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edited by Thomas Tinnefeld

Journal of Linguistics and Language Teaching

Volume 14 (2023) Issue 1

Cross-Linguistic Influences of Learning German in Finnish and German Upper Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to find out what importance upper secondary school learners of German attach to the cross-linguistic influence (CLI) regarding specific aspects of German language learning in Finland and Germany. Cross-linguistic learning gives learners additional skills to learn and understand structures and words in their mother tongue, a second language or a foreign language. The Finnish students (n=100) participating in our survey spoke Finnish as their mother tongue and studied German as a foreign language. German students spoke German either as their mother tongue (n=40) or as a second language (n=60), but they studied German as a native language. The survey data consisted of students' answers to one identical question that they were asked in the school years 2017-2020: 'How does the knowledge of the languages studied at school (Swedish, English, French, Spanish, Latin – cross-linguistic learning) affect their learning of German?' Our research methods were both quantitative and qualitative.

The main results showed that the positive transfer on learning German was based on the perceived



The Editor

JLLT (ISSN 2190-4677) is of relevance as a publication platform for professors, university instructors, high school teachers, and PhD students who are professionally interested in linguistics and the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

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Professor Thomas Tinnefeld holds a full professorship for Applied Languages at

(objective) similarity of languages while the negative transfer was based on assumed (subjective) similarities which were in conflict with actual (objective) differences in German language learning processes and experiences of language learning. Skills in other languages contributed to learning German, but they also interacted positively and negatively with each other's learning. *Learning to learn* was found to be a unifying factor in language learning.

Keywords: *Cross-linguistic influence, upper secondary school student, German, language awareness*

1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to find out what importance upper secondary school learners of German attach to cross-linguistic influence (CLI) regarding specific aspects of language learning in Finland and in Germany. According to Vygotsky (1982: 194; also Penttinen 2005: 65), the role of the learner's mother tongue in foreign language learning is reciprocal – the learner may acquire a new way of expressing meanings that he or she can already express in his or her mother tongue, but learning a foreign language also affects his or her mother tongue, in other words, interlanguage learning gives the learner additional skills to learn and understand the structures and words of his or her mother tongue, a second or a foreign language.

Guided by previous research and the theoretical framework of our study, during the school years of 2017-2020, we asked Finnish and German learners the same question: How do the language skills of the languages studied at school (Swedish, English, French, Spanish, Spanish, Latin - multilingual learning) interact with the learning of German?. In their responses, however, learners also reflected on their skills and the teaching of German, and on how German and the other languages they had studied interacted with each other in the context of language learning. In Finnish upper secondary schools, German is taught as a foreign language (L3) only; German students participating in this survey spoke German either as their mother tongue (L1) or as a second language (L2). The German instruction is based on:

- the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools (FNUS 2015) (grades from ten to twelve) (also the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education; FNBE 2014) regarding Finland,
- the School Curriculum for Grades 10, 11 and 12 for Deutsch (Ger.: *Schulcurriculum für die Klassen 10, 11 und 12 für das Fach Deutsch*; DSFD, 2015), (also *Allgemeiner Teil des Lehrplans für den grundlegenden Unterricht*; DSAU 2016), both based on the Curriculum for the Acquisition of the General Higher Education Entrance Qualification (*Lehrplan für den Erwerb der Allgemeinen Hochschulreife*; TMBJS, 2011) regarding Helsinki German School, and
- the Curriculum for Grammar Schools in Bavaria (*Lehrplan für das Gymnasium in*

Saarland University of Applied Sciences
(*htw saar*, Germany).

Through his work at universities in Germany and abroad in the fields of linguistics, foreign language methodology as well as the teaching of English and French, he has acquired comprehensive academic and teaching experience. Before founding *JLLT* in 2010, he had co-edited a German journal on university language teaching for several years. Currently, he is also the editor of the *Saarbrücken Series on Linguistics and Language Methodology (SSLLM)*.

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Bayern; ISB, 2004) (eight grades from five to twelve (G8) regarding Bavaria).

The content and goals of German as a foreign language in the Finnish curriculum are consistent with the Common European Framework of Reference for Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CEFR 2001). Its main aim is to provide a common basis for the elaboration of a language syllabus, curriculum guidelines, examinations, and textbooks, thus, a method of learning, teaching, and assessing that applies to all languages in Europe. We have constructed our study based on research results in the theoretical framework pertaining to cross-linguistic influence, and both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. Our study can be considered a limited whole, i.e. a *survey study* (Syrjälä 1994) and our approach corresponds to the views of Denzin & Lincoln (2018) on the nature of socially constructed reality and on the close relationship of the researchers to the objects of their study.

