

Contrastive and Error Analyses in Inverted Order to Facilitate English Language Teaching

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Abstract

Both Contrastive and Error Analysis have vital roles in accounting for problems in teaching English as a foreign/second language (TEFL/TESL). Contrastive Analysis (CA) compares languages and makes predictions about possible errors learners make due to the influence of their first language (L1), while Error Analysis (EA) analyses pupils' compositions or conversations and investigates different sources of errors one of which is cross linguistic influence. It is obvious that CA and EA are not the same. They overlap in a certain area, but they are not competing against each other. Both CA and EA can be used in a complementary role in understanding learners' errors in second language learning. In the present article, a teaching methodology ("a contrastive approach" to EA) will be explored where the traditional order of conducting CA and EA (where CA leads to EA) has been inverted. The approach in the present study is that the job of diagnosis belongs to EA and here CA can be used as complementary to EA as a remedial procedure.

Keywords: contrastive analysis (CA), error analysis (EA), first language (L1), teaching

Introduction

It is irrefutable that errors are not just inevitable but also necessary in the process of learning a language. Corder (1967) considers errors to be products of a system of the learner language, as he argues that "a learner's errors provide evidence of the system of the language that he is using (i.e. has learned) at a particular point in the course". Thus, the errors a foreign/second language learner makes in the process of constructing a new system of language need to be analyzed carefully to understand the process of language learning. Errors can be regarded as the indicators of the stages of the progression between the first language (L1) and second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) systems.

Both Contrastive and Error Analyses have a vital role to play in accounting for different types of errors committed by

L2/FL learners. They should be viewed as complementing each other rather than as competitors for some procedural pride of place (James, 1980). There is little gain in adopting an exclusive 'either-or' approach and the results of doing so can be positively debilitating.

Contrastive Analysis (CA) is normally considered as a predictive device. Wardhaugh (1970) suggests that predictive CA is really a sham in that no contrastivist has ever really predicted solely on the basis of the CA. But let us not throw the baby along with the bath water. Let us have both contrastive analysis (CA) and error analysis (EA) exist in harmony with each other. Nickel (1971) is of the opinion that an error analysis without a contrastive analysis is quite simply impossible; pupils often make interlingual errors, which can be analyzed

with a contrastive study in much more detail. It is obvious that CA and EA are not the same. They overlap in a certain area, but they are not competing against each other. Both types of analyses are needed in order to benefit from research and one influences the other in a positive way. Further, helpful and useful conclusions can be drawn in order to improve second/foreign language teaching.

The approach in the present study is that the job of diagnosis belongs to EA and here CA can be used as complementary to EA as a remedial procedure. This means that the first step should be deciding that which subset of attested errors is attributable

to L1 influence. Possessing this vital knowledge, the analyst should conduct CA in order to explain those errors. This does not mean that the present study is as Richards (1974) calls it “a non-contrastive approach to error analysis”. Rather it is “a contrastive approach” to EA but the traditional order of conducting CA and EA (where CA leads to EA) has been inverted. In other words, the present study is a juxtaposition of contrastive as well as error analyses (where EA leads to CA) as the focus of the study lies in the overlapped area where contrastive analysis and errors analysis complement each other rather than acting as foes as it is described in figure 1.

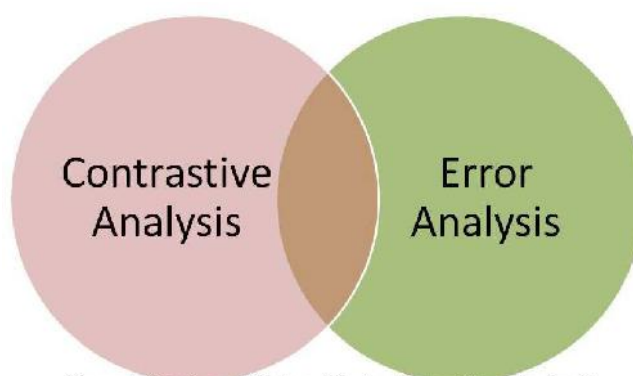


Figure 1: Overlapped Status of Contrastive and Error Analysis¹

Literature Review

Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive linguistics is a branch of linguistics which seeks to compare (the sounds, grammar and vocabulary) two languages with the aim of describing the similarities and differences between them. Contrastive analysis is the technique associated with contrastive linguistics and it may be defined as a systematic comparison of the selected linguistic features of two or

- Taking the two languages L1 and L2
- Writing the formal descriptions of the two languages (or choosing descriptions of them)

more languages, the intent of which is to provide teachers and text book writers with a body of information which can be of service in the preparation of instructional materials, the planning of courses and the development of classroom techniques.

Procedure of Contrastive Analysis (CA). Whitman (1970) breaks contrastive analysis down to a set of component procedures. The five steps are as follows:

- Picking forms from the descriptions for contrast
- Making a contrast of forms chosen
- Making a prediction of difficulties through the contrast

Two Different Versions of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. Contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) is classified into strong and weak versions. Wardhaugh (1970) classifies the strong version of CAH as that version that claims to predict the difficulty through contrastive analysis. The assumption is that the two languages can be compared *a priori*. The strong version claims the following:

1. The main obstacle to L2 learning is the interference from the L1 of the learner.
2. The greater the difference between L1 and L2, the greater the difficulty will be.
3. A systematic and scientific analysis of the two language systems can help predict the difficulties.
4. The results of CA can be used as a reliable source in the preparation of teaching materials, planning of the course and the improvement of classroom techniques.

