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A Comparison of Native Speakers' and Korean Learners' Usage of "Will" and "Be Going To"

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ABSTRACT

The Journal of Studies in Language **39.4, 465-475**. This study analyzes and compares the use of English future markers—"will" and "be going to"—by native speakers (NS) and Korean learners (NNS). The datasets were extracted from a native speaker corpus, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), and a learner corpus, the Incheon National University Learner Corpus (MULC). They were compared to identify similarities and differences in using the futures between NS and NNS. The results show that native speakers use both forms more frequently in their speech. In contrast, Korean learners tend to use—or overuse—"will" significantly in writing and "be going to" in speaking, relative to their native counterparts. However, no significant difference is observed in the frequency of use of "be going to" in writing and "will" in speaking. Pedagogical implications are also presented. **(Kookmin University)**

Keywords: English futures, learner corpus, log-likelihood, normalized frequency, authenticity

1. Introduction

Over the years, the literature on expressions of the future tense in English—specifically "will" and "be going to"—has been enriched, especially in the field of English language pedagogy (Leech 2014; Quirk and Crystal, 2010). Research on the future markers "will" and "be going to", which explores their varied use in different contexts and styles, is frequently found. More recently, advances in technology have led to the construction of corpora in a variety of domains, including speech, writing, fiction, and journals, enabling quantitative analyses that compare the use of English between native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) groups, and between NNS groups with different L1s (Al-Jabbawi and Majee, 2021; Choi, 2017; Gablasova et al., 2017; Seog and Choi, 2018; Szmrecsanyi, 2003; Tyler and Jan, 2017). However, the comparative literature on NS and NNS corpora, particularly Korean learner corpora, remains scanty. In particular, there is a lack of research on the usage patterns of the English future

marker in both speaking and writing. Thus, there is a need for research into the usage patterns of the markers across both NS NNS in different registers, as such an inquiry could positively influence the stylistic aspects of language use among NNS.

The present study aims to fill this gap by investigating the usage of the English future maker, specifically "will" and "be going to", by Korean EFL learners and native English speakers. More studies are needed to understand how English language learners apply the future marker in different contexts, which can be crucial for language teaching methodologies and curriculum development. To this end, this study compares data from an NS corpus, the Contemporary American English Corpus (hereafter, COCA), with data from a Korean L1 learner corpus, the Incheon National University Multi-Language Learners Corpus (hereafter, MULC). The frequency and usage patterns of the two auxiliaries in the two groups are examined. The findings touch on the following topics: (1) the usage patterns of "will" and "be going to" across the different registers of COCA, (2) the overuse and underuse of the two expressions in both corpora, and (3) the pedagogical implications involved in such usage patterns.

2. Literature Review

Numerous studies within the field of English linguistics have rigorously examined the future markers "will" and "be going to" delving into their varied usage in different linguistic contexts and registers. As in, for decades, linguists have tried to provide a convincing and unified explanation for the usage patterns of each expression, including whether they are interchangeable or not. Several studies have investigated the form "be going to", its role as an alternative form for "will", and the contexts surrounding the use of each future marker (Leech, 2014; Szmrecsanyi, 2003). For Szmrecsanyi (2003), "will" expresses a neutral future; it is a future-oriented expression indicative of the speaker's intention and determination of future events. By contrast, "be going to" is a speaker-oriented expression based on the present situation, indicative of the future achievement of present intentions and the future outcome of present causes. For Leech (2014), "will" provides the nearest approximation to a neutral or colorless future in English, with its general meaning of prediction or irrealis potential—that is, potential, but not real (Klinge, 1993)—denoting affairs that are yet to come into being but about whose probability there is no question (Brisard, 2001; Leech, 2014).

Extensive research has indicated that "will" is utilized more frequently than "be going to" across various registers with a notably lower occurrence of the latter in written compared to spoken data (Szmrecsanyi, 2003). It is also established that in more informal settings, there's a tendency to use contracted or cliticized forms of future markers (i.e., subject + 'll), as well as preferring "be going to" over "will". This is outlined in research by Berglund (2000a; 2000b) and Szmrecsanyi (2003). Across various studies, "be going to" is consistently used less frequently than "will", especially in written forms as opposed to spoken forms.