2 CLI from the Perspective of Language Learning

In the present study, the terms *negative transfer* or *interference* and *positive transfer*, as well as the term *cross-linguistic influence* are problematic from the viewpoint of learning a language that is addressed to (e.g. Ringbom 1986, 1987, 2007, Odlin 1989 1990, Ellis 1994, Hammarberg 2009, Jarvis & Pavlenko 2010, James 2012). The classic definition of negative transfer comes from Weinreich (1968 [1953]):

those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of the familiarity with more than one language (ibid.: 1)

typically with one’s mother tongue. According to Odlin (1989),

Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired (ibid.: 27).

Cross-linguistic influence can be seen as one particular transfer type of learning which is limited to language-related knowledge. It is typically defined as the influence that the knowledge and competencies of one language have on an individual’s language learning or use of another second or third language (Odlin 1989, James 1998, 1999, Ellis 1994, Jarvis & Pavlenko 2010, James 2012, Luchtenberg 2014).

According to Ringbom (1987: 41; Odlin 1989), there are varying degrees of formal, phonological, and semantic similarities between languages of the same family. For example, Finnish students of German who know Swedish (Finland has two official languages: Finnish and Swedish) find it easier to understand many German words because they are phonologically and semantically identical to Swedish: e.g. the German word *Stadt* is equivalent to the Swedish word *stad*. Ringbom also states that phonological and semantic similarity together contribute to the fact that a new word is stored in the learner’s mental vocabulary when he or she encounters it for the first time (positive transfer). Similarly, when a foreign language learner meets an unfamiliar word (for

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Impressum

Herausgeber:

Prof. Dr. phil. Thomas Tinnefeld

Dienstanschrift:

Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft (HTW) des Saarlandes

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Redaktion: Wiss. Beirat (vgl. *Editorial Board*, vordere Umschlaginnenseite)

E-Mail: linguisticsandlanguage teaching(at)googlemail.com

Internet:

<http://sites.google.com/site/linguisticsandlanguage teaching/>

Konzeption, Titelgestaltung und Layout: Thomas Tinnefeld

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Labels

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the first time) he or she needs several clues to infer its meaning. Phonological similarity without semantic overlap may lead to negative transfer (e.g. *false friends*).

There is no single, equally precise definition of *awareness*. According to Nummenmaa (2022), the best way to understand the relationship between awareness, mind and brain is to determine as precisely as possible the neurobiological basis of the simpler phenomena of mind and awareness. Perceiving cross-linguistic influence is a subjective process. Language teaching is a part of language education and an introduction to language awareness. By studying other languages at school, a student becomes aware of the positive, negative, or neutral effect of cross-linguistic on the learning of his or her mother tongue, a second, or a third language. However, this often leads to an inaccurate or incomplete awareness of the real similarities or differences that exist across languages (Ringbom 2007, Ringbom & Jarvis 2009, FNBE 2014, FNUS 2015.) According to James (1998, 1999; also James & Garrett 1992), *multilingual awareness* is the learned ability to analyse one's own native language and / or to learn a foreign or acquire a second language explicitly. Dufva (2000; also Odlin 1989, Jarvis & Pavlenko 2010, James 2012), emphasises the metalinguistic awareness of a learner (intuitive / implicit awareness, the 'intuitive feeling' for a language), which helps the conscious study of characteristics relating to the form and function of a language. Helmstad (1999) perceives awareness as a hierarchical process of understanding information, i.e. reception, adoption, and comprehension. When a language learner becomes aware of the fine similarities, differences, or meanings of a given language, it is part of his or her mother tongue, second, or foreign language learning (van Lier 2010; also Penttinen & al. 2019).

The term *cross-linguistic* becomes problematic if a person's language proficiency is simply defined as computational monolingualism, which refers to one, bilingualism to two and multilingualism to more than two languages (Linderoos 2016). It is *multilingualism* when a person is competent in two or more languages that are not necessarily at the same level as his or her mother tongue (Oksaar 2003, Hammarberg 2009, Riehl 2014). However, current research suggests that multilingualism is neither detrimental nor beneficial to non-linguistic information processing – although the ability to speak more than one language is valuable in itself (Bwalya 2023).

In our study, in line with Hammarberg (2009), the L1 refers to German as a mother tongue (*GaM*) and the L2 refers to German as a second language (*GaS*) acquired either simultaneously with the L1 or after, and the L3 refers to German as a foreign language (*GaF*), currently being learned primarily in an institutional environment. In this respect, *GaS* is secondary to *GaM*, and *GaF* is tertiary in relation to *GaM* and *GaS*.

