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Transfer of V2 by Norwegians Learning English: A Brief Outline

Bachelor's thesis in English for teacher training students

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Abstract

Even with the role of English in Norway strengthening, the research on Norwegians learning English is scarce. Therefore, this text is aiming to outline one specific part of second language research; V2 word order transfer in L1 Norwegian learners of L2 English. *Transfer* is a debated term, and the degree to which it occurs, has been debated since the beginning. The Linguistic Proximity Model (Westergaard et al., 2017) proposes that transfer happens through an evaluation of the similarities of the relevant languages. For Norwegian and English, they are both Germanic languages with a SVO structure, but they also differ in that Norwegian also is a V2 language and English has subject-verb agreement. This means that there is a lot to consider when you are a L1 Norwegian speaker learning L2 English. The three research studies by Westergaard (2003), Javorovic (2021) and Strætkevørn (2023) all study such learners in the context of word order. Two of them identified a clear and considerable presence of V2 transfer, but the last contrasts the findings. The field of L1 Norwegians transferring V2 word order into L2 English doesn't appear to be wide, and is in need of more research. The author briefly suggests a few measures.

Keywords: V2, word order, Linguistic Proximity Model, SLA, Norwegian

When learning a second language, the assumption is that we are influenced by our primary language. To what degree this is the case, is a topic of disagreement, but there is a general agreement that there is at least *some* transfer. This means that a learner of English as a second language in Norway, will transfer certain elements of the L1 Norwegian into their L2 English. Norwegians experience high levels of exposure to English in everyday life and activities (Donal, 2017). Which means there might be a general motivation to learn the language. Listhaug et al. (2021) pointed out that studying a foreign language in Norway is rarely a L2 case, because of the position of English in Norway, and the position of English is only strengthening. The aim of this text is to find out what the research literature tells us about V2 word order transfer from L1 Norwegian into L2 English. First, I will outline the position of English in Norway today, and give more context for transfer by the use of research on L1 Norwegian learners of L2 English. Then I will outline three current research articles from the field, discuss them and relate them to how the current research field appears to be and should move onwards.

English in Norway

In the world today, it has become the case that non-native speakers of English vastly outnumber native speakers (Lewis et al., 2013, as cited in Dahl, 2014). If we speak about the global roles of English, we can use the model by Kachru (1985, 1992) that describes three concentric circles. Norway falls into the expanding circle, with English having no official status but being an important and widespread foreign language (FL). English teaching starts in Norway from grade 1 but many children enter school already familiar with the language due to the prevalence of the language in media, news, TV and general digital channels (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019). Phillipsson (1992) described in his book *Linguistic Imperialism* a shift for English in the Nordic countries, from a foreign language (FL) to a second language (L2). The role of English in Norway is only strengthening.

The Norwegian language is clearly being influenced by English, as demonstrated by the fact that Norwegians frequently use English words and expressions, even when speaking Norwegian (Graedler, 2002; Norås, 2007). The high level of English proficiency in Norway compared to other countries, is well documented (Bonnet, 2004; Breivik & Hasselgren, 2002; EF Education First, 2023). Olsen (1999) documented that there is a widespread cross-linguistic influence from Norwegian L1 in English texts written by lower secondary

students. But we do not know nearly enough about the extent to which Norwegians utilise cross-linguistic influence (transfer) when learning English as a FL or L2. The research on Norwegians learning English is scarce. Dahl (2014) states that most research in English classrooms is for secondary level, and consists of two types: 1. Norwegians speakers' acquisition of and competence in English, and 2. Structure and content of English teaching in schools (p. 33). Dahl (2014) makes the point that we need more research on English learning in Norwegian classrooms, as we cannot equate a young starting age with high-quality learning (p. 39). Even though the position of English in Norway is strong, there is a lack of research on second language acquisition (SLA). One of the areas of research is transfer.

Transfer

It is well-known that influence of the L1 is one of the strategies in SLA, but the terminology that describes the phenomenon, as well as the extent to which this occurs, has been under debate for quite some time.

