THE EFFICACY OF CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS IN ASSESSING ESL STRATEGIES OF L2 SYSTEM: A REVIEW

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Abstract

Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis are considered the sub-systems of Applied Linguistics, and are known to be the major thrust areas of Second Language Acquisition research. Even if they may not be the ultimate remedies for all SLA problems, they are reasonable to recommend possible solutions. The research pursued in these areas may render very valuables insights for developing effective SLA pedagogy. Those insights and indicatives are supposed to promote second language learning and teaching. To prop up SLA, different methods and materials may be tried at. They are all the multi-means of a uni-goal, to ease second language acquisition. The paper attempts to review the Contrastive Analysis to assess its significance and efficacy as one of the prominent scientific instruments in analyzing and interpreting the ESL learner strategies and cognitive processes about the target language system (L2).

Introduction

During 1940s and 1950s, the behavioral psychology and the structural linguistics, the two basic schools of thought, form the base for contrastive analysis approach; they are crux influential to it. This approach is considered to have been the first attempt to explain the observable phenomena in the field of second language acquisition. As the very purpose of contrastive analysis is pedagogical in character and to facilitate language learning and teaching, it principally attends the problems of SLA and attempts to explain them through a systematic means of comparing and contrasting the languages in order to determine the potential errors.

Contrastive Analysis

It is Robert Lado, who asserts the very purpose of Contrastive Analysis approach significantly in his classic work ''Linguistics across Cultures'' (1957) that   "The plan of the book rests on the assumption that we can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student. In our view, the preparation of up-to-date pedagogical and experimental materials must be based on this kind of comparison" (Lado.R: 1957)

Before Lado, Charles Fries has observed these phenomena of learning and teaching, and sets forth his principles in "Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language (1945)" and states that "The problems of learning a foreign language were attributed to the conflict of different structural systems. Contrastive analysis of the two languages would allow potential problems of interference to be predicted and addressed through carefully prepared teaching materials" (Jack.C and Theodore S: 2005: p.52). Moreover, Fries expresses his stand-point about the pedagogy of SLA that

> "The most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the two languages to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner" (Fries: 1945: p.9).

With this proposition contrastive analysis has been established as an integral approach of SLA methodology. The other prominent linguist whose interpretations have contributed to establish contrastive analysis is Uriel Weinreich, a renowned scholar of bilingualism. He observes that

> "Those instances of deviations from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language" (Vivian cook: 2003:p.1).

All these insightful observations have been the pooling sources to formulate the assumptions associated with C.A. (The assumptions explained in the following pages). The early proponents of C.A. have adapted the behavioral psychology. It postulates that all learning is a habit formation through the process of stimulus- response- reinforcement, and assumes that language learning is also purely habit formation. The empirical analysis of this postulation leads to frame "the Principle of Transfer".

During 1950s and 60s, contrastive analysis is greatly extended of its scope on Generative grammar, which has an objective of searching for linguistic universals in typology. Leonard Bloomfield, an outstanding scholar, emphasized the importance of interlingual comparison for the language universals. He states that

"The only useful generalizations about language are inductive generalizations, this admonition is clearly important, in the sense that we do not want to invent language universals but to discover them" (Giorgio: 2001:p.326). He hopes that it would be the major area of contrastive linguistics research.

1**. The Fundamental Assumptions of Contrastive Analysis**: Contrastive analysis, in course of time, produced voluminous pedagogical materials basing on the various assumptions as following ones.

1. Contrastive analysis is based on a theory of language that claims that language is a habit and language learning involves the establishment of a new set of habits.
2. The major source of errors in the production and / or reception of a second language is the native language.
3. One can account for errors by considering differences between the L1 and the L2.
4. A corollary to item 3 is that the greater the differences, the more errors will occur.
5. What one has to do in learning a second language is learn the differences. Similarities can be safely ignored as no new learning is involved. In other words, what is dissimilar between two languages is what must be learned.
6. Difficulty and ease in learning is determined respectively by difference and similarity between the languages in contrast. (Susan. M. Gass: 2008:96-97)
7.

2. The Prior and the Posterior Versions of Contrastive Analysis:

By 1970, contrastive analysis becomes the major thrust area of second language acquisition and is graded to be the prominent scientific research tool that enables to find out solutions for all learning problems of second language acquisition. With the high pro-scenario of second language acquisition research, the proponents of contrastive analysis over- claim and over- hypothesize the efficacies of contrastive analysis. Consequently, the strong version of contrastive analysis is evolved. The strong- version postulates that "one could make predictions about learning and hence, about the success of language teaching materials based on a comparison between languages" (ibid: Susan. M. Gass: 2008:97). The growth of this version relies on different salient assumptions. It is Lee (1968) that states them explicitly.

1. The prime cause, or even the sole cause, of difficulty and errors in foreign language learning is interference coming from the learner's native language.