In this study, we focus on the cross-linguistic influence in learning German, but motivation and language aptitude also play a very important role in language learning. According to Ellis (1994: 36-37; 236-237), *motivation* is a specific ability to learn a language, it is independent of language aptitude. Motivation also has a major impact on learning in both formal and non-formal learning environments. *Aptitude* is considered important only in formal language environments. These

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two variables determine the learning behaviour that different learners see in the two contexts, and thus, the learning outcomes. These can be linguistic (*language proficiency*) and non-linguistic (*attitudes, self-concept, cultural values, and beliefs*).

Against this backdrop, our research question is the following one:

What importance do upper secondary school learners of German attach to cross-linguistic influence (GLI) regarding specific aspects of learning German in Finland and in Germany?

3 The Study

3.1 Research Design

3.1.1 Participants

The students in the study were aged 16–17. Neurobiological studies have shown that the language learning gap between girls and boys narrows at the age of 17 (Böttger 2016). Our question was answered by:

- 105 Finnish-speaking students studying German as a foreign language at A (first foreign language), B2 (second foreign language) or B3 (third foreign language) German level (see below) in three Finnish upper secondary schools,
- and 32 German GaM, or GaS students at the Helsinki German School, as well as 75 German GaM or GaS students of two Bavarian upper secondary schools. They studied German at a mother tongue level.

Students answered our question in the 2017-20 school years. We had to reject five of the responses of the Finnish students and seven of the German students. Rejection were due to the fact that the Finnish students' mother tongue was not Finnish, that students' responses were not focused on the research topic, or that we were unable to decipher the response.

Students' German language learning history in our study was as follows: Out of all the Finnish GaF students, A-German (starting in 3rd grade) was studied by 39 girls and 17 boys, B2-German (starting in 8th grade) by 10 girls and 5 boys, and B3-German (language started in the 1st grade of upper secondary school, often only taken by linguistically 'gifted' students) was studied by 14 girls and 15 boys. In primary education, pupils in grades 3 to 9 usually study German for two hours a week at the A and B levels. In upper secondary school, A-German

81 Doró (1)

- 81 Egbert (1)
- 81 Eggensperger (2)
- 81 Emini (1)
- 81 Enkin (1)
- 81 Evans (2)
- 81 Fakharzadeh (1)
- 81 Fewell (1)
- 81 Fócil Salvador (1)
- 81 Forster (1)
- 81 Fuchs (1)
- 81 Garner (1)
- 81 Gerhardt (1)
- 81 Gess (1)
- 81 Ghazala (1)
- 81 Gick (1)
- 81 Giessen (2)
- 81 Golebiewska (1)
- 81 Grim (3)
- 81 Habók (1)
- 81 Hartshorn (3)
- 81 Hawes (1)
- 81 Herbach (1)
- 81 Hernández (1)
- 81 Ho (1)
- 81 Hofmann (1)
- 81 Holmström (1)
- 81 Huttenga (1)
- 81 Ikonic (1)
- 81 Imhof (1)
- 81 Ishag (1)
- 81 Ivanovska (3)
- 81 Johnson (2)
- 81 Jones (1)
- 81 Khamkhien (1)
- 81 Killie (2)
- 81 Kirkham (1)
- 81 Kostrzewa (3)
- 81 Krulatz (3)
- 81 Kusevska (1)
- 81 Lamb (1)
- 81 Larsen (1)
- 81 Lee (1)
- 81 Lejeune (1)
- 81 Leyva Moo (1)

consists of six compulsory and two optional courses (one course comprises 38 lessons, with one lesson being 45 minutes long) and B-German consists of five compulsory and two optional courses. In Finland, students at different levels of German study the language in separate groups. Out of all the German students in our survey, 14 girls and 26 boys, respectively, reported German as their mother tongue, and 30 girls and 30 boys reported German as their second language. Their German lessons started in the first grade of primary school. In upper secondary school, students had five hours a week in the German school of Helsinki and three hours a week in Bavaria. German GaM or GaS students attend the same German instruction at the upper secondary school level.

In the Finnish upper secondary school, the following grading scale was used (with the corresponding German grading scale in parentheses): excellent 10 (1), good 9 (2), satisfactory: 8/7 (3), poor: 6/5 (4) and a fail 4 (5). Students studying B3 German did not receive a grade (0).

3.1.2 Materials and Their Categorisations

The Finnish and German upper secondary school students (n=200) who participated in our survey used a total of 732 sentences in their responses to our question. The number of sentences would seem to be an appropriate number for this study. The content of the responses collected later started to repeat the content of the responses collected earlier, which reflected the so-called saturation phenomenon (e.g. Eskola & Suoranta 1998).