Szmrecsanyi (2003) undertook a comprehensive analysis of the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (CSAE), focusing on the frequency and distribution of future markers. In his detailed examination of the BNC, he categorized it into two distinct sections: formal and informal contexts. Specifically, the spoken portion of the BNC was evenly divided into a demographically sampled (DS) component, which encapsulates language used in informal encounters by a diverse range of informants, and a context-governed (CG) component, representing formal encounters across four distinct domains. In other words, these two segments of

the BNC—the demographically sampled (DS) component, abundant in informal British English, and the context-governed (CG) component, representative of formal British English — are considered as separate entities. The analysis of different corpora reveals statistically significant variations in the usage of future markers (Szmrecsanyi, 2003). Specifically, in the CSAE, "gonna" emerges as the most predominant future marker, surpassing "going to" significantly with a ratio of approximately 7:1. This trend is also observed in the DS corpus, where "gonna" is roughly twice as prevalent as its full form. In contrast, the CG corpus shows a preference for the full form "be going to" over the contracted "gonna". Furthermore, in formal corpora, the use of full "will" is more common compared to its contracted forms, while informal corpora demonstrate the reverse pattern. The study found that sentences with "be going to" are generally longer than those with "will". It concludes that in more complex and detailed grammatical situations, speakers are more likely to use "be going to" instead of "will". This suggests a preference for "be going to" in elaborate language settings.

On the other hand, Siyanova and Schmitt (2007) investigate the use of one-word versus multi-word verbs in two native English corpora, the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE) and the British National Corpus (BNC), and a non-native English corpus, the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE). In the study, 26 multi-word verbs were investigated, including "turn down" (decrease), "go on" (continue), "put off" (postpone), "work out" (train), "mess around" (misbehave), "tell off" (reproach), and "brush up on" (revise). They find that, in most spoken and written cases, native speakers prefer one-word verbs to multi-word verbs. Non-native speakers also prefer one-word verbs over multi-word verbs. In examining the BNC, Lee (2014) finds that the adverb "not" is more frequently combined with the longer form "be going to". This finding is in line with the findings of Szmrecsanyi (2003), but contradicts Siyanova and Schmitt's (2007) claim that both native and non-native speakers primarily prefer the use of shorter one-word verbs based on economy or simplified syntax.

In summary, the literature review comprehensively examines the usage of future markers "will" and "be going to" in English linguistics. Research indicates that "will" is more frequently used than "be going to" across various registers, with its use being notably less in written than in spoken data. Studies also show a tendency towards contracted or cliticized forms in informal settings, and a preference for "be going to" over "will". In Szmrecsanyi (2003)'s study, it is revealed that the prevalence of "gonna" in informal American English and the dominance of the full form "be going to" in formal contexts. Further, the study found that sentences containing "be going to" are generally longer, suggesting a preference for this marker in more complex grammatical constructions. These results also align with Lee's (2014) study, which indicates that when generating English sentences, it's not solely dependent on economy. This collection of studies offers a detailed exploration of the usage and interpretation of future markers in English, highlighting the diversity in their application across different linguistic and educational contexts.

3. Method

3.1 Learner Corpus

MULC compiles samples of both spoken and written English of undergraduates from various course programs at Incheon National University, collected from 2018 to 2022 (Table 1). The data analyzed in this study consists of 139 writings and 224 monologues (Park, 2022).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of MULC

Course Programs								
Natural Science	Business Admin	Engineering	Education	Law	Social Science	English	Other Languages	Arts & Physics
24	15	42	9	8	23	78	22	3
11%	7%	19%	4%	3%	10%	35%	10%	1%
Male: 112, Female: 112								
Age: 20.9								
A1 (7, 3%), A2 (82, 37%), B1 (86, 38%), B2 (42, 19%), C1 (7, 3%), C2 (0, 0%)								
Total: 224 (100%)								

The writing task was allotted 30 minutes, and the monologue task, 2 minutes. The writing task was conducted using the Note program on a desktop computer so that no online dictionary was available. The monologues were conducted in a soundproof lab, and all the data were recorded digitally in real time under the researcher's supervision. The topics are shown in Table 2 (Yoon et al., 2022).

Table 2. Topics for Each Task

Spoken	Written
1. What do you usually do in your free time? Hobbies, etc.	1. Should everyone get married?
2. What is your favorite genre of movies?	2. Is it essential to wear school uniform in middle and high schools?
3. Do you think there can be friendship between opposite genders?	3. Should elementary, middle, and high school students be allowed to carry phones in class?
4. Is it better to have a dog than a cat?	4. Should any college student join a club?

3.2 Native Speaker Corpus

The learner corpus is compared with a native corpus, the COCA. The very recent COCA corpus (1990 to 2019) includes 1 billion words in approximately 500,000 texts. These texts take the form of various genres: TV/movies, blogs, spoken utterances, fiction, magazines, newspapers, and academic texts. As Table 3 shows, this study uses COCA data specifically from the following sources: spoken utterances, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts. These genres were selected because they are more relevant to teaching and learning than the other genres.

