned tertiary languages other than Swedish. These languages were considered by all participants to be the most difficult languages for them to acquire due to their dissimilarity with their prior languages: the participants had no prior metalinguistic framework for understanding the systems of these foreign languages, which made the acquisition process more difficult. For instance, Matt struggled with the TLA of French due to how differently verb conjugation functions in the language. Similar morphological issues were faced by Hannah, who found the three grammatical genders of German to be a difficult concept to grasp. Perhaps the greatest relative distance between prior languages and the target language was experienced by Anne and George, who had learned Chinese, Korean and Russian as tertiary languages. The unique writing systems had made the acquisition process much more difficult.

These findings seem to suggest that the presence of CLI, derived from similarities between the target language and priorly acquired languages, can be beneficial for language acquisition; the opposite is true for the absence of CLI, which prevents the learner from benefitting from their prior competence.

#### **4.4.2. Cross-linguistic influence as a hindrance**

Although the participants considered the cross-linguistic influence of L2 English on L3 Swedish to be ultimately positive, they were nonetheless able to identify forms of negative influence between the two languages. This negative influence was typically related to some kind of an interference between English and Swedish, wherein the participant had incorrectly borrowed a feature of English in their production of Swedish.

The participants noted that they had mixed certain lexical items and even morphological systems between the two languages. These issues were typically related to words and systems that appear

cross-linguistically similar, but which ultimately differ in some manner. This type of “false equivalency” between Swedish and English lexical items emerged as a common issue. There are numerous words in English and Swedish that have a nearly identical form despite having differing functions. Anne had a vivid recollection of interference with a pair of such words in the early stages of her TLA process (Extract 8):

Extract 8.

”... But yeah there are certainly some kinds of structures that become carried over. A more specific example would be that *vill* is “to want” in Swedish but then it is utilized as for future tense in English, so that was somehow really – especially in secondary school when I just began to study Swedish, so then it was really difficult to remember that they are not the same word. “ - Anne

The apparent similarity of English and Swedish prepositions, which have slightly differing functions, was acknowledged both as a hindrance and as an aid by the participants. It seems that the participants overall considered the similarity of the preposition systems to be helpful, but the nuanced differences between the prepositions had caused difficulties. George, for instance, had difficulties with finding a Swedish equivalent for the English preposition ‘for’ (Extract 9):

Extract 9.

”... like times where I have used an English preposition in Swedish. That has happened occasionally. I mean, not even an English preposition, but somehow I have used the preposition *för* because it would be ‘for’ in English, and then in the end it should be *till* in Swedish, so yeah.” - George

The participants could also recall instances of negative transfer where they incorrectly applied English syntactic features in their production of Swedish. According to Matt, the similarity of Swedish and English systems for word order had caused difficulties due to their nuanced differences. Hannah had faced similar difficulties at the upper secondary school level (Extract 10):

Extract 10.

”But it I can tell that every now then [the languages] almost get mixed. Or maybe not anymore, but back when I was in upper secondary school. I can remember that I mixed

*KONSUKIEPRE* and *KASPO*<sup>[1]</sup> for a bit, I had to consider which belonged to English and which to Swedish, so those required a bit of thinking.” - Hannah

Similar to the positive aspects of cross-linguistic influence, the most significant instances of negative CLI occurred in the early stages of the TLA process. It became apparent from the interviews that the greatest difficulties relating to negative transfer between L2 English and L3 Swedish emerged in secondary school and upper secondary school, whereas at the university level these difficulties have become mostly absent due to increased L3 competence.

#### **4.5. Limitations of metalinguistics in TLA**

Although the participants generally considered metalinguistic awareness and cross-linguistic influence between L2 English and L3 Swedish to be a contributing factor for their TLA process, they were also able to identify some limitations for this beneficial effect. The lack of L2 competence hinders the effectiveness of metalinguistic methods for language acquisition, while increased L3 competence makes them redundant. These limitations are discussed in this section.

While the benefits of L2 competence were noted by all participants, Anne and Matt also noted that utilizing metalinguistic strategies in learning a tertiary language is only viable if the learner has a sufficiently high level of competence in their prior languages. In other words, a student with a lower level of competence in English is much less likely to benefit from their previous linguistic experiences in their TLA process. This problem did not concern any of the participants, who assessed their English competence to have been fairly high by the time their acquisition of L3 Swedish began. Despite this, the lack of competence is a concrete limitation to the usefulness of L2 English in L3 Swedish acquisition when considering Finnish language education: after all, it is safe to assume that the participants of the current study all have a level of interest and competence in languages that exceeds that of the average Finnish language learner.