Firstly, many researchers and theorists use the word *transfer* to describe L1 influence in L2 acquisition, but others prefer the term *cross-language influence*. According to the American Psychological Association's dictionary of psychology, language transfer in SLA is "the tendency to transfer the phonology, syntax, and semantics of the native language into the learning of the second language" (American Psychological Association, 2018c). We can differentiate between *positive* and *negative transfer*. The former is relevant in the instance in which similarities between L1 and L2 facilitate learning, and can lead to the development of an *interlanguage* (a mix between the learner's native language and the target language) (American Psychological Association, 2018b). On the other hand, negative learning is when the learner exhibits systematic errors when learning the second language, often as a result of the differences in structure between the two languages. This is why it is also called *interference*. It can lead to *fossilisation*, which results in an interlanguage that can be described as intermediate, because the learner's development has ceased without them attaining native-like proficiency (American Psychological Association, 2018a).

Secondly, as mentioned above, transfer is used by many in the field, but it is also used interchangeably with the term cross-linguistic influence. Westergaard et al. (2022) explain the history of the terms transfer and crosslinguistic influence. *Transfer* as a term originates in

behaviourist theories from the 1960s, referring to L2 acquisition as a mechanistic process, predicting that linguistic elements in L2 that are similar to L1, will be easier to acquire than those that are different (Westergaard et al., 2022, p. 2). The term “crosslinguistic influence” (CLI) was suggested by Smith (1983), meaning “[...] any influence that may be found in the L2 acquisition process.” (Westergaard et al., 2022, p. 2). Westergaard et al. (2022) point out that these terms have often been used interchangeably in SLA research, and Dehooei (2022) points out that the terms are often used interchangeably in the L3 literature as well.

Facilitative CLI and non-facilitative CLI correspond to the phenomena of positive and negative transfer as explained above. In regards to using the term *transfer*, Sharwood Smith (2021) argues that, although transfer is a “handy metaphor”, it has limitations in describing this phenomenon (p. 410). He states that it is a misleading terminology, since the term transfer implies switching from one place into another, and that it damages the original source. (Dehooei, 2022, p. 3). But a better description is that the two (or three, or more) languages influence each other. After all, some have suggested that not only does the L1 affect the L2, but the L2 can also affect the L1 (for Norwegian example see Sunde & Kristoffersen, 2018). The current text will use both interchangeably, as the different articles vary in use as well, but they are synonymous.

Moving on, there has been disagreements on how transfer (or CLI) occurs since the phenomenon first was identified. The main question has been what transfers - everything, nothing or something in between? It has led to different theories of transfer, emphasising different levels of transfer. Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) suggested the Full Transfer or Full Access theory, which states that the initial state of L2 acquisition is the complete L1 grammar, meaning everything is transferred at the start of the L2 acquisition. Differently, Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1996) suggested a Minimal Trees theory, which states that only parts of the L1 could transfer, but that the most likely case is that there is no transfer from L1. This aligns with Platzack’s (1996) theory of Initial Hypothesis of Syntax, which also explains that L2 acquisition is similar to L1 acquisition because they have the same starting points, as opposed to the former having a previously learned language for inspiration. More recently, Westergaard (2021) argues for what she calls Full Transfer Potential (FTP), meaning that “anything may transfer”, opposing the Full Transfer theory that suggests that “everything does transfer” (p. 400). The FTP is part of the Linguistic Proximity Model (LPM, Westergaard et al., 2017), which states that transfer (or CLI) happens property by property, and is in large parts based on the structural linguistic similarity of the languages between

which the transfer takes place. Also relevant is Westergaards (2009, 2014) Micro-cue Model, which suggests that L1 acquisition happens by children parsing input and building the L1 grammar in small steps. She has also extended this theory to L2 and L3, and argues that acquisition of L1, L2, and L3 “are fundamentally the same process, based on learning by parsing” (Westergaard, 2021, p. 379). The idea is that any linguistic property *can* transfer, but not everything *does*.