Table 3. Basic Descriptive Statistics of COCA

Spoken Utterances	Written				
	Fiction	Magazines	Newspapers	Academic Texts	Total
127,396,932	119,505,305	127,352,030	122,958,016	120,958,016	490,773,367

3.3 Software

The study utilized two software tools: AntConc Tools version 4.2.0 and the University Centre for Computer Corpus

Research on Language (UCREL) online log-likelihood (LL) calculator. The text retrieval software AntConc Tools was used to retrieve the targeted forms: "will" and "be going to" constructions, with the related context from the corpora. For the statistical analysis software, the UCREL LL calculator was utilized to compute the LL values to determine the overuse or underuse of the targeted forms in the corpora.

The log-likelihood value serves as an effective method for contrasting different corpora (Park, 2020). Pojanapunya and Todd (2018) found that the Log-likelihood (LL) test offers superior performance in corpus comparison compared to chi-square statistics. This value tends to be elevated in instances where there is a notable variance in frequency. In other words, a high log-likelihood value indicates a substantial difference in the relative frequency of a word when comparing two corpora (Park, 2020).

4. Results

4.1 COCA

COCA has a total token size of 618,170,299 words. Using the CHART option of the search tool on the COCA website, a total of 1,194,072 occurrences were retrieved for "will" (including the contraction "subject + 'll"), and a total of 410,068 occurrences for "be going to" (including "gonna"). Overall, regardless of genre or register, the American English speakers in COCA used "be going to" only 31.37% of the time, compared to "will".

The normalized usage frequency of "will" is 1,932, whereas that of "be going to" is 606, confirming that "will" is used much more frequently than "be going to" in general. Furthermore, sub-corpora comparisons show that, in the spoken corpus, the occurrence of "be going to" is 87.48%, compared to that of "will", which indicates that for every 100 "will" occurrences, "be going to" occurs approximately 87 times (See the methodology in Seog et al., 2019). Table 4 shows the details of the occurrences of "will" and "be going to" in each sub-corpora of COCA.

Table 4. Occurrences of "Will" and "Be Going To" in COCA

COCA	Total Token Size	"Will"		"Be going to"		"Be going to" vs. "Will" (%)
		Raw Freq	Norm Freq per Mil	Raw Freq	Norm Freq per Mil	
All	618,170,299	1,194,072	1,932	410,068	606	31.37%
Spoken	127,396,932	298,153	2,340	260,816	2,047	87.48%
Written	490,773,367	895,919	1,826	149,252	304	16.65%

As for the written corpora, the occurrence of "be going to" is 16.65%, compared to that of "will" (Table 4). The normalized frequencies reveal that native speakers use "be going to" less frequently than "will" across both registers. However, the infrequent usage of "be going to" is much more apparent in the written register.

To determine the overuse and underuse of the two expressions across the two registers, the LL values for the occurrence of each were calculated. Table 5 shows the LL values of "will" and "be going to" in the spoken and written registers of COCA.

Table 5. LL Values for "Will" and "Be Going To" in the Spoken and Written Registers

COCA	Spoken Raw Freq	Written Raw Freq	Log-likelihood Spoken vs. Written
"Will"	298,153	895,919	+ 13,227.66
"Be going to"	260,816	149,252	+ 355,047.56
Total Tokens	127,396,932	490,773,367	

LL>15.13 is significant at p<0.0001 level.
The UCREL LL wizard by Rayson uses "+" to indicate overuse and "-" to indicate underuse of corpus 1 (Monologue) relative to corpus 2 (Writing).
+ indicates overuse in Corpus 1 relative to Corpus 2;
- indicates underuse in Corpus 1 relative to Corpus 2.

On the whole, the American native speakers of COCA significantly overuse both "will" and "be going to" in the spoken register, compared to the written register, with LL=13,227.66 for "will" and LL=355,047.56 for "be going to". Moreover, American native speakers use "be going to" much less frequently than "will" in both registers.

4.2 MULC

MULC has a total token size of 60,399 words. Using the CHART option of the search tool on the COCA website, a total of 195 occurrences were retrieved for "will", and a total of 199 occurrences for "be going to". Overall, regardless of genre or register, the learners in MULC used "be going to" 102.05% of the time, compared to "will".