2. The difficulties are chiefly, or wholly, due to the differences between the two languages;

3. The greater those differences are, the more acute the learning difficulties would be;

4. The results of comparison between the two languages are needed to predict the difficulties and errors which occur in learning the foreign language; and

5. What there is to teach can best be found by comparing the two languages and then subtracting what is common to them, so that what the student has to learn equals the sum of differences established by the contrastive analysis. (Lee: 1968:186)

The implications of the assumptions prompt to assert some significant pedagogical tasks for the practice. Banethy, Trager, and Waddle (1966) in "The Use of Contrastive Data in Foreign Language Course Development" suggest the prime practices for the language-teacher, the learner, and the linguist – that

> "The task of the linguist, the cultural anthropologist, and the sociologist is to identify differences. The task of the writer of a foreign language teacher programme is to develop materials which will be based on a statement of these differences; the task of a language teacher is to be aware of these differences and to be prepared to teach them; the task of the student is to learn them" (Lee Kok Cheong:1983:58)

2.1. The Critique of Contrastive Analysis:

The over simplifications of the tasks, referred in the above quotation, of second language acquisition field and the attribution of all the difficulties to the first-language interference, entail the stern criticism against contrastive analysis especially of its strong version and its predictive validity. It is by the 1970, the doubt about the predictive power of contrastive analysis has been arisen. It faces serious challenges as the empirical research starts to prove

1. That all the difficulties of learning are not traced back to the first language- transfer.

2. That all the difficulties of second language acquisition are not always predicted by contrastive analysis.

3. That the characteristics of the target language, in some cases, appeared to be more important than mother language transfer (Vibeke: 2011:205-206)

4. That contrastive analysis, Sajavara and Lehtonen (1980) criticize, harbors a static view of interlingual contrasts and the learner's position in relation to the target language is considered stable. (Ulla Connor: 1996:p. 14)

Thus, the empirical findings have challenged the principal axioms of contrastive analysis, namely, the Predictive ability and the Mother Language Transfer as root sources of learner's

difficulties. the results (some results are referred to under) have urged many researchers to think over the empirical validity of contrastive analysis. For them, the theoretical significance of transfer seems to be dubious and some differences between languages do not always lead to significant learning difficulties.

2.2. The Research Findings that Reinforce the Doubts of the Researchers against Contrastive Analysis:

a. Two verbs in Spanish corresponding to different senses of the English verb 'know'—Conocer and Saber. While this lexical difference poses many problems for English speakers learning Spanish, Spanish speakers learning English seem to have little difficulty in associating two lexical senses with one form.

b. A contrastive analysis of Spanish and English would not predict that Spanish speakers would omit forms of the verb 'be', since Spanish has similar grammatical structures.

c**.** In looking at studies of child bilingualism that had been conducted earlier in the twentieth century as well as more recent ones scholars noticed that a number of the studies showed only minimal evidence of transfer or any other kind of language mixing.

d. The classification of many learner errors is sourced from error analysis.
(Terence Odlin: 1989:17-18)

In addition to the above findings, Zobl (1980) found that while English speaking learners of French negatively transfer English post-verbal pronoun placement to produce ungrammatical utterances, French–speakers learners of English did not make such errors, even though both languages have post- verbal object pronouns. (Geoff Jordan: 2004:169)

Randal Whitman and Kenneth Jackson (1972) used four different contrastive analyses of English and Japanese, in order to predict the errors that would be made by Japanese learners of English. Their conclusion is that contrastive analysis was of little use in predicting the items which proved difficulty in their tests.(William Little Wood: 1984:20)

With all the empirical evidences, contrastive analysis becomes disputed of its 'predictive' validity. But, Wardhaugh.Ronald (1970) proposes to distinguish 'the strong-version' from 'the weak –version'. The strong-version, as already referred claims that Contrastive analysis can predict reliably the learners' difficulties, whereas the weak-version claims that Contrastive analysis helps to 'explain' Transfer errors. This explanatory character of contrastive analysis is considered more acceptable and by means of which Contrastive analysis is subsumed in Error Analysis, a broader SLA Research tool. (Elene Gluth: 2003:6)

3. **A Remark Pro to Contrastive Analysis:** Irrespective of the strong criticism against contrastive analysis, many critics have a stable conviction in the ability and value of it as a sub-system of applied linguistics and as a scientific instrument for the pedagogical explorations. The rationale behind the conviction may rely on the following major factors.

3.1. **Contrastive Analysis as a Means for Different Ends:** contrastive analysis provides valuable information of the analogy about languages. It is really a major contribution, since the analogy is inductively a valuable means of inferring

Generalizations about language and that may lead to diagnose language universals, which illuminate our knowledge about linguistics, and may many of the areas of lexis, semantics, and syntax be benefited from the available large parallel corpora.

As a number of studies reveal that the alignment and mapping of the language codes have been proved to be insufficient for the applied purposes, the recent contrastive studies have introduced various psychological, sociological, and contextual factors along with the purely

linguistic one. Likewise, the target of applied contrastive studies is to establish information that can be used for purposes outside the language domain proper, such as translation, interpretation, and bilingual education, for all of which a contrastive study is of a prominent help.