This means that any linguistic property, be it syntactic, morphological, pragmatic etc., has the potential to be transferred. One possibility is the syntactic element of word order, for example adverb placement, subject or object placement, or verb placement. This is interesting to look at in a Norwegian L1 and English L2 context, as the languages differ somewhat in this regard. Both English and Norwegian are Germanic languages, and word order is the main cue for syntactic function (Dahl, 2014). They are both SVO languages, but they differ in terms of verb placement because of differences in verb movement, both types of verbs that move and how far. This results in Norwegian being called a V2 language (Holmberg & Platzack, 1995; Roberts, 2001), because the move to the C(omplementiser) position is obligatory in Norwegian in all main clauses (Åfarli & Eide, 2003). This is in opposition to English, where lexical verbs will remain in their original position when auxiliary verbs can move in for example declarative main clauses, in yes/no-questions and in wh-questions, to mention some (Listhaug et al., 2021, p. 126). It is then proposed that English displays a residual V2, as the verb becomes the second constituent (Rizzi, 1996). Even if they differ in this significant way, they have shared linguistic roots, and are similar in many other ways, which may be of benefit or confusion for Norwegians learning L2 English.

One element of language acquisition that affects transfer, is “closeness” between the two languages (similarity/difference). The Linguistic Proximity Model (Westergaard et al., 2017), as mentioned above, states that transfer is mainly based on linguistic similarities. Jensen (2016) studied Norwegian learners of L2 English and found that what caused the most difficulty was subject-verb agreement, which has no equivalent in Norwegian. This probably means that the learners lacked the knowledge of how to produce this linguistic feature, and had no cues from the target language, or similar component in the native language to transfer, so the result was error. Kellerman (1979) argued that the learner’s perceived distance between the languages L1 and L2 affects the extent to which transfer takes place. This means that the evaluation and analysis the learner does, doesn’t have to be true, but their methods reflect their beliefs about language. If the learner assumes that the L1 and L2 are not similar in the

aspect they are evaluating, they will not use transfer for fear of incorrect production. But if they perceive that the languages are somewhat similar, it increases the possibility of the learner choosing transfer as a tool, both successfully (positive transfer) and erroneously (negative transfer) (Kellerman, 1979).

There are several examples of transfer and proximity of the languages in question. For instance, Olsen (1999) conducted an error analysis of English texts by L1 Norwegian speakers in lower secondary school. The author found several strategies for production, or compensatory strategies, and one that showed the clearest evidence of crosslinguistic influence, was language mixing. He noted that when learners struggled to produce English, the similarities between L1 and L2 meant that there often is a solution that looks like the target language English, meaning that language mixing (and thereby transfer, or CLI) is an important compensatory strategy for language learning. In effect, this means that the use of positive and negative transfer in second language acquisition is an important tool for learners, particularly when they perceive some similarity between the languages. Furthermore, Jensen and Westergaard (2022) found evidence that both lexical and syntactic similarities affect crosslinguistic influence even in third language (L3) acquisition. When it comes to acquisition of word order, some have claimed that these linguistic elements “[...] are considered to be more salient in language acquisition, and therefore they are frequently acquired very early and with less difficulty.” (McDonald, 2000, 2006, as cited in Jensen et al., 2023, pp. 729-30). What it also means, is that errors learners make in word order production, by for example using transfer, are especially noticeable as well.

Below, I will look more closely on articles and research regarding word order transfer from L1 Norwegian to L2 English. I will summarise and comment on three research articles focusing on V2 transfer. The aim is to comment on what implications we can draw when looking at them collectively, and possibly identify what the research is lacking. It is an ambitious task, so this will not be a review in detail, but rather an outline of the current research on the matter.

The Research

In search of articles and research, I looked for those studying L1 Norwegian speakers learning L2 English in regards to transfer of V2. The results were not overwhelming, but I

cannot in full honesty claim to have covered the field completely. One issue was that I was looking for studies only focusing on V2 transfer in SLA, but several studies investigated more linguistic properties at a time (e.g. Dehooei, 2022; Jensen et al., 2023), and some were in relation to third language acquisition (e.g. Westergaard et al., 2017; Listhaug et al., 2021; Dahl et al., 2022). Below is a short outline of three articles from the research on L2 acquisition of English by L1 Norwegian speakers.

