

“Not to Be”:  
The Decline of Contrastive Analysis Pedagogy

Dina M. Al-Sibai

English 523  
Contrastive and Error Analysis  
Professor Mohammed Z. Kebbe  
October 26, 2004

### The Decline of Contrastive Analysis Pedagogy

Contrastive analysis was born as a result of a rather simple assumption. Aware of the same errors appearing so regularly and methodically in the works of increasing numbers of students, language teachers gradually came to assume that they could predict what mistakes the majority of learners would make. From such mistakes, the assumption went on; teachers would be better equipped to foresee difficulties and, consequently, would become wiser in directing learning and teaching efforts.

Contrastive Analysis (CA) became mainstream in the 1960s. According to Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) in (Yoon, 2002), this was a time when structural linguistics and behavioral psychology were rather dominant in the study of language learning. CA proponents came to advocate that L2 instructional materials could be prepared more efficiently by comparing two languages and, in the process, predict learners' behaviors and difficulties. Some researchers even believed that when similarities and differences between an L1 and an L2 were taken into account, pedagogy could be more effective and useful. Such arguments gave birth to the basic ideas of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), upon which CA is based. Lado's *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957, p. 2) is the landmark work which paved the way for CAH. According to this hypothesis, L1 transfer affects second language acquisition. Lado contends that "those elements that are similar to the [learner's] native language will be simple for him, and those areas that are different will be difficult." However, as the 1970s dawned, CA was being discredited on so many levels that the bubble began to burst. Contrastive analysis was no longer claiming as much pedagogic attention as it once did before.

According to Abbas (1995), CA's basic weakness, for which it is often criticized, lies in its overwhelming emphasis on one type of error, i.e. "interference". Many researchers feel that such emphasis has distorted CA's ability to predict correctly a host of other important errors which second language learners are prone to commit. Klein (1986) provides a good example of this scenario. Following the grammatical structure of their native language, Turkish students learning German often put the verb into the final position. On the other hand, Spanish and Italian learners do the same, although verbs are not in final positions in their own languages. It is quite clear that interference of a learner's L1 is not the only factor at play here. As a reaction to this type of criticism, Error Analysis (EA) was often suggested as an alternative; however, both CA and EA have their own merits and drawbacks. Johnson (2001, p. 73) observes that "'Both these theories [CA and EA] have had their moment at the center of the applied linguistics stage and, although neither continues to hold that position, neither has yet made its final exit'" (as cited in Shizuka, 2003).

What Johnson is suggesting is that there are still many applied linguists who firmly believe in the predictive power of CA. In fact, one cannot deny that CA may have some potential in certain fields. For example, a contrastive analysis study, conducted by Abbas (1995), revealed that in the case of adverbial positions, learners of both English and Arabic have access to more than one place to accommodate the adverbial concerned in the sentence. In view of this sort of positional freedom, teachers are able to predict that Arabs, for example, will not have much difficulty with adverbials. However, one should not turn a blind eye to the fact that CA's popularity has declined as the years have gone by. Although Sheen (1996, p. 14) is all for exploiting contrastive analysis in teaching and learning a foreign language, he also confesses that recently there doesn't seem to be much interest in the pedagogical applications of CA. He regrettably reports, "Judging from an examination of currently available text books, CA input therein continues to be conspicuous by its absence. Furthermore, a survey of articles appearing in well-known journals manifests no renewed interest in the relevance of CA input for language teaching, notable exceptions being Abbas (1995) and James (1994)."

This paper tries to investigate the controversy surrounding the validity, utility, and merits of Contrastive Analysis for language learning and teaching. An attempt is made to identify what appear to be the main problems which have led to a decline of CA in language teaching pedagogy.

