

Contrastive Analysis and English Language Teaching

A research paper by

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Introduction

Although interest in second language goes back to Babel, it is not necessary to trace the roots of second language acquisition (SLA) research as a scientific discipline further back than World War II, and the war time and post-war interest in foreign language teaching. From the forties to the sixties, the dominant theoretical position on language learning reflected the dominance of behaviourism in psychology, and structuralism in linguistics. Briefly put, it held that language learning, whether first or second language, is a form of habit formation.

In this sense, there was no theory of SLA as such, given that no reason was seen for anything other than a general learning theory for all types of learning. SLA research concentrated on identifying the sources of difficulty of habit formation for the learner of a second language; 'difficulty' of course being defined in terms of degree of success or failure in producing native-like utterances in the second language. The orthodoxy of this period is usually summed up in the term "Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis" (CAH).

The Basic Assumption of CA

CA, though itself a hypothesis, is based on a number of assumptions. However, the main assumptions that have often been discussed are:

1. The main difficulties while learning a second language are

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- primarily caused due to mother tongue interference.
2. These difficulties are predicted by CA after accomplishing a comparison between a source language (SL) and target language (TL).
 3. In order to overcome these difficulties, teaching/learning materials are prepared in such a way that materials help to reduce the effect of interference.

A careful analysis of these assumptions is essential here in order to evaluate the claims made by the advocates of CA. Lado (1957:1) tries to show the validity of these assumptions through the previous studies carried on bilingualism. He says, " A practical confirmation of the validity of our assumption has come from the work of linguists who study the effect of close contact between languages in bilingual situations. They report that many linguistic distortions heard among bilinguals correspond to describable differences in the language involved."

He specifically refers to the work of Haugen (1953) and Weinreich (1953) in this regard. However, the first assumption deals with the transfer of native habits into the target language. Two types of transfer most frequently referred to in CA are: positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer refers to facilitation of the native habits into the native language system while learning the target language. Dulay et al (1982:97) define it as "... the automatic use of the L1 structure in L2 performance when the structures in both languages are the same, resulting in correct utterances."

Negative transfer refers to the interference caused by the native language while learning the second/foreign language. Dulay et al. (1982:97) further clarify the notion of negative transfer in the following way: " The CA hypothesis held that where structures in the L1 differed from those in the L2, errors that reflected the structure of the L1 would be produced. Such errors were said to be due to the influence of the L1 habits on L2 production." The two words " differences " and " difficult " are synonymously used in CA. The more the differences between L1 and L2, the more the difficulties the learners are likely to face resulting in the erroneous utterances. Another feature of this assumption is that the source language of the learner is considered to be the sole cause of errors

that he is likely to commit.

The second assumption of CA is its predictive power in the areas of difficulties in which the TL learners are likely to make errors. It is assumed that the areas in which the source language and target language of a learner differ, the learner are most likely to face difficulties. Lado (1964:21) is firm in supporting this assumption when he says, " ... differences are the chief source of difficulty in learning a second language." Banathy et al. (1966:37) also put an emphasis on comparing two languages so that the differences between them can be sorted out in order to predict the areas likely to be difficult for the TL learners. They say that, " The change that has to take place in the language behaviour of a foreign language student can be equated with the differences between the structure of the student's native language and culture and that of the target language and culture..." The task of the linguist, the cultural anthropologist, and the sociologist is to identify these differences." The task of the foreign language teacher is to become aware of those differences and focus his teaching on them.

The third assumption of CA is more or less directed towards the remediation of the difficulties predicted by the work of CA. The immediate appreciation of CA is in the second or foreign language teaching. The learning materials based on CA address the areas of difficulties that the learners are likely to encounter. This has clearly been expressed by Fries (1945:9) in the following statement:

" The most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of learner." This spirit is further maintained by Lado (1957:3) who also stresses the need for comparing the native language and target language for preparing teaching materials. He also believes that a teacher who can compare two languages "... will be able to prepare supplementary exercises on those patterns who are important or difficult and have been overlooked or treated inadequately in the book."

Pedagogical Implications of CA

In the fifties and sixties, CA was considered to be the main source of information regarding the preparation of foreign language syllabuses, textbooks and teaching materials. Fries (1957:3) furthers his claim and says that " The most important new thing in the preparation of teaching materials is the comparison of native and foreign language culture in order to find the hurdles that really have to be surmounted in the teaching.

Lado also points out the advantage that a teacher may have. He can systematically compare the native language and foreign language because he

can prepare supplementary materials in the areas of the foreign language that are likely to be difficult to the learners but are not adequately given in the textbooks.