The normalized usage frequency of 3,229 for "will" compared to that of 3,295 for "be going to" also confirms that the frequencies of both modals are not that different unlike COCA in general. Furthermore, the sub-corpora comparisons show that, in the spoken corpus, the occurrence of "be going to" is 273.91% of that of "will", which indicates that for every 100 occurrences of "will", "be going to" occurs approximately 274 times. This indicates that among Korean university students, "be going to" is used much more frequently than "will" in speaking. However, in writing, "be going to" is used only 8 times for every 100 occurrences of "will", showing a significant difference in the frequency of use of these modals between speaking and writing. This pattern also presents a stark contrast to the trends observed in COCA. Table 6 shows the details of the occurrences of "will" and "be going to" in each of the sub-corpora of MULC.

Table 6. Occurrences of "Will" and Be Going To" in MULC

MULC	Total Token Size	"Will"		"Be going to"		"Be going to" vs. "Will" (%)
		Raw Freq	Norm Freq per Mil	Raw Freq	Norm Freq per Mil	
All	60,399	195	3,228.53	199	3,294.76	102.05
Spoken	27,876	69	2,475.25	189	6,780.03	273.91
Written	32,523	126	3,874.18	10	307.47	7.94

Table 7 shows the LL scores of "will" and "be going to" in the spoken and written registers in MULC. There is no significant difference in the use of "will" (LL=-9.28) between the registers, but the use of "be going to" is significantly more prevalent in speaking than in writing (LL=+225.35).

Table 7. LL Values for "Will" and "Be Going To" in the Spoken and Written Registers

MULC	Spoken Raw Freq	Written Raw Freq	Log-likelihood Spoken vs. Written
"Will"	69	126	- 9.28
"Be going to"	189	10	+ 225.35
Total Tokens	27,876	32,523	

The LL values were calculated to compare patterns in the learner and native speaker corpora.

Table 8. LL Comparison of MULC and COCA

LL values	MULC vs COCA	
	Spoken	Written
"Will"	+ 0.16	+ 56.31
"Be going to"	+ 188.70	+ 0.01

Table 8 shows the detailed LL values for MULC and COCA. The findings show the significant overuse of "be going to" in speaking (LL=+188.70) and of "will" in writing (LL=+56.31) in MULC compared to those in COCA. The current findings contradict previous studies, such as Seog et al. (2019), which examined only Korean undergraduates' writings and found that learners use "will" as frequently as the native speakers of the COCA Written-All (LL=2.70), while significantly overusing "be going to" (LL=25.81).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Given that auxiliary verbs are one of the most troublesome grammatical structures in English (Quirk and Crystal, 2010), the present study analyzed how EFL university students use future modal verbs, specifically "will" and "be going to". The results presented considerable and clear differences in terms of the frequency and distribution of these verbs across the spoken and written registers of COCA and MULC.

First, the use of future markers in each corpus with different L1s can be summarized as follows: Native English speakers of COCA use "will" more than "be going to" in both speech and writing ("will" vs. "be going to" (normalized frequency): 1,932 vs. 606), whereas for Korean speakers, no such significant difference in usage can be observed ("will" vs. "be going to": 195 vs. 199). The result found in COCA supports the previous literature, in that "will" outnumbers "be going to" in usage regardless of the register. Such finding is similar to Siyanova and Schmitt's (2007) argument: one-word verbs are more frequently used in both written and spoken discourse. The basis of this argument can be found in Cayer and Sacks' (1979) finding that, in their writing, basic L1 writers tend to use surface phrases that are characteristic of spoken language (e.g., "I will", "yes" and "I guess"). This means that not all L1 adults completely differentiate their oral discourse from their written discourse. This observation—that there is no significant difference between the use of the two future markers across the two registers—is discussed further below.

Next, the following summarizes the results of the use of future expressions in speaking and writing among NS and

NNS: According to the LL analysis for COCA, L1 English speakers use both future markers more frequently in speaking ("will": + 13,227.66; "be going to": + 355,047.56). By contrast, in the Korean corpus, no such significant difference in the use of "will" in either speaking or writing can be observed (LL: - 9.28). However, "be going to" is used more frequently in speaking (LL: + 225.35).

Given Siyanova and Schmitt's (2007) finding that one-word verbs are used more frequently regardless of register, it is necessary to compare the frequency of multi-word verbs used in their study with the results found in the present study. They compared pairs of 26 verbs that have the same meaning but differ in form. Using the CHART option in COCA, one finds that the 26 multi-word verbs are not more frequently used than "be going to". For example, "put off" has a normalized overall frequency per million of 3.02 (e.g., NormFreq per Mill (spoken): put off 3.02 vs. be going to 2,047). By contrast, the normalized frequency per million of "be going to" is 2,047 (Table 4), which means that for every 100 times "be going to" is used, "put off" is used only 0.15 times.