#### Lado: The Start of Something New

The basic premise of Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis is that language learning can be more successful when the two languages – the native and the foreign – are similar. Some linguists call this situation “positive transfer”. In an overview of Lado’s CAH, Schuster (1997) indicates that English learners of German or German learners of English are destined to have a positive transfer because the two languages do have many similarities. On the other hand, the theory stipulates that learning will be quite difficult, or even unsuccessful, when the two languages are different. An example in point is English *vis-a-vis* Asian languages. As such, Lado and his supporters believe that second language teaching should concentrate on the differences, with little or no emphasis on similarities. Though this argument may sound logical in theory, it is full of loopholes in practice. Teaching differences alone means that important parts of a foreign language are not taught at all. This may have grave consequences on the language learning process; weakening instead of strengthening it.

Another argumentative point in Lado's theory is the model of language learning. Lado calls grammatical structure “a system of habits.” According to this view, language is a set of habits and learning is the establishment of new habits (Lado, 1957, p. 57). However, Schuster (1997) reports that the majority of research on second language acquisition shows strong disagreement with such a view. Indeed, this thinking goes into the very core of the mainstream behaviorist view of language learning, championed by Bloomfield and Skinner, but attacked by Chomsky who was convinced of the existence of a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) in order to construct a generative grammar of linguistic competence out of the language samples one encounters.

Like Chomsky, but from a different angle, Klein (1986) is at odds with Lado’s CAH. Klein asserts that the results of research based on Lado's theory were of less help than expected. One reason for this shortcoming is the fact that structural similarities and dissimilarities between two linguistic systems and actual production and comprehension are two different things. The author points out that contrastive linguistics is basically concerned with the linguistic systems or structures, whereas acquisition has to do with comprehension and production. Hence, a specific second language structure may be easy to perceive but hard to produce, or vice versa. This being the case, prediction of possible transfers should not be based on comparisons of structural properties but on the way in which learners process such properties. For example, a German learner of English has to learn the sound of /th/ in the English word “that”. If she is unable to produce this sound, she might replace it by similar German sounds, for example /z/. This is not predictable if one compares only phonetic (i.e. structural) properties.

Although Lado did not claim his theory to be an all encompassing theory of CA pedagogy and, as a matter of fact, did call for further research on his ideas in order to get final validation, his CAH remains hotly criticized and contested. Sridhar, for one, observes that, “... as the claims of contrastive analysis came to be tested against empirical data, scholars realized that there were many kinds of errors besides those due to interlingual interference that could neither be predicted nor explained by contrastive analysis. This led to renewed interest in the possibilities of error analysis.” (Sridhar, 1980, p. 223).

There are other linguists who share this opinion. They believe that a more serious challenge to the validity of contrastive analyses is the occurrence of errors that do not appear to be the result of native language influences. For example, it is conceivable to see how a contrastive analysis of

Arabic and English would predict that an Arab would most likely omit the form of the verb “be” when speaking in English due to its unavailability in Arabic. On the other hand, however, 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 structure (Oldin, 1989).

According to Sajavaara (1981, p. 35), “The culminating point was, on the one hand, the publication of the Contrastive Structure Series (CSS) in 1962-1965 and, on the other, the Georgetown Round Table Conference in 1968.” The CSS was primarily designed to help teachers overcome the language problems facing them. The published volumes strongly reflect the transfer in linguistics from pure structuralism over to transformational grammar. This is ominous in a sense that, to this day, those CSS volumes remain as a final authority on contrastive presentations of any two languages. On the other hand, the Georgetown Round Table Conference was destined to strike one of the heaviest notes of criticism. For many linguists this note seems to have subsisted as the last word about CA. Since then, it has become quite evident that linguistic contrastive analysis cannot solve all the problems of language learning. Simply put, this is so because not all of such problems are linguistic in nature. As a consequence, American contrastive analysis slowly, but surely, started to fade away.