For many years CA dominated TL activities with a noble aim of helping the TL learners to overcome their learning difficulties. Stressing on the pedagogical implications of CA, Chau (1975:119) says, " These activities (CA) are undoubtedly of great importance to the course developer and the language teacher as well as the test writer, in their task of organizing teaching materials, planning teaching strategies, and evaluating progress and achievement. They must unquestionably have certain knowledge of the potential problem areas and of the causes and magnitude of the learning problems." This statement includes almost all the aspects of the pedagogical realm. CA requires the service of a person who is skilful in describing languages so as to compare the two languages in question with each other. It also heavily relies on not only adequate descriptive model of a language but also on how a language functions.

Sciarone (1970:118) makes this fact clear thus: " The contribution to the improvement of teaching that CA can be expected to make, depends-

needless to say- on the quality of the analysis of language in the first place, and the way in which this analysis is executed in the second place."

He further suggests that the transformational generative grammar is

descriptively most adequate for the purpose of carrying out CA activities. Spolsky (1979:253) finds CA most useful for the development of pedagogic grammar of the TL. But unlike Fries (1945) and Lado (1957), he thinks it to be "...safe to sum things up by saying that there is good reason to believe that a contrastive analysis is a useful (some would say necessary) preliminary to the development of good teaching materials, but none for suggesting that it is in any way a sufficient condition or a complete basis for a theory of language learning." He further claims that CA encourages the linguists to describe the type of language that a language teacher needs for his teaching.

Criticism of Contrastive Analysis

Lack of theoretical justification

The theoretical and methodological assumptions underlying contrastive studies have been severely criticized. Some of the most important points of criticism concerning contrastive studies are as follows:

Firstly, Corder (1967,1971,1981:5) criticized CA's contribution to language teaching which was not more than an intensive contrastive study of the system of the second language and mother tongue of the learners. He points out that " Teachers have not always been very impressed by the contribution of linguists for the reason that their practical experience has already shown them where these difficulties lie and they have not felt that the contribution of the linguists has provided them with any significant new information."

One of the main criticism against CA is the lack of its theoretical justification. Primarily, it was based on structural linguistics and psychological interference theory.

Enkvist (1981:45) supports the view that CA lacks a theoretical foundation. He indicates that " it is by now a truism that all contrastive linguistics must be based in some theory and model of linguistic description. Without such a foundation we simply cannot compare and contrast languages in a systematic way. It is another matter that in applied contrastive work the approach may well be eclectic, picking and choosing among different theories for different areas of work."

Linguistic Differences Do Not Equal Learning Difficulties

Whitman and Jackson (1972:40) conclude from a study of errors produced by Japanese learners of English that "relative similarities rather than differences are directly related to levels of difficulty." Ringbom (1994) is of the view that when a particular L2 aspect is different from the same aspect in L1 it does not necessarily follow that it is difficult to learn. He supports his view by an example from Finnish where there is only one pronoun for 'he and 'she'----'han'. This means that Finnish beginners learning Germanic languages have frequent problems in choosing the right pronoun when speaking English.

However, when English speakers learn Finnish, the use of third-person personal pronouns is an aspect of the Finnish language that causes very little difficulty. He concluded from this that the difference between Finnish and English poses learning difficulty in one direction, but not in the other.

Predictive Validity of Contrastive Analysis is Doubtful

To predict actual language behaviour from crosslinguistic comparison of language structures is fraught with problems. Contrastive analysis was criticized severely that it could not predict all the errors which learners made. To prove this empirically, Mukattash (1981) conducted a study in Amman (Jordan). In that study, a test consisting of 150 multiple choice items concerning eleven areas of English grammar was given to 4,835 Arab learners of English. The decision of testing various grammatical areas was based on more than one consideration. Firstly, the English verbal system presents a serious problem for Arab learners of English as a foreign language. Secondly, the contrast between the Arabic verbal system and the English verbal system is linguistically interesting in the sense that in Arabic certain grammatical categories relating to the verbal system are mutually exclusive. For example, the English present progressive and present perfect have no corresponding verbal form in Arabic, and neither has the present perfect progressive. In this study, 'difficulty' is assumed to be reflected in

errors. If linguistic differences are taken to be the basic source of difficulty in foreign language learning and production, then we would expect the following difficulties for Arab learners of English with respect to the verbal system discussed above.

1. The past perfect progressive, the present perfect progressive, the present and perfect progressive, lacking formal correspondence in native language, will prove to be the most difficult verbal forms for Arab learners.
2. The simple present having both formal and semantic correspondence will be easier than present perfect progressive.
3. The simple past, the past perfect and the past progressive, having both formal and semantic correspondence in native language, will not prove to be difficult.