Students' responses were divided into three categories:

- Positive CLI transfer (329 sentences)
- Negative CLI transfer (141 sentences)
- Reflection (262 sentences)

According to Dulay and al. (1982; Arabski 2006), *positive transfer* leads to correct performance because the new behaviour is the same as the old one. Accordingly, *negative transfer* refers to those cases that result in error because the old behaviour is different from the new behaviour that is being learned. In other words, both types of transfer refer to the automatic and subconscious use of old behaviour in new learning contexts. The third category refers to reflection on the skills as well as the teaching of German and the interaction between German and other languages in the context of language learning.

3.1.3 Method

We used content analysis / technique and contextual analysis as a method to quantitatively and qualitatively analyse written documents, in our study responses from Finnish and German upper

- 81 Lindemann (1)
- 81 Lger (1)
- 81 MacLean (1)
- 81 Marsel (1)
- 81 Mather (1)
- 81 Merkelbach (1)
- 81 Mhandeni (1)
- 81 Michaud (1)
- 81 Mir (1)
- 81 Mohamed (1)
- 81 Momtaz (1)
- 81 Morvay (1)
- 81 Mumin (2)
- 81 Murelli (1)
- 81 Neokleous (1)
- 81 Neumann (1)
- 81 Nyinondi (1)
- 81 O'Toole (1)
- 81 Oaks (1)
- 81 Osle (1)
- 81 Osle Ezquerra (1)
- 81 Ouahmiche (1)
- 81 Pedretti (1)
- 81 Peleki (2)
- 81 Penttinen (1)
- 81 Pham (1)
- 81 Philippi (1)
- 81 Quevedo-Camargo (1)
- 81 Quintero Ramrez (4)
- 81 Raposo de Melo (1)
- 81 Rasekh (1)
- 81 Reisel (1)
- 81 Reuber (1)
- 81 Rexach (1)
- 81 Rovira (1)
- 81 Ruiz-Funes (3)
- 81 Rusten (1)
- 81 Schader (1)
- 81 Schenck (2)
- 81 Schlak (2)
- 81 Schmale (2)
- 81 Schmitz (1)
- 81 Schoormann (2)
- 81 Selimi (3)

secondary school students to the question we asked. Berelson (1952: 18) poses:

Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.

We used content analysis as a method for quantifying (i.e. content specification) our documents and contextual analysis combined with content analysis (i.e. describing the content of documents verbally) to examine the context in which the issues of interest occurred (e.g. Burwitz-Melzer & Steininger 2016, Grönfors 1982, Eskola & Suoranta 1998).

Our research approach is situated between deductive (theory-based) and inductive (data-based) content analysis. Data analysis is not directly based on theory, but there are some connections to it. We looked to theory for explanations and confirmation to support the results from our data (also e.g. Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2011: 95–99).

4 Results

Below, we will answer our research question as presented in Section 2. The results will first be presented quantitatively (the number of sentences and percentages, i.e. content specification) and thereafter, examples of student responses, sorted into three different categories, will be provided (qualitative approach, i.e. describing the content of documents verbally).

4.1 Positive CLI Transfer

The first category included 114 sentences, or 34.6% of the sentences used in the responses of Finnish GGaF students studying A-German, while the corresponding figures for B2-German students were 36 sentences or 10.9%, and for B3-German students 70 sentences or 21.3%. The corresponding figures for German GaM students were 38 sentences or 11.6%, and for German GaS students 71 sentences or 21.6%. The first category of responses from students in both countries was further subdivided into the sub-categories *general level*, *vocabulary* and *grammar*.

4.1.1 Positive CLI Transfer (General Level)

A Finnish GaF student's response (1) WAS:

Swedish supports my learning of the German language because it is a similar language to German. French has made German feel as an easy and a really logical language because French is rather difficult. I hear English everywhere, so that has developed my feel for language and thus helped me learn German, too. (Student (number) 14, A (level), m (male), 9 (grade number)

- 81 Sepp (1)
- 81 Sharp (1)
- 81 Shehata (1)
- 81 Shively (1)
- 81 Sieg (1)
- 81 Smakman (1)
- 81 Soh (4)
- 81 Son (1)
- 81 Spillner (1)
- 81 Szanajda (1)
- 81 Thekes (1)
- 81 Timpe (1)
- 81 Tinnefeld (6)
- 81 Tinnefeld-Yeh (1)
- 81 Tocaimaza-Hatch; 81 Ganeshan (1)
- 81 Tso (1)
- 81 Turnbull (1)
- 81 Utenga (1)
- 81 Valies (1)
- 81 van de Weijer (1)
- 81 Volk (1)
- 81 Wagner (1)
- 81 Walkova (1)
- 81 Weißhaar (1)
- 81 Wust (2)
- 81 Xhaferri (1)
- 81 Yamane (1)
- 81 Zangmo (1)
- 81 Zhang (1)
- 81 Ziad (1)
- 81 Ziegler (1)
- 9 Reviews (1)
- 91 Beyersdörfer (1)
- 91 Cirocki (1)
- 91 Gómez Moreno (1)
- 91 Jiang (1)
- 91 Klewitz (2)
- 91 Kolb (1)
- 91 Kostrzewa (1)
- 91 Kovács (1)
- 91 Lüger (5)
- 91 Mathews (1)
- 91 Mumin (1)
- 91 Nappo (1)
- 91 Petkova-Kessanlis (1)