Table 1

Articles on word order transfer in L2 English acquisition by L1 Norwegian speakers

	Method	Participants	V2 transfer
Westergaard (2003)	Oral and written tests.	Norwegian elementary school children aged 7 to 12, learning English from grade 1.	Considerable evidence of V2 transfer.
Javorovic (2021)	Qualitative analysis of written corpora.	Norwegian 7th graders through students enrolled in higher education, all learned English from grade 1.	Clear evidence of V2 transfer.
Strætkevørn (2023)	Acceptability Judgment Test (AJT)	Adults with intermediate/advanced proficiency in English.	No definite evidence of V2 transfer.

Westergaard (2003)

The author thought it interesting to study the language acquisition of Norwegian children in elementary school, as they are within the supposed critical period (Birdsong, 1999), and start learning English in 1st grade at the age of 6, but are not receiving very formal instructions and only minimal exposure over an extended period (which she has argued is of little use, see Westergaard, 2002). She studied children from the 1st grade until the 7th. Despite this, all of the 1st graders had to be excluded from the study, because they had no English knowledge to study. So the participants were from the age of 7 through 12.

An oral test was given to the 2nd to 4th graders. By playing a tape, the students were tasked to assess linguistic material. There were three tasks: assessment of sentence pairs, grammaticality judgments of individual sentences, and elicited production (the latter only for the 4th graders). A written test was given to the 5th to 7th graders, one that mirrored the oral test. In addition, the 4th graders were given the written task a year later, for comparability. The author acknowledged issues with statistical validity and methodology, but encouraged further research.

One of the predictions the author considered, was in relation to markedness. The author notes that V2 is considered as a marked feature, whereas the SVO word order of English unmarked, and that in theories of partial transfer, unmarked features may transfer, but not marked features. Thereby, according to a minimalist framework, it was expected that V2 word order would not transfer (Roberts, 1999). But if one looks at Henry and Tangney's (1999) definition of markedness, which claims less complex languages are unmarked, one can consider Norwegian to be less complex as it requires less verb movement, and thus expect this feature to transfer.

The author concluded that the transfer of Norwegian word order is "considerable", and that it is necessary for the children to unlearn this feature in order to learn the correct word order in English. Specifically, in order to realise the difference between lexical and auxiliary verbs in English sentences with regard to movement.

Javorovic (2021)

The author investigated the transfer of V2 word order in his master thesis. The author wanted to identify the evidence for V2 transfer and the variation across linguistic contexts, as well as investigating over-generalisation of word order in L2 and evidence for prolonged transfer

effects. “A primarily qualitative approach to corpus linguistics”, the study was a qualitative analysis of potential V2 errors from learner corpora, the learners being Norwegian students and learners of English, all from 7th grade until students enrolled in higher education (Javorovic, 2021, p. 30). The author admitted that a weakness was the lack of statistical error rates and the opportunity to analyse these.

The author discussed the Interface Hypothesis, which states that in second language acquisition, linguistic properties of narrow syntax is acquirable, whereas interface properties involving syntax and another cognitive domain may not be (Sorace & Filiaci, 2006, p. 340, as cited in Javorovic, 2021, p. 24). Javorovic noted especially how this means that even highly advanced L2 speakers will have difficulty with acquiring certain linguistic properties, and be more vulnerable to transfer because of it.

This turned out to be consistent with some of the results from the study, as the author found that lexical verb raising was less persistent than raising of auxiliary verbs to second position. Both are thought to be the result of transfer, but in accordance with Interface Hypothesis, even some advanced learners still “[...] produce[d] non-target subject-auxiliary inversion in topicalized contexts” (Javorovic, 2021, p. 67). This led the author to conclude his findings to be clear evidence of transfer, as well as showing that it still persists even in late stages of acquisition. He also concluded that there was no conclusive indication for over-generalisation by the L1 Norwegians, but discussed reasons as to why this might be the case in his study.

Strætkevørn (2023)

The author investigated transfer of V2 in relation to certain adverbs in intermediate/advanced adult L1 Norwegian speakers of L2 English. The author also wanted to investigate the presence of a proposed response bias related to using the Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT), which is widely used in research on transfer. Finally, the author wanted to determine how the participants’ judgments and bias are potentially affected by their access to metalinguistic knowledge.