It is quite obvious from the data presented that not all the predictions made by CA were valid.

<u>category</u>	<u>frequency</u>	<u>percentage</u>
simple present	1,259	74.4
simple past	324	19.1
present perfect	10	0.7
past perfect	17	1.0
present progressive	33	1.9
past progressive	11	0.7
present perfect progressive	1	--
past perfect progressive	--	--
simple future	38	2.2
future perfect	--	--
future progressive	--	--
total	1,693	100%

1. The past perfect, which has both formal and semantic correspondence turned out to be more difficult than the present perfect, which has no formal correspondence in native Arabic language.
2. The past progressive, which has both formal and semantic correspondence in NL, turned out to be more difficult than the present progressive, which lacks formal correspondence

3. The simple past turned out to be more difficult than the past progressive when both have formal and semantic correspondence in NL.

Another conclusion that can legitimately be drawn from this study is:

There is a high correlation between ' difficulty ' and ' avoidance '. The present perfect progressive and the past perfect progressive, which proved to be the most difficult verbal forms in this study had a zero frequency of occurrence in free composition.

Despite the ever-growing criticism lodged against the use of CA in foreign language teaching and its basic assumptions, it is no less valuable.

The pedagogic contrastive grammars, if prepared, will be of immense value to the foreign language teachers, learners, material writers and even translators. Leaving aside the extreme viewpoints for and against the implication of CA for pedagogical purposes, it is worthwhile to conclude with the well-balanced remarks of Marton (1981:169), " WLe may conclude with a remark that pessimism concerning the pedagogical application of contrastive studies is certainly unwarranted, although some premature hopes and expectations of dramatic advancements in language teaching connected with introduction of contrastive role as a contribution to better organization and guidance in foreign language teaching and learning."

Towards New Approaches to Develop Contrastive Analysis

New approaches began to develop which, under various labels and with new techniques of enquiry attempted to relate the study of CA to the external reality and to the language user. These approaches are ' contrastive semantics 'contrastive sociolinguistics' and 'Pragmatic Contrastive Analysis ' (PCA).

These new fields of study aim at connecting the study of language with the speaker –hearer, the context and the topic. They are concerned with the relations between language and context and

between language and language user. In other words, these approaches attempt to analyze the use of language in a sociocultural setting, whereas the traditional CA was concerned with analysis of problems pertaining to language structure rather than language use. The desirability of establishing such new approaches can be traced back to the mid-seventies. Jackson (1975:7) points out that " If contrastive linguistics (CL) is released from the necessity of having pedagogical relevance at the same time, CL can be free to develop its own theoretical principles and make a distinctive contribution to linguistics generally. The theoretical conclusion of CL will contribute to the areas of language typology and language universals, The contrastive descriptions of specific language and language systems will contribute to an understanding of individual languages and their structures." In 1979, two papers were published in " Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics " (PSICL). The first paper was by Wachtel (1979) who refers to ' Pragmatics ' as a new tool in contrastive analysis. The second paper was by Rily (1979) who proposes a ' Model of Contrastive Pragmalinguistics '. Two years later, Oleksy (1981) proposed in his article " Towards Pragmatic Contrastive Analysis " (PCA) a model of contrastive analysis that is capable of dealing with language use in sociocultural setting. In his proposal, he suggested four components of PCA which accommodate the concept of communicative act.

The components are as follows:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| A. Locutionary Component | LC |
| B. Illocutionary Component | Ilc |
| C. Pragmatico-Contrastive Component | PCC |
| D. Interactive Component | IC |

PCA suggests that linguists need to consider not only linguistic contrasts but also pragmatic contrasts such as similarities and differences in the stylistic user of items in the first and second language and in form-function relationship.

To sum up, PCA is equally concerned about comparing the communication functions of different languages as well as comparing how different languages express the same communicative functions.

CA in Yemen

As a result of CA, it was believed that English grammar was the main problem for Arab learners. Therefore, there was an emphasis on teaching and learning grammar intensively.

Moreover, there was a comparison between the learners' native language and the target language in order to enable the learners to overcome their problems in the second language. This practice was very common in Yemen in the early sixties when English language was introduced in schools for the first time as a school subject.

It might be useful to brief the reader when and how English as a foreign language started to be taught in Yemen as a school subject. Till 1962, English was not allowed to be taught in schools as a result of the deliberate isolation of the Yemeni dynasty. When the Revolution took place in 1962, teaching English was one of the main objectives of the new government. However, there was not a single English book at that time available to be taught at schools. Therefore, the new government decided to use the Egyptian English Courses, "The Nile Course."