To explain this finding, one might consider the way Korean university students learn English verbs, which could be linked to a pattern of language transfer from their first language, rather than a generalized economics-based reason. For another example, compared to the normalized frequency per million of "turn down" used in Siyanova and Schmitt's (2007) study, "be going to" is a verb form that is introduced early on in the learning process in EFL settings (e.g., NormFreq per Mill (spoken): "turn down" 1.74 vs. "be going to" 2,047). "Be going to", despite being a multi-word verb, is used overwhelmingly more than other multi-word verbs (i.e., "turn down", "put off") among Korean learners because it has already been acquired even at the novice level and is therefore familiar to use. That is, learners acquire the use of "be going to" like "will", in the early stages of their learning. Therefore, considering the possible influence of language transfer in the learning process of Korean university students in MULC, it suggests there might not be a significant difference in the timing of acquisition of "will" and "be going to" in both speaking and writing in English, making this result an intriguing possibility.

Another possible explanation for Korean speakers' overuse of "be going to", relative to native speakers, is the expression of willingness implicit in the multiple meanings of "will". Given that Koreans are taught early on in their formal education that "will" implies willingness (Hong, 2008), it can be argued that Koreans, one of whose virtues is to suppress strong expressions of willingness relative to their Western counterparts, are more likely to refrain from using "will" than "be going to". This finding is consistent with Park (in review) who examined Korean and British adults' usage patterns of the contrastive connector (i.e., "but" and "however") and found that, relative to the British, Koreans use "but" more frequently than "however". In other words, under normalized overall frequency conditions, L2 writers are about twice as likely as L1 writers to use "but". No such significant difference can be found in the use of "however" between the two corpora. "But" represents a weaker contrast (Blakemore, 2002), whereas "however" expresses a stronger contrast or sense of contradiction in introducing the succeeding clause (Lee, 2020). Non-native writers tend to use relatively fewer contrastive connectors with a strong tone. Koreans overuse common connectors, such as "but", and may use simpler sentence forms, unaware of the pragmatic functions and features of English connectors (Kim, 2018).

Finally, in contrast to speaking, an important observation about Korean writing is the overuse of "will", compared to native English writing. Given Korea's status as an IT powerhouse at a time when the broadcast content from each country is shared through various media, it can be predicted that learners are exposed to more media and learn from it, aside from the traditional school setting, so Koreans will have learned that "will" is more commonly used in formal

writing and "be going to" in informal speech.

For example, the full text of the January 20, 2017 inaugural address of Donald Trump, the 45th US President, does not contain a single use of "be going to" (Heo, 2022). By contrast, "will" is used 43 times. Here is an excerpt:

Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength. I will fight for you with every breath in my body—and I will never, ever let you down. America will start winning again, winning like never before. We will bring back our jobs. We will bring back our borders. We will bring back our wealth. And we will bring back our dreams. We will build new roads, and highways, and bridges, and airports, and tunnels, and railways all across our wonderful nation. We will get our people off of welfare and back to work—rebuilding our country with American hands and American labor. We will follow two simple rules: Buy American and Hire American. We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world—but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first (Trump, 2017).

Even in formal news reports, such as TV weather forecasts, "be going to" is absent, with only "will" being used. Indeed, given the high frequency of "be going to" in many informal contexts, it is possible that English speakers are restricting its use in formal situations (Heo, 2022).

The burst of warm and sunny spring weather across south-east Australia in recent days will abruptly end later this week, forecasters warns [sic]. One of the strongest cold outbreaks of the year will hit South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales over coming days as wintry conditions return, reports Weatherzone. Residents should expect rain, thunderstorms, damaging winds, low level snow, icy temperatures, and possibly a dangerous squall line (Wood/9news.com.au/Sep 6, 2023).

In sum, using the learner corpus MULC and the native speaker corpus COCA, this study sheds light on the usage patterns of "will" and "be going to" across different registers. The results showed that native speakers use both forms more frequently in their speech. By contrast, non-native speakers tend to use—or overuse—"will" significantly in writing and "'be going to" in speaking, relative to their native counterparts. Teaching the difference patterns to L2 learners will be meaningful. However, despite the differences between the two expressions, an important practical consideration should not be overlooked: replacing "be going to" with "will" makes little semantic difference (Leech, 2014). Given this substitutability, some current researchers assert that the important distinction to be made between the two is a contextual distinction (formal vs. informal) rather than a hard semantic distinction (Heo, 2022). Future studies will necessitate detailed analysis that includes the points mentioned above. As such, it is important to make learners interested in learning using authentic content in context, and it is also important to teach learners to express themselves based on intelligibility when conveying meaning. This study's findings will be beneficial when taken into consideration by producers of EFL materials to enhance the authenticity of the language input which can be advantageous for designing teaching materials.

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