Another Finnish student's response was:

I have become considerably more aware of various languages and of learning both my native language and foreign languages, which has made it easier to learn the German language. (No. 76, B3, f (female), 0)

This response indicates that the positive influence of other acquired languages on German and its learning was probably based on the student's perceived or assumed judgement (thus, an intuitive feeling) about the subjective similarity between different languages (Odlin 1989, Ringbom & Jarvis 2009, Jarvis & Pavlenko 2010, James 2012). Correspondingly, a German GaM student answered.

My first foreign language, English, has positive impact on my German language. I often use Anglicisms or find that for some English words there is no German translation. But this is more likely to be due to the fact that I watch many English videos and travel a lot on the Internet. (No. 101, m, 1)

His answer indicates that he has become aware of his mother tongue through positive interaction with the English he has studied and used. In language learning, he was motivated to combine his experience of multilingualism with a positive effect on his attitudes towards interlanguage influence (Odlin 1989, Ellis 1994, James 1998, 1999, Dufva 2000, Gass & Selinker 2001, Ringbom 2007, Ringbom & Jarvis 2009, Jarvis & Pavlenko 2010, James 2012, Nummenmaa 2022).

The responses also imply that Finnish GaF students found Swedish and German typologically and formally similar, whereas German GaM and GaS students found English (also Latin and French) and German similar or related. Language learners at different levels experience cross-linguistic influence in different ways when learning the same language (cVerspoor & Behrens 2011; also Jarvis & Pavlenko 2010). The students participating in this study also mentioned factors adopted while learning other languages that eased their learning of German, such as strategy, method, routine, logicity, technique, and feeling for a language (also James & Garrett 1992, Ellis 1994, Helmstad 1999, Dufva 2000), as a Finnish GaF student put it:

By learning more languages, I can more easily develop good techniques for learning German. (No. 41, A, f, 8)

In bilingual environments, such as Finland, both multilingualism and multiculturalism can be encouraged (e.g. Ellis 1994: 208), as the response of a German GaS student from the German school in Helsinki shows:

I personally speak two languages at home, German and Finnish. In German learning, English and Swedish help, but Finnish doesn't really help at all. When you grow up with two languages, they affect each other. (No. 158, f, 2)

It seems that the social and cultural milieu in which this student grew up has determined her perception of German and its learning in an interlingual and multicultural context.

- [91 Schmale](#) (2)
- [91 Schmitz](#) (1)
- [91 Schowalter](#) (1)
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In the Finnish (FNBE 2014, FNUS 2015) and German (ISB 2004, TMBJS 2011, DSFD 2015, DSAU 2016) education systems, the learners' mother tongue plays a central role in the study of foreign languages in school. The importance of the mother tongue is emphasised when it comes to the acquisition of the structures and reading comprehension of each foreign language. The curricular approach fits well with the cross-linguistic view that people do not learn a new language in isolation from the language system built around their mother tongue and the foreign language they have learned (CEFR 2001: 4-5).

4.1.2 Positive CLI Vocabulary Transfer

A response from a German GaM student was:

My knowledge of foreign languages enables me to deduce more word structures in German and, above all, to gain more feeling for language development. (No. 105, m, 1)

A German GaM student wrote:

It is possible to derive many terms and words from the foreign languages into German. Thus, my language horizon can be worked on extensively. (No. 122, f, 3),

and a German GaS student stressed:

I can deduce a lot of foreign words from my foreign language knowledge, like Latin or English. The Latin phrases like ‘*neque...neque*’ or ‘*nec...nec*’ I will never actually use in German, but Latin makes me think of something like that when I am writing an essay in German. (No. 173, m, 3)

These responses show that the German GaM and GaS students’ multilingual knowledge enables them to infer words and phrases from foreign languages into German, i.e. to broaden their linguistic horizons and contribute to their linguistic development (also Ringbom & Jarvis 2009, Goundar 2019). According to Ringbom & Jarvis (2009), learners usually do not assume that the formal properties of words and multi-word structures are similar until they are aware of these similarities, which essentially depends on the typological distance between the two languages and the learners’ proficiency level. According to Ollivier & Strasser (2013), students’ responses can also be compared to the phenomenon of receptive intercomprehension where students use the similarity of family languages they study so as to learn German vocabulary.