The author studied L1 Norwegian speakers with intermediate/advanced proficiency in L2 English in two experiment groups. This demography was chosen specifically because the author acknowledged that previous research confirming V2 word order transfer has been on

elementary school children (Westergaard, 2002, 2003) and highschoolers (Dahl et al., 2022; Listhaug et al., 2021). Thereby, the author wanted to investigate whether the tendencies of transfer persists in adult speakers.

The author explains that Norwegian and English differ in word order in main and relative clauses (Strætkevorn, 2023, p. 103). The presence of a frequency adverb such as *often* or *always* in declarative main clauses, causes finite verbs to move to the position of C(omplementizer) in Norwegian (Åfarli & Eide, 2003). Also referred to as the V2 rule. Contrastingly, word order in main and relative clauses are the same in English (Strætkevorn, 2023, p. 105). Which can result in a V3 word order. Because of transfer, the author predicted a higher acceptance for V2 in main clauses than in relative clauses (p. 111).

The author used Acceptability Judgment Tasks (AJTs) in her study. Because using AJT has met some recent criticism for facilitating a yes-bias, the author also wanted to investigate this claim (Romano & Guijarro-Fuentes, 2023). She acknowledged that other researchers, although never using the terminology, has found evidence of a no-bias, which means there need to be more investigations for there to be a definite answer to the claim. For example, Domaas (2016) found a no-bias among the intermediate/advanced L2 English speakers she investigated, as they were “systematically less willing to accept grammatical items than the control group” (Domaas, 2016, as cited in Strætkevorn, 2023, p. 102). In order to measure this, the author used a Signal Detection Theory (Bader & Häussler, 2010) and decision criterion.

The results showed no detectable transfer of V2 relative to adverbs, contrasting with the findings like Westergaard (2002, 2003), Dahl et al. (2022) and Listhaug et al. (2021). The results also showed a clear no-bias, meaning one cannot assume a yes-bias in L2 users. There were some elements with the study that could explain why the results stood in opposition to previous research. One being that the performance of the L2 users was “at ceiling”, meaning too close to the highest score possible (in this case comparable to the control group) and weakening the value of the measurement. Effectively, this means that the L2 learners were too proficient to be representative, or that the groups of participants were too small, perhaps even compared to each other. Another weakness acknowledged by the author was that the possible no-bias led the participants to reject items they were unsure about, and when the only way to identify V2 transfer is having speakers accept ungrammatical structures, it makes revealing V2 transfer difficult. The author was not able to fully assert the influence of access

to metalinguistic knowledge, and on the whole suggested a larger and more diverse participant group, as well as controlling for a response bias with the present results of a no-bias in mind.

Discussion

The three studies in the article above gave conflicting results when it comes to the presence of V2 word order transfer, and the studies differed in terms of methodology and demography of the studied participants.

There seems not to be a definite answer in the research field. Westergaard (2003) and Javorovic (2021) found clear and considerable evidence for V2 word order transfer, whereas Strætkevorn's (2023) results showed there was no detectable evidence. There isn't a lot of research regarding only V2 word movement between L1 Norwegian and L2 English, but there seems to be a general acceptance that this is the case, even if not all studies support this. For instance, Mykhaylyk et al. (2015) showed that when comparing learners with L1 Norwegian and L1 Russian, Norwegians over-accept non-target English sentences with Norwegian word order (V-adv) more frequently than the Russians. But Donal (2017) compared L1 Norwegian and L1 Polish learners of L2 English, and concluded that since the Norwegians generally did not accept non-target English sentences with Polish or Norwegian word order, which the Polish learners still did, the Norwegians had moved past the stage of using transfer of word order in their second language acquisition. Nevertheless, in L3 acquisition research the presence of V2 transfer is agreed upon to the degree of it being used as an indicator of whether L3 is influenced by L1 and/or L2. For instance, in Westergaard et al. (2017), the authors found that Norwegian-Russian bilingual children were significantly better at identifying ungrammatical sentences in English with a V2 word order than L1 Norwegians, but the bilinguals still scored lower than the L1 Russian children on grammatical trials, suggesting a non-facilitative influence from Norwegian. This indicates a general acceptance of V2 word order transfer between L1 Norwegian and L2 English. On one hand, it might indicate that there isn't enough research in the field of L1 Norwegian acquisition of L2 English to conclusively establish this as a fact. On the other hand, it might demonstrate Westergaard's (2021) Full Transfer Potential theory, which states that everything *can* transfer, but not everything *does*, and the differences in research results may be due to differences in language acquisition strategies, like transfer.