Wardhaugh (1970: 126) notes that contrastive analysis has intuitive appeal and that teachers and linguists have successfully used 'the best linguistic knowledge available....in order to account for observed difficulties in second language learning'. He called such observational use of contrastive analysis as the weak version of CAH. Here, the emphasis shifts from the predictive power of the relative difficulty to the explanatory power of observable errors. This version has been developed in Error Analysis (EA). CAH is a theory or hypothesis while EA is an assessment tool. Brown (1987) also suggests that the weak version focuses not on the *a priori* prediction of difficulties but on the *a posteriori* explanation of the sources of errors in language learning. According to this, only some errors were traceable to transfer and CA needs to be used hand in hand with error analysis.

Significance of Contrastive Analysis in Teaching. Marton (1981) is of the opinion that CA is a useful and helpful instrument to recognize the divergent and common features of two languages. Of the same opinion is Ausubel (1968), who stated that "if had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly." All in all, Contrastive Analysis provides teachers with a clearer understanding of the learner's mother tongue as well as with the second language to be learnt. The teachers can provide insightful pieces of advice for their students. Teachers can improve their methods, publishers can improve the textbooks' exercises according to the newest CA results in a comprehensible and easy manner, and learners can connect their L1 and L2 in a tangible way. All "require a knowledge of contrastive grammar in order to be able to predict, explain, correct and eliminate errors due to interference between source and target language" (Nickel, 1971).

Error Analysis

According to the basic tenets of Error Analysis, language learning is not merely the result of repetition, but the result of cognitive interaction among the learners, L1 and L2 as well as the environment of learning. That is, the development of the L2 reflects the complex interaction between language learning and mental process.

The most influential publication launching Error Analysis as an approach in SLA was S. Pit Corder's (1967) article on 'The Significance of Learner's Errors' which call on applied linguists to focus on L2 learners' errors not as 'bad habits' to be eradicated, but as sources of insight into the learning process. Cook (2011) makes a

point that a language learner possesses a set of cognitive structures for hypothesis formation in which the making of errors is a positive sign of the learning process itself.

Error analysis focuses on the difficulties of the target language as well as the psycholinguistic process of language learning. The methodology of error analysis (traditional error analysis) can be said to have followed the steps below:

1. Collection of data
2. Identification of errors (labelling with varying degree of precision depending on the linguistic sophistication brought to bear upon the task, with respect to the exact nature of the deviation).
3. Classification into error types
4. Statement of relative frequency of error types
5. Identification of the areas of difficulty in the target language;
6. Therapy (remedial drills, lessons, etc.).

In short, the main purpose behind error analysis is to analyze the learner's errors in order to discover knowledge of the language till now and to know how the language is learnt by the particulars learners.

The Implication for Language Teaching. Error analysis has brought about major changes in language teaching practices. Learner errors provide the teacher with important feedback on his/her teaching and information about the types of errors produced by a particular group of students. It can also help the teacher to judge the progress made in learning the target language over a period of time (Corder, 1981; Brown, 1994).

Moreover, error analysis can provide valuable data for the development of suitable curricula, and the preparation of teaching materials, text books and examinations. Corder notes that it is on the basis of information the teachers get from errors made by their students that they can vary their teaching procedures and materials, the pace of the progress and the amount of practice which s/he plans at any moment. Corder lays stress on the practical uses of error analysis and applications for language teaching.

Error analysis enables teachers to decide whether they can move on to the next item on the syllabus or whether they must devote more time to the items they have been working on. This is the day-to-day value of errors. But in terms of broader planning and with a new group of learners they provide information for designing a remedial syllabus or a programme of re-teaching.

Implementing the Complementary Amalgamation

As mentioned earlier, contrastive analysis of two languages is criticized for being purely predictive in nature and it is normally generalized that most of the transfer errors predicted by contrastive analysis are actually not committed by learners of a second language. In order to overcome this drawback of CA, this study suggests conducting a complete error analysis of language learners' errors to be followed by contrastive analysis of transfer errors to remove any possibility of any error type being predicted by CA.

Methods

This case study is an action research which employs both contrastive analysis and error analysis to frame a contrastive grammar based on the common errors

committed in writing English by the learners of English at undergraduate level. Brown (1994) and Ellis (1995) elaborated on how to identify and analyze learners' errors. Ellis

(1997) and Hubbard & Power (2003) gave practical advice and provided clear examples of how to identify and analyze learners' errors. The initial step requires the selection of a corpus of language followed by the identification of errors. The errors are then classified. The next step, after giving a grammatical analysis of each error, provides a plausible explanation of different types of errors.

Purpose of the study

In this study, this amalgamation of EA and CA is tested empirically in an English classroom at undergraduate level. The purpose is to ascertain the fact that a considerable amount of errors in learning a second language is made due to the influence of L1 (transfer errors or interlingual errors) and therefore the significance of using an empirically tested CA (where EA is followed by CA) in classroom cannot be overlooked. The subjects who are chosen for this study are learners of English at undergraduate level. All of them share a common first language – Punjabi, which is the regional language of Punjab state of India.

The objective of this study is to figure out the percentage of errors committed due to the grammatical influence of the first language of the learners of English in the writing of English. The study further seeks to identify and analyse learners' errors in writing English with the help of EA and CA. Based on the results, the present article seeks to suggest a teaching method which involves the judicious use of L1 in facilitating TEFL/TESL.

Phases and Instruments

The