4.1.3 Positive ICL Grammar Transfer

Under closer analysis of the responses, it can be discerned that only the linguistically ‘gifted’ students participating in our study were able to utilise their knowledge in other languages (*cross-linguistic influence*) to learn German grammar. For example, a Finnish GGaF student expressed this as follows:

Mostly, I find languages I am learning like English and Swedish support me, because German grammar is similar, it is easier to understand based on related languages. (No. 24, A, f, 9)

and a German GaM student wrote:

In my opinion, learning a language like Latin helps to learn the grammar of the German language. Even as a native speaker I have my knowledge of grammar from Latin lessons. (No. 102, m, 1),

Another German GaM student stressed:

By studying grammar logically and explaining it in detail in English and French classes, I was really involved in the construction of a language for the first time. I only became aware of the colloquial use of actually inappropriate tenses in German through the foreign language lessons. (No. 103, m, 1)

The responses No. 102 and 103 above describe the interpretation of students' mother tongue competence from the perspective of their foreign language competence. According to Brown (1994: 201), a language learner can detect differences between languages by comparing them within and across languages, as expressed by a Finnish GaF student in her response:

Multilingualism supports me getting a better idea of the structures of different languages and I can find similarities between languages. Similar rules of grammar help me remember and the differences are easier to conceptualise when there are points of comparison. (No. 3, A, f, 10)

According to Ringbom & Jarvis (2009), syntactic consistency is an important factor in the learning of a new language. If the source language and the target language are very similar, there is no need to re-learn the functions of the target language to achieve a complete understanding.

Students with poor grades did not mention grammar, at all, in their answers, and students with satisfactory grades only mentioned grammar in a superficial way. It seems that they had not become aware of the positive impact of the other languages they had studied on the learning of German grammar. According to Luchtenberg (2014), metalinguistic awareness does not consist of knowledge of grammar and linguistic terminology only but also of a holistic ability to react to language phenomena, involving cognitive, social, and emotional feelings, in other words, a positive intuitive feeling.

4.2 Negative CLI Transfer

The second category, negative CLI transfer, included 65 sentences, or 46.1% of the sentences used in the responses of Finnish GaF students studying A-German, while the corresponding figures for B2-German students were 10 sentences or 7.1%, and for B3-German students 20 sentences or 14.2%. Among German GaM students, the corresponding figures were 9 sentences or 6.4%, and for German GaS students 37 sentences or 26.2%. In this category,

students' responses were also divided into the subcategories of *general level*, *vocabulary*, and *grammar*.

4.2.1 Negative ICL Transfer (General Level)

Based on their responses, it seems that the German and Finnish students with the highest grades did not perceive the impact of their knowledge of the other language on their German learning as a significantly negative factor, as a Finnish GaF student's response shows:

Studying Swedish and English at the same time can be confusing, but not a significant factor. For example, the two languages I have studied the longest, Swedish and German, sometimes get mixed up. (No. 19, A, f, 9)

However, students expressed concern for their classmates, as the two German students' responses below show:

I think that speaking other languages can damage the German language if students are more interested in the foreign languages they learn at school than in German. (No. 147, GaS, f, 2)

Even people who are in the same class as you and who don't speak German fluently can confuse your German. (No. 110, GaM, f, 1)

Students with poor or satisfactory grades mentioned that the lack of knowledge in their mother tongue or in other languages, had a negative impact on their learning of German, as can be seen from the following responses of German and Finnish students:

My poor English language knowledge have a negative impact on my German language knowledge, causing many gaps in my German language knowledge. It is difficult for me to make up for the deficiencies in German because I have to make up for deficiencies in English as well. I have to find a balance between the two languages because it is difficult to focus on just one language. (No. 189, GaS, f, 4)

I prefer to speak English rather than German. (No. 196, GaS, f, 4)

Studying Swedish makes it difficult to learn German because my knowledge are weak in both languages. (No. 43, GaF, A, f, 7)

Negative transfer becomes evident when assumed (subjective) similarities conflict with actual (objective) differences. In other words, learners expect that a new language will work in the same way as the languages they already know; this usually leads to learning problems (Ringbom & Jarvis 2009). Transfer is rarely clearly two-fold, because actual similarities and differences are often intertwined. According to Brown (1994: 201), it is easy to see the big differences between languages. However, it cannot be concluded that the number of learning difficulties is directly proportional to the size of the differences.