Another aspect is that V2 transfer usually diminishes over time, as learners advance their proficiency in the target language. Long (1990) has claimed that there are sensitive periods in second language acquisition, and wrote: “Native-like morphology and syntax only seems to be possible for those beginning before age 15.” (Long, 1990, p. 280). Even so at some stage, learners’ proficiency can become native-like, even if they might still make some mistakes in late stages of acquisition, like Javorovic (2021) found. It has been pointed out that V2 word order is typologically rare, and is potentially difficult to acquire by adults in an L2 (Håkansson et al., 2002; Walkden, 2017). Platzack (1996) argues that the one underlying word order in universal grammar (UG) is SVO, which is the case in English. This means that those learning a V2 language (like Norwegian or Swedish) as L1 have to go against the cues from the UG in order to learn the language (Westergaard, 2003). Still, word order mistakes among proficient Scandinavian speakers of English are rare, while learning V2 for advanced English learners of Scandinavian languages is a struggle, so perhaps V2 is generally more difficult to learn (Westergaard, 2003). In light of the diverging research, it would be interesting to see some more replicated and longitudinal studies that follow or follow up L1 Norwegian learners of L2 English over some time. As opposed to studying different samples of learners at different stages of acquisition, as the current research, including the three examples above, does.

The three research studies above also used three different methods, and although Acceptability Judgment Test has been used frequently in second and third language acquisition (e.g. Listhaug et al., 2021; Jensen et al., 2023), it has been criticised to have a response bias upon which there is disagreement (Romano & Guijarro-Fuentes, 2023; Strætkevorn, 2023). Javorovic (2021) and Westergaard (2003) also criticised their own research methods. In 2009, Katz reviewed the use of ERP and fMRI evidence in L2 syntactic processing. The author suggested a more combined psycholinguistic approach by using both neurophysiological and behavioural measures. The author held that conflicting behavioural results in the field could be helped by valuable information from neurophysiological measures such as ERPs, fMRI, and PET. This indicates that a possibility for the direction of the field is to consider different methods, and perhaps look to neuroscience.

Lastly, it is important to note that it might be a reductionist approach to reviewing the research field, only looking at the L2 research for two languages for some specific linguistic properties. As mentioned above, several studies investigated more linguistic properties at a time, and some of the relevant research was on L3 acquisition. By being this restrictive in

choice of topic to investigate, I am excluding a wider context and the possibility that research on other languages, even those linguistically similar to Norwegian, can give insight into the way L1 Norwegian speakers learn L2 English, or L2 in general. A possibility is to look at research on word order transfer in Swedish (e.g. Håkansson, et al., 2002; Bohnacker, 2006). Nevertheless, as Dahl (2014) pointed out: we need more research on how Norwegians learn English.

Conclusion

This text has focused on V2 transfer in second language acquisition in the context of L1 Norwegian and L2 English. I have explained the conceptualisation of transfer, and discussed the important position that English has in Norway today. This was with the aim of answering what the research literature can tell us about V2 word order transfer from L1 Norwegian into L2 English. With this in mind, I outlined three research articles regarding V2 transfer, discussed them and then related them to how the current research appears to be and should move onwards.

There appears to be conflicting results in the most current research, with research such as Westergaard (2003) and Javorovic (2021) asserting a strong presence of V2 transfer in L2 English learning by L1 Norwegian speakers, but Strætkevorn (2023) and Donval (2017) finding the opposite in their studies. Dahl (2014) has pointed out that research on Norwegians learning English is scarce, and with the research being conflicting, there appears to be a need for more research, quite simply. A firm research base on L2 English learning in Norway would be beneficial from a pedagogical perspective, building the knowledge needed to support young learners of language acquisition in English classrooms in Norway. The briefly suggested measures are more replications, longitudinal studies, bigger samples and wider demographics, and alternative approaches such as neurophysiological measurements. If at all it is necessary for the research field to focus so narrowly on the learning of English by Norwegian speakers. For what it's worth, I think it is.

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