Another limiting factor for the potential of metalinguistic learning was increased L3 competence. As is apparent from the subsections above, the advantages of metalinguistic awareness in language learning were most significant in the earliest stages of the TLA process, where the participants could use their knowledge of L2 English to complement their lack of competence in L3 Swedish. However, at university level the participants reported to have a sufficient level of Swedish competence so that there is no longer a need to complement the production of Swedish with English. The participants

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<sup>1</sup> *KONSUKIEPRE* and *KASPO* are Finnish mnemonics for recalling the word orders of Swedish and English

had difficulties remembering instances of utilizing MLA at the university level, indicating that the participants might be able to process the languages separately from one another. Anne also doubted the applicability of metalinguistic strategies at the university level due to the nature of language studies at that level (Extract 11):

Extract 11.

”... after all, studying a language in a university is so different from what it is in comprehensive school and in upper secondary school that I can not really – maybe it is harder to come up with [instances where metalinguistic strategies could be applied] at that level because there is no need to learn some structure from the very beginning . . . but I am not sure, I suppose [metalinguistic strategies] could be beneficial at the university level just as before.” - Anne

George and Hannah had similar experiences, and they assessed to have seldom used MLA during their university studies. On the other hand, Matt considered his awareness of L2 English to be beneficial for his production of L3 Swedish even at the university level, especially for translation tasks. Despite this, the general consensus seemed to be that applications of metalinguistic strategies for Swedish production were scarce at the university level due to a higher level of competence with the language.



## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The current study produced findings that provide promising answers to the research questions, which inquired 1) whether the participants consider English and Swedish to be cross-linguistically similar, 2) whether the participants had utilized MLA in their TLA of Swedish, and 3) how the CLI of English had affected the TLA process. The participants considered the languages to be cross-linguistically similar in many respects and L2 English was, generally speaking, deemed to have a positive influence on the acquisition of L3 Swedish. Metalinguistic strategies, such as cross-linguistic comparison, had allowed the participants to consciously utilize their prior linguistic competence, while the CLI of English had granted the participants a better structural understanding of Swedish. Some participants also had experiences of MLA being successfully utilized in their language education, which is in accordance with Jessner's (1999) proposal of activating the L3 in a classroom setting and underlining cross-linguistic similarities. The participants considered this cross-linguistic approach in teaching to be helpful for acquisition. These findings suggest that the CLI and MLA of L2 English could be utilized in Finnish language education, both by learners and teachers. Training Finnish students to utilize metalinguistic strategies in their acquisition process could also have a remarkably positive effect on their TLA of Swedish.

The findings of the current study are supportive of the cumulative-enhancement model for language acquisition, as presented by Flynn et al. (2004): the cross-linguistic influence of the L2 was not inferior to that of the L1. Remarkably, the influence of the L2 was actually more pronounced than the influence of the L1 in specific areas of acquisition, such as definite/indefinite articles. This finding also relates well to those made by Schepens et al. (2016), who asserted that cross-linguistic similarities between priorly acquired languages and the target language lead to higher proficiency. The participants of the current study had benefitted from their L2 English competence while studying L3 Swedish, whereas acquiring dissimilar tertiary languages was deemed much more difficult due to cross-linguistic differences. Based on this information, the acquisition of L3 Swedish in Finland could potentially be enhanced through positive cross-linguistic influence by utilizing of the existing cross-linguistic similarities between English and Swedish in a classroom context.

The current study produced information that corresponds well with its research aim, and in that regard the study could be considered successful. It could have been further improved with a more extensive, sampled group of participants that would give the data more representativeness. Furthermore, since the focus of the current study was on *experiences* rather than *proficiency*, the application of translation tasks for data collection seems slightly misguided in retrospect. The original intention of the current

study was to research upper secondary school students by testing their metalinguistic abilities, which was the initial purpose of the translation tasks. However, they did not provide any meaningful information with the participating university students, who were more than capable of producing accurate translations without remarkable instances of interference or metalinguistic strategies. Although the translation tasks served as a warmup for the final section of the interview, they could have been better utilized in a different research setting with different participants.