4.2.2 Negative ICL Vocabulary Transfer

The negative cross-linguistic influence on the Finnish and German students' German vocabulary could be divided into four groups regardless of their grades in German. The responses of the first group were often related to the negative influence of concurrently studying several languages, as a Finnish GaF student says in her reply:

Sometimes words get mixed up. If there are several languages during the same term, it is particularly hard to close out the other language temporarily. (No. 10, A, f, 10)

In the second group, the negative influence was related to students' erroneous use of borrowed words derived from their respective mother tongue or from some other language they had learned (i.e. *interference*), as is shown in a German GaM student's response:

Foreign words are easier to remember because they can be derived from Latin, although this occasionally leads to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. (No. 108, m, 1)

The third category included cases in which students could not remember a word in German but instead knew a word in their mother tongue or in another language they had studied, as the response of a German GaS student shows:

It means first of all that I know more words in my mother tongue or in English than in German, but also that I can think of words in English that I cannot translate into German. (No. 178, m, 3)

The fourth group included cases in which a word in some other language outwardly and phonetically resembled a word in German but had a different meaning, i.e. *false friends* (e.g. Ringbom 1987: 52), as expressed in the response of a Finnish GaF student:

Words that sound the same can also confuse me when their meaning is actually different (compare *schnell* – *snäll*, not at all the same thing). In a German test situation, words can come to mind from the wrong language. Similar words are very often so confusing that I do not know if the word in question German or Swedish is. I use Swedish words when speaking German unconsciously and vice versa. (No. 20, A, f, 9)

Comprehensive research on cross-linguistic influence also shows which cross-linguistic factors cause more or fewer problems in learning the target language, in other words, cases where cross-linguistic (formal) similarity proves to be more problematic than cross-linguistic differences (Ringbom 1986, 1987, Odlin 1989, Ringbom & Jarvis 2009, Jarvis & Pavlenko 2010).

4.2.3 Negative ICL Grammar Transfer

The response of a German GaM student shows the latent negative syntactic influence of English on German:

However, it is noticeable that as my knowledge of English progresses, I often think or instinctively formulate a German sentence using English grammar first. (No. 105, m, 1)

This negative influence represents those situations of convergence in which a student's mother tongue and his or her foreign language are on an equal footing. In other words, the language user is bilingual or has adopted the foreign language that he or she masters rather well. In these situations, the influence is mutual, and it leaves both positive and negative traces in both languages (L1 ↔ L2). Similarly, a Finnish GaF student stated:

The Swedish grammar mixes Swedish and German word order, especially personal pronouns, interrogatives, and time attributes. These are often similar and confusing. (No. 76, B3, f, 0)

This response shows that the associations made by the student often do not correspond to the reality between the languages and this can make it difficult for students to learn the structures of the target language (Winford 2000, Ringbom & Jarvis 2009, Jarvis & Pavlenko 2010).

Cross-linguistic differences also cause learning problems for students who speak German as a second language as can be seen from the response of a German GaS student:

I find multilingual teaching difficult because all languages tend to mix. Personally, I have problems with correct sentence structure, commas, and grammar in German. (No. 142, f, 1)

On the one hand, students have problems when the grammatical rule of the target language differs from that of the source language (e.g. punctuation, word order), or when the grammatical rule in question has two or more equivalents in the target language (Odlin 1989). On the other hand, regarding the differences between the grammar of different languages, it cannot automatically be concluded that the degree of learning difficulties is directly comparable to the degree of the differences that exist between languages, as a Finnish GaF student stated in his reply:

If a foreign language taught in school is clearly different from German, like English, the influence is not so significant. (No. 15, A, m, 9)

On top of that, it has not been proven that learning difficulties derived from differences between languages are reflected in students' language usage (James & Garrett 1992, James 1998, 1999).

It seems that students with poor grades in German have difficulties in mastering grammatical terms (meta-language) and the way the information contained in a grammatical term is expressed in different languages, an aspect a Finnish GaF student pointed out in her reply:

The most difficult thing about learning German is using grammatical terms (participle, agent, etc.) whose meaning is never explained in depth. Sometimes I unknowingly misuse Swedish and English grammar rules when writing in German. (No. 47, A, f, 6)

Brown (1991: 201) calls the mastery of grammar and its terminology a window that allows a

language learner to examine the validity of his interpretation and to become aware of the correctability of the language he uses. However, learners tend to generalise too much of what they have learned in one language to another (DeCarrico & Larsen-Freeman 2002, Jarvis & Pavlenko 2010).

4.3 Reflection on German and Other Languages

The third category included 65 sentences, or 24,8% of the sentences used in the responses of German GaM students, while the corresponding figures for German GaS students were 105 sentences, or 40,1%. Among Finnish GaF students studying A-German, the corresponding figures were 59 sentences or 22,5%, and for B2-German students 10 sentences or 3,8%, and for B3-German students 23 sentences or 8,8%.