These courses were obviously influenced by the CA approach. Therefore, there was a lot of focus on grammar, and long lists of vocabulary translated into the learners first language. Learners were asked to learn by heart the grammar rules of the target language as well as to memorize these long lists of vocabulary. Learners were not taught how to use these isolated words in real communication. Therefore, learners memorized those lists of vocabulary and grammar rules just to be able to answer the final exam paper.

In 1970, the government realized that these courses were unable to fulfill the objectives of teaching English in the country . Thus, all Egyptian courses i.e., "The Nile Course " were replaced by new English courses called "Living English for the Arab World"

These books were also used in Kuwait. Again, these courses were mainly based on grammar and translation as well as long lists of vocabulary translated from English into Arabic to be memorized by the learners. This was nothing different from the old courses. However, these courses, like the previous courses failed to fulfill the objectives of teaching English in Yemen.

In 1980, the British Council in Yemen, with the cooperation of the

Ministry of Education, established a new course called "English for Yemen". These books focus on the Yemeni environment to motivate the Yemeni learners to learn English.

However, these courses were only the " first-aid ". They attempted to introduce the " Communicative Approach " as a reaction to the previous traditional courses which were influenced by CA. Though these new courses gave more attention to learners' " communication needs ", they did not forget to satisfy the learners expectations (to memorize some grammar rules and long lists of vocabulary). These courses also

failed to fulfill the objectives of teaching English in Yemen, particularly the second and the fifth objectives listed in the document quoted below which are:

2. To provide the student with skills which will enable them to communicate orally with the native speakers of English and with people of other nationalities who also speak English.

5. To enable the learners to carry out on their own academic research in English where it is the medium of instruction.

(Ministry of Education, 1965:40)

In 1995, new courses replaced " English for Yemen ". These new courses were called " Crescent English Course for Yemen". They were supposed to be introduced in 1991, but suspended as a result of the Gulf crises. However, these courses need to be evaluated to find out whether they have achieved their goals or failed like the previous ones.

Yemeni Learners' Expectations

According to Johnson (1983) students come to class with specific assumptions about language learning. They may believe that the most effective way of learning a language is by receiving clear rules for writing sentences or through rote memorization of vocabulary charts.

In other words, some students want traditional didactic teaching which thus encourages passivity and adoption of " surface " learning techniques because it is easier for them.

A Yemeni learner does come to study English with certain expectations. He/She usually expects to be provided with long lists of vocabulary and grammar rules to be memorized and recited whenever required in the class. These expectations are mainly transferred from their elder brothers/sisters or parents who were taught in that traditional way of CA methodology. Learners in many cases, ask their teachers to assign some vocabulary to memorize and learn by heart; otherwise they feel they are not learning properly. In English classes, teachers translate each and every word for their learners so as to facilitate learning of the second language. Therefore, learners who come to the university to study " English " still expect to be provided with some expressions, structures, grammar rules, and long lists of vocabulary, to be memorized. Thus, they learn by heart all the English plays, poetry, novels and short essays. This might be due to the earlier methods of teaching in Yemeni pedagogic tradition.

Learners usually ask their teachers about the best bilingual dictionaries just to start to learn by heart some words with their Arabic meanings in order to be able to translate from English into Arabic or vice-versa.

In phonology, Yemeni learners face many difficulties. For example, /p/ does not exist in the learner's native language. Therefore, they replace this sound with /b/.

The same thing can be said about /v/; learners replace this sound with /f/ regardless of whether this sound is initial, or final.

Though traditional CA pays attention to these problems as part of its basic assumption or predictability; in many teaching situations, it did not help in solving the learners' problems. These difficulties have not been taken into account in any of the previous English courses, including the new courses like " Crescent English Course for Yemen."

Conclusion

As a matter of fact, we cannot refute the usefulness and practical value of CA, in the field of language description as well as in teaching and learning the target language. Moreover, it helped in establishing the basic ideas of new approaches and studies of CA which are coming up in the field of linguistics these days. However, the new approaches which have grown out of CA have not destroyed the original idea of CA, that the learner's L1 largely determines what problems the learner is going to face. Sajavaara (1981b) points out that the basic idea of contrasting languages is a correct one. The problem lies not in the idea, but in the methods in which the contrast has been carried out and that contrastive analysis needs to be undertaken with reference to purely linguistic parameters.

Finally, Sanders (1981:30) says, " Contrastive analysis is still in use, and of use, in language teaching. The part it can play should be neither exaggerated nor understated, and there is a place for continuing research.... Account must be taken of empirical evidence of its usefulness, and the distinction between a linguistic and a pedagogical grammar borne in mind."

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