#### The Strong, Weak, and Moderate Versions of CA: And the Winner is...

In the 1970s, Lado’s CAH underwent some scrutiny of its predictability. In an influential article, Wardhaugh (1970, p.124) stated that the hypothesis could be classified into two versions: strong and weak. The strong version predicted that the majority of L2 errors were due to negative transfer. The weak version, on the other hand, merely explained errors after they were made. Wardhaugh goes on to point out that, “CAH was also criticized on the ground that it could not take into account relative difficulty among L2 segments that shared the property of being different from the L1.” Also in 1970, Oller and Ziahosseiny (p. 184) proposed a moderate version of the CAH to explain the hierarchy of difficulty. The pair maintained that similar phenomena, or as they put it “wherever patterns are minimally distinct,” are harder to acquire than dissimilar phenomena. To test their views, they conducted a study which was based on English spelling errors on the UCLA placement test. Spelling errors of foreign students whose native language employed a Roman alphabet were compared with spelling errors of foreign students whose native language had little or no relation to such an alphabet. The results of this study led Oller and Ziahosseiny to conclude that as far as English spelling is concerned, knowledge of one Roman writing system makes it more difficult, not less, to acquire another Roman spelling system.

Thirty years later, the basic premises of that study still holds true. Recent researchers such as Major (2001) argues that, “Minute differences in spelling are more likely to be ignored, resulting in poor performance on related sounds, whereas noticeable differences are more often perceived due to their perceptual salience” (as cited in Yong, 2002, p. 7). An example in point is offered by Oldin (1989, p. 17). The formal resemblance between English “embarrassed” and Spanish “embarazado” (which means “pregnant”) can lead an embarrassed Englishman to make the embarrassing remark “I am very pregnant.” On the other hand, however, Fisiak (1981) believes that both similarities and differences may be equally troublesome in learning another language. Though this moderate version of CA makes some sense, the majority of applied linguists still believe that the notion of similarity remains quite controversial.

To be sure, proponents of CA have tried to suggest different ways for learners to compare their L1 with the L2 using the moderate version of CA in order to facilitate the learning process. This is usually accomplished using what is known as the “surface structure” or “deep structure” approaches. However, even such enthusiasts admit that these approaches are not totally reliable. Using the moderate CA version as his basis, James (1980) elaborates on some of the drawbacks of

using the “surface structures” of languages for comparing the similarities found in two languages. According to him, using such an approach may lead to interlingual equations that are superficial and insignificant. He states, “This situation arises when we are led to identify as same, categories having very different conditions of use in real-life situations.” The following examples may clarify this point. Although (1) and (2) have the same “surface structure”, they are used in different “real-life” contexts. On the other hand, though (3) does not have the same “surface structure” as (1), it is, however, pragmatically just as equivalent:

The postmen opened the door.  
 Le facteur ouvrit la porte.  
 Le facteur a ouvert la porte. (James, 1980, p. 169)

It is no wonder that such inconsistencies were instrumental in making a large segment of contrastivists more receptive to the suggestion that “deep structure” could be a more satisfactory approach for making comparisons. However, one must be cautioned not to lose sight of the fact that sentences – of the same or of different languages – with a common “deep structure” are not necessarily communicatively equivalent. For example, even though the following two sentences have a common origin, “The door was opened by the postmen” and “Le facteur a ouvert la porte,” learners are simply misinformed if they are led to believe that the two sentences are equivalent in terms of their communicative potential (James, 1980, p.171).

As such, one must truly wonder: If such eminent linguists in the CA field believe that their best efforts are still not fully applicable in the language classroom, then how are we, as ordinary language teachers, supposed to have the courage to try out such approaches. Indeed, the reliability of applying CA, in any of its forms, for language teaching purposes must be seriously questioned.

#### How Reliable Are Comparative Analysis Procedures?

What may be even more discouraging than CA approaches not being reliable is the fact that the various procedures involved in conducting an actual comparative analysis are also quite questionable and, as a result, adherents of CA have easily lent themselves to much criticism. The reason behind this dichotomy is simple. Whitman (1970, p. 191) contends that “A contrastive analysis must proceed through four steps; description, selection, contrast, and prediction. Unfortunately, most analyses are weakened by insufficient care or attention at one or more of these steps, each of which is beset with a host of problems.” He emphasizes that there must be a strong and consistent basis for making selections, a format for contrasts, and a means of relating contrast and prediction.

Writing on this topic, James (1980, p. 29) observes that from the very start, linguists wanted to find out by what criterion are languages best compared. However, one of the major dilemmas for the Structuralists, who promoted CA wholeheartedly, was the issue of “language uniqueness” which they insisted on. James explains that, “The Structuralists objected vigorously to the traditional practices of super-imposing the descriptive categories of the classical languages onto modern vernaculars.” Sajavaara (1981), for one, explains why describing a given language is such a difficult task. The history of contrastive linguistics shows that the descriptions of individual languages, which have been adopted for contrastive analysis, have changed in accordance with the development of linguistic theory. Since there is no generally accepted model for linguistic description, it is implied that there can be no complete descriptions of any two languages according to one and the same model. Hence, the argument goes on; if such unreliable descriptions of languages for contrastive analyses are of no practical use, then, it is incumbent upon CA enthusiasts to find some type of “standard” or “criterion” to follow in order for CA to be a viable pedagogical tool.

Even if one chooses to overlook some of the problems concerning a model of description to validate CA, another more serious problem arises. This is what some call “idealization”. Oldin (1989, p. 30) explains that idealization of linguistic data is unavoidable since there are many minute variations in the speech of individuals who consider themselves to be speakers of the same language. He states that, “The more idiosyncratic variations in a speech, the less accommodating contrastive descriptions become.” This situation, however, is wrought with danger. It is well known, as Oldin points out, that too much idealization could lead to an unacceptable degree of distortion. For example, contrastive descriptions of Arabic and English do not specify regional varieties, and while such generalized comparisons are often appropriate, there do exist important differences in the pronunciation of Arabic speakers in Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, etc. which can result in important differences in learners’ pronunciation of English. In fact, Oldin may have a point; however, being a Saudi citizen of Syrian origin, I have found that differences in English pronunciation are not, for example, only evident between Saudis and Syrians. As a teacher in the Translation Department at KSU, I’ve also come to realize that variations also exist among Saudis themselves. Keeping such discrepancies in mind, how can one come even close to achieving “idealization of linguistic data”?

A final issue to be discussed here is the reliability of CA predictions. The credibility of such predictions is criticized by many linguists. For example, while Lado (1957) was in favor of using the information of CA to construct language tests, Upshur (1962), who opposed CA predictions, pointed out that according to the predictions theory, if a test based on CA is administered to students with the same language background, they must all receive identical scores. Of course, this never happens in real-life, indicating that there must be something wrong with the theory. According to Oldin (1989), a comparison of the native and target languages would be useful as to why certain errors arise; but in the absence of actual data about learners’ errors little if anything could reliably be predicted. In brief, accurate CA predictions are not easily forthcoming. Furthermore, Sheen (1996, p. 15) reminds us that “the difficulty posed by the rigorous control of variables in comparative studies results in a lack of complete confidence in the findings of any one single study.” He believes that for such confidence to be justified there must be replication of the findings in a series of similar studies.

### The Current Status of Comparative Analysis

Despite the fact that CA has been the subject of rancorous debate for some forty years, it has made significant contributions to our understanding of language teaching and learning. At present very few, if any, seriously entertain the contrastive hypothesis in its original strong form. This would mean that language teachers, for example, no longer need to create special grammar lessons for students from each language background. To be sure, much of the criticism of CA was based on the fact that such an approach was unable to meet the objectives which were set for it in the fifties. This still holds true; it is clear today that many objectives were, indeed, not met. As a result of these problems, CA and CAH began to be abandoned, at least in their strong forms (Sridhar, 1981). In the end, one must face reality; CA is undoubtedly far from perfect. One cannot deny that learners’ knowledge of their first language will ultimately influence the way in which they approach and learn a second language; yet at the same time, there is still no consensus about the nature or the significance of cross-linguistic influences. Thus, CA, in most parts of the world, has come to be regarded as having very little pedagogical relevance.

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