Students who had excellent or good grades reflected on the impact of their German language skills and on the learning of other languages at school, which is shown in the responses given by a German GaM and a German GaS student as well as a Finnish GaF Student:

My knowledge of German language has an impact on my newly acquired knowledge of English and French. (No. 106, GaM, m, 1)

‘German is a good starting language for learning other languages. German has many sounds that occur in many languages, such as ‘ch’, ‘ö’, etc.’ (No. 150, GaS, m, 2),

German influences my studies of other foreign languages. We study German mostly at school, so it is more in my mind compared to other languages. It is useful to know German when learning Swedish because they are similar in many ways. (No. 11, GaF, A, f, 10)

Students were also able to examine the issue from the point of view of their fellow mates as the response of a German GaM student demonstrates:

‘I and many of my classmates have big gaps in German knowledge, not in practice, but in theory. Foreign languages have the greatest effect on each other, but not necessarily on the German language.’ (No. 129, m, 3)

Some students who received a satisfactory grade, but especially those German students who received a poor grade, found that their poor German language skills had a negative impact on their skills in the other languages to be studied at school, as a German GaM student stated:

My German grade in writing partly affects my foreign language grades. (No. 140, m, 5)

In particular, students who spoke German as a second language, regardless of their German grade, were critical of their own German language skills and their German language teaching, as shown by the responses of two German GaS students:

I am also better in English and Latin than in German. Spanish, on the other hand, does not help my

German knowledge. Besides, we never talk in class, but only read texts that nobody understands anyway. (No. 174, f, 3),

In German lessons we don't even speak, it is only grammar and vocabulary to learn, our goals are not fulfilled with it. (No. 191, f, 4).

Nevertheless, out of all students' responses, an implicit idea arose regarding the positive connection of cross-linguistic influence on *learning to learn*, as can be seen in the response of a Finnish GaF student:

You could say that I have 'learned to learn languages' when studying other languages. Even if German felt difficult, it does not seem impossible to learn if I spend time on it. (No. 92, B3, m, 0)

According to the Hautamäki research group (2000), learning to learn requires *knowledge*, *skills* and *study*. The research group further mentioned *the perspective of hope* as a part of learning to learn, an idea that the student also implicitly foregrounded in his response.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to find out what importance upper secondary school learners of German attach to the cross-linguistic influence (CLI) regarding specific aspects of German learning in Finland and in Germany. We asked learners the same question, which was related to cross-linguistic influence, but in their responses, they (especially German students) also reflected on their German skills as well as the instruction of German they received, and on how German and the other languages they have been learning interacted with each other in the context of language learning. In terms of age, the Finnish and German upper secondary school students who participated in our study formed a homogeneous group. The contextual analysis, inclusive of the content analysis, we used proved to be suitable for the research method employed in our study. It allowed us to examine our findings on a theoretical basis and our data basis.

Based on the students' answers to our question, it seems that they had a positive attitude towards the interlanguage impact on the learning and understanding of German structures and words in their mother tongue, in a second language or in a foreign language, which is also reflected by the number of positive CLI transfer responses in Section 2.1.2. However, there were some differences between the responses of students who scored well and those who performed poorly in German. Especially, the students with excellent or good grades in German were very positive about a cross-linguistic influence on their German skills and German learning. The low-achieving German GaM students had deficits in German but not in language use. These students and some GaS students were critical of their German skills and the German language teaching they received. It seems that students who do well or poorly when learning German also do well or poorly in the other languages they study, or vice versa, which is also reflected in their attitude towards the cross-linguistic influence.

Some students felt that the other languages learned at school had neither a positive nor a negative impact on their learning of German, but that the German language had an impact on their learning of the other languages. However, the other languages had a greater impact on each other than the German language had on them.

Finnish students considered the Swedish and German vocabulary and grammar to be typologically and formally similar. In particular, students whose mother tongue was German mentioned that learning English and Latin, but also French, helped them to understand German grammar and foreign words in German. Students' responses were probably based on their perceived or assumed assessment of the subjective similarity or dissimilarity of different languages and their experiences of the effects of different learning strategies or techniques, routines, or logic on language learning.

In our study, Finnish and German students predominantly saw cross-linguistic influence as a kind of resource for the learning of German and for the interaction between German and the languages to be learnt at school, as well as for analytically examining these languages and becoming aware of their similarities and differences. Some students mentioned that they *had learned to learn*. According to Hautamäki et al. (2000), the responses of these students indicated that their German learning was a process. Suurniemi & Satokangas (2021) similarly talk about the concept of a *learning environment* in the learner's mind. Learning to learn requires *knowledge, skills* and *study*, but above all, it involves a perspective of *hope*, which was, explicitly or implicitly, expressed especially in the responses of the students with low grades in German. These students' lack of proficiency in German was also reflected in their learning of other languages and vice versa.

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(1) Students' responses were not corrected in terms of language correctness but deliberately left in their original form.