Despite the limitations, the current study did provide valuable information about the metalinguistic aspects of language learning in a Finnish context. Based on the findings, the significance of CLI and MLA is most pronounced in the early stages of TLA. This could warrant further research on younger students and their experiences with third language acquisition. An action study, where the participating students are trained to recognize and utilize their MLA in order to improve their proficiency in a given language, could provide intriguing results.

Furthermore, the effects of cross-linguistic influence on language acquisition could be studied in a Finnish context by employing a comparative approach where some participants speak L1 Finnish while others speak L1 Swedish. Their acquisition of L2 English could then be compared to see whether their acquisition is dictated by their L1 or whether the high exposure to English through various forms of media negates this effect. A bidirectional form of cross-linguistic influence could also be studied among Finnish secondary school level learners of German and Swedish, since the students are likely to have much more limited experience and exposure to the two languages than to English. An equal lack of competence in both of the tertiary languages would hypothetically diminish the likelihood of unidirectional transfer, which is more likely to occur when the student has a significantly higher level of competence in one of their target languages.

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## Appendix A: Interview form in Finnish and English

### Osio 1: Yleisiä kysymyksiä kieltenopiskelusta

1. Mitä vieraita kieliä olet opiskellut, ja mitä niistä opiskelet tällä hetkellä?
2. Mikä opiskelemistasi kielistä on sinulle helpoin/vaikein? Miksi?
3. Onko opiskelustrategioillasi eroja kielten välillä? Opitko esimerkiksi englantia eri tavalla kuin ruotsia?

### Osio 2: Käännöstehtävät

### Osio 3: Tarkentavia kysymyksiä kieltenopiskelusta

1. Minkälaisia yhtäläisyyksiä ruotsin ja englannin välillä on? Voit miettiä esimerkiksi kielten lauseoppia, muoto-oppia tai sanastoa.
2. Entä minkälaisia eroja niiden välillä on?
3. Koetko, että Englanti ja Ruotsi ovat samankaltaisia kieliä? Ovatko kielet merkittävästi erilaisia suomeen verrattuna?
4. Muistatko ikinä vertailleesi Englantia ja Ruotsia keskenään tällä tavalla opintojesi aikana?
5. Onko kielten välisistä samankaltaisuuksista ollut ikinä hyötyä kielten opiskelussa?
6. Onko kielten välisistä samankaltaisuuksista ollut ikinä haittaa oppimiselle? Meneekö sinulla helposti ”kielet ristiin?”
7. Muistatko ikinä hyödyntäneesi Englannin kieltä jollain tavalla Ruotsia opiskellessa?
8. Muistatko kieltenopettajiesi ikinä tuoneen esille Englannin ja Ruotsin välisiä samankaltaisuuksia opetuksessa?
  - a) Oliko siitä mielestäsi apua kielen oppimisessa?
9. Koetko itse, että Ruotsin ja Englannin välisiä samankaltaisuuksia voisi hyödyntää kieltenopetuksessa? Millä lailla?

### **Section 1: General question on language studies**

1. What foreign languages have you studied, and which of them are you currently studying?
2. Which of the languages that you have studied has been the easiest/hardest for you? Why?
3. Do you employ different learning strategies with different languages? For instance, do you learn English in a manner that is different from Swedish?

### **Section 2: Translation tasks**

### **Section 3: Specifying questions on language studies**

10. What kinds of similarities are there between Swedish and English? You may consider the syntax, lexicon or morphology of the languages
11. What kinds of differences are there between the languages?
12. Do you consider English and Swedish to be similar languages? Are they remarkably different from Finnish?
13. Can you recall ever comparing English and Swedish to one another in this manner during your studies?
14. Have cross-linguistic similarities ever assisted you in your language studies?
15. Have cross-linguistic similarities ever hindered your language learning? Do you easily mix the two languages?
16. Can you recall ever utilizing English in some manner during your Swedish studies?
17. Can you recall your language teachers ever mentioning the cross-linguistic similarities between English and Swedish?
  - a) Was it helpful for learning?
18. Do you think that the similarities between Swedish and English could be utilized somehow in language education? How?

## Appendix B: Translation tasks

1. I would have gone there if I had time
2. My friend loves his new cat, which is white
3. There are no cars on the road. The road is empty
4. Being happy is not easy
5. Jag vill sova gott idag
6. Det regnar just nu
7. I can fix bikes but not cars!
8. Är svenska och engelska liknande språk?