The scope of Contrastive analysis has been broadened over the years with the researcher's interests beyond the confines of sentence (Fisiak: 1990), for instance, to Interlanguage Pragmatics (Tros Borg: 1995) or Contrastive Rhetorics (Ulla Connor: 1996).

The other prominent factor is that the advancement of computer technology and its wide range of applications make possible to carry out Contrastive studies of language features in context through the use of large computerized corpora (Aijmer et.al:1996). In this way, new insights can be expected into contrastive text linguistics, Discourse analysis, Rhetoric and Pragmatics. (Michael Byram: 2000:142-143)

Di Pietro ingeniously points out that the transformational generative distinction between deep and surface structures is useful as a means of reinforcing rather denying contrastive linguistics. Further, the theoretical basis of contractive analysis, which had been clearly structuralistic in Lado's work (1957), was brought into the line with the later developments in linguistic theory. Although Contrastive analysis has never recovered the place it held in 1960s, its value has been reassessed and its continued importance is hardly disputed to-day. (H.H.Stern:1983:168)

3.2. **Contrastive Analysis as a Useful Pedagogical Instrument:** contrastive analysis remains as a powerful tool of research to investigate the potential sources of trouble in foreign language learning. It cannot be over looked in syllabus design, preparation of text-books and production of teaching materials. Carl. James(1980) suggests that contrastive analysis can be used by curriculum planners and teachers in their preparation of instructional material but not necessarily as a whole-sale explanation of difficulties, based on statistics of learner's actual difficulties(ibid: Vibeke:2011:205)

3.3. **The Original Claim of Contrastive Analysis Revised:** a fair number of critics hold that the theory and practice of contrastive analysis have been revised and some of its initial claims have been supplanted by a more limited view of what it can and should try to accomplish. This is particularly the case with regard to 'the strong version' of Contrastive analysis (Wardhaugh 1970). Indeed, the scope of the original claim of contrastive analysis to predictive value and its critique were magnified out of the proportion in the general upheaval of the linguistic theory in 1960s. In fact, from the very inception of contrastive studies the serious practitioners viewed error prediction in statistic, that's probabilistic, rather than absolute terms. It is clearly perceptible in the statement of Lado (1968:124-125) "From these contrastive studies we have been able to predict probabilistically many of the distortions that a speaker of L1 is most likely to introduce into L2 as he learns it …… the inventory of distortions does not represent behavior that will be established by every subject on every trail. It represents behavior that is likely to appear with greater than random frequency and it represents pressers that have to be over-come (Milton.M.Azevedo:1981:6-7)

3.4. **The Contribution of Contrastive Analysis**: Rivers values contrastive analysis as "the distinctive contribution of the linguistic scientists and the results of studies of these contrasts are incorporated in the materials prepared for class and laboratory work. (Rivers: 1964:14)

Contrastive analysis has made a substantial contribution to the development of second language acquisition and research. It has precipitated to launch many research projects over the world. Some of them are in brief;

   A. Numerous theses and dissertations in this field were completed in all major academic centers of the world over the period.

B. The center for Applied Linguistics in Washington organized the first contrastive studies project, which lead to "contrastive studies series". The series presented the results of the phonological and grammatical contrastive analysis between English and five other languages commonly taught as foreign languages in America –--- German, Russian, French, Spanish, and Italian.

C. In 1968, the 19th Annual round table; Contrastive Linguistics and its Pedagogical Implications, an International conference was organized.

D. Di Pietro "Language Structures in Contrast" a highly influential book was published.

E. Various other projects like The Yugoslav Serbo-Croatian-English contrastive project in Zagreb, the Swedish-English Contrastive studies in Lund were started.

F. All these made contrastive analysis an academic discipline at various universities throughout the world.

For the last two decades of 20th century, modern linguistic approaches and modern technology have opened up new horizons for contrastive analysis. It has been striving through the new directions, like Cognitive Linguistics, Pragmatics, and Corpus Linguistics, which lay the foundation of contrastive analysis into the 21st century. (Sophia: 2005: 258-59)

4. **A Paradigm Shift from Contrastive Analysis to Error Analysis**:

With the advent of cognitive psychology, the validity of behavioral psychology, which is the prime-philosophical realization of contrastive analysis, has been mitigated in second language acquisition research. Cognitive psychology prognosticates that language learning is a rule-governed or creative structure acquisition rather than habit formation, and perceives the rule governed system- acquisition as to be cognitively processed through 'the hypotheses-formation and testing' rather than through 'stimulus and reinforcement'. This revolutionary perspective intensely changes second language acquisition process and practice from the external to internal, in other words, from sociological to biological process of learning. As consequence, Error Analysis has been evolved as another applied linguistics method to look into the ESL learner errors.

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