CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS AND ERROR ANALYSIS AS APPROACHES TO SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Contrastive Analysis is the systematic comparison and contrasting of a learner's native and target languages. This is done with the aim of predicting the degree and type of difficulty which the learner will experience in acquiring the phonology, syntax and lexicon of the target language. The prediction made in this way is based on the assumption that the second language is mapped onto the first, and that the greatest degree of difficulty will be encountered where the greatest dichotomy or variance exists. The hypothesis of language learning implicit in this is that the learner is engaged in progressively restructuring the system of his or her native language, gradually replacing the features thereof with the features of the target language, experiencing the most interference where these two conflict.

To use contrastive analysis faithfully, a teacher would have to have at his or her disposal an existing exhaustive analysis of the native language of the students in the class (and what if the native languages of the class members are vastly heterogenous?). Contrastive analysis is a mammoth task, complicated by the astronomical number of permutations possible, but provided it can be done, the language teacher assumes the role almost of a sport coach confronted with a bulky weightlifter and the directive to metamorphose him into a swimmer. An anatomical contrastive analysis will indicate what muscles the neophyte swimmer needs to acquire, counterposed against those he has. Attention will be focussed on developing the required muscles, while contriving to mould and trim the superfluous ones.

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Contrastive analysis seems to assume a theory of language acqui-
sition that sees learning as the process of accommodating or as-
similating discrete 'bits' of language structure (as muscle gain
is measured in centimetres), and sees the teacher's job as mere-
ly the provision of these 'bits' in the form of input, and the
supervision of practice, which - apparently - will serve to
'glue' the ' bits' into place. The behaviourist and atomist
bias of this approach is one with which most language theorists
have become distinctly uncomfortable.

There is something to be salvaged from contrastive analysis, how-
ever. Teachers can use knowledge of the structure of the stu-
dent's native language to help them understand, a posteriori,
the source of at least some of the errors their students are mak-
ing. They can identify (either by direct translation or re-
versed transformations) the origin of what may seem on the sur-
face to be random and bizarre errors. Not only will this type
of insight be of cognitive assistance, but it is valuable in
that it can change teachers' attitudes towards students, helping
them to realise that it is not the student who is random, bizar-
re or inept, but that he is merely transposing (perfectly accept-
able) native language constructs onto the target language.
Teachers can thus give the student positive affective feedback,
and in their cognitive feedback indicate an understanding of
what the student is trying to say, and why he chose a particular
way to say it.

Secondly, awareness of the main features of the native language,
for example the absence of gender related pronouns in many Afri-
can languages, or the lack of the θ-sound in Afrikaans, could
alert the teacher to the need for more detailed instructional in-
put in these areas than would be necessary for students whose na-
tive languages did not contrast with English in this fashion.
Thirdly, the intriguing discovery made in contrastive analysis,
that minimally distinct forms can cause more confusion than
totally new forms indicates that teachers could perhaps avoid
teaching such closely related items by means of contrast, trans-
formation, and/or translation.

The dangers of adopting contrastive analysis lie in the assump-
tion that interference (in its various forms) from the native
language is the sole cause of error in the second language, and
teachers would be wearing pedagogical blinkers if they focussed
on contrastive analysis to the exclusion of error and discourse
analysis. Another teaching pitfall is that 'excessive attention
to points of difference at the expense of realistic English is a
characteristic of much contrastive based teaching' (Richards,
in Oller, 1971).

It is apparent that contrastive analysis is inadequate to explain the language learning process, and inadequate as a pedagogical roadmap. The psychological parameters involved in learning a second language do not necessarily correlate with the linguistic parameters, and teachers should bear this in mind.

Error Analysis takes a different approach, regarding second language acquisition as a creative process by which the learner constructs closer and closer approximations of the target language system. It is a dynamic, re-creational continuum building on a basic, abstract language code or cognitive skeleton which, once established (during childhood acquisition of a first language), is always accessible for basic communicative functions, and as a starting point or initial hypothesis for acquisition of an additional language.

In this 'version' of second language acquisition, errors are seen as indications of transitional stages of grammatical competence, on the continuum from zero proficiency to near-native competence. Intralingual (as opposed to interlingual) errors made by the learner are characteristic of general trends in language rule learning (e.g. generalization, incomplete application of rules, false hypotheses), and are indicative of the system in and/or state at which the student is working in his approximations of the target language. Errors thus reveal the student's systematic attempt to deal with the language data as he experiences it, as it is presented in the class, and in the light of his existing linguo-cognitive knowledge.

Teachers could use error analysis firstly to determine the level at which the student is operating - what he knows, what rules he is using. This can reveal positive progress in the sense of acquisition of correct and functional structures, or can reveal linguistic detours as a result of an intralingual error. Mistakes are often the result of inadequate or inaccurate data, and thus should be seen as requests for feedback to assist in learning, and be responded to as such, rather than as sins of omission or commission.

Errors, particularly those based on faulty hypotheses or assumptions, could arise or derive from faulty teaching strategies, and teachers could use error analysis as an indication of where their presentation of language data might be inadequate for the formulation of complete linguistic structures and accurate hypotheses. Errors indicate areas requiring more information and input from the teacher, and error analysis provides a diagnosis of the current 'condition' of the language learner, or the effectiveness of the teaching strategy, and offers a prescription for the type of input required. Medical similes aside, errors are

not indicative of a malady, but rather of a dynamic, changing system. If error analysis reveals no new errors, no change in system, a static 'fossilization' on an incomplete, simplified level of language, the indications are more serious. A teacher using error analysis would be alerted to this stagnation, and could make an informed decision about the direction her pedagogical approach should then take.

The greatest value of both contrastive and error analysis in the classroom seems to lie in the attitude shift that is implicit. Evidence seems to indicate that psychological and emotional variables play a considerably more significant role than any teaching technique, and any approach which teachers can use to arrive at an acceptance, understanding and appreciation of the learner can only be facilitative, with the proviso (of course) that these techniques are not worshipped as ends in themselves. Both contrastive and error analysis offer ways of looking at the 'mistakes' made by language learners as indications of the learner's personalized attempts to grapple constructively with the language data, rather than as barometers of ignorance, laziness or stupidity, and as such can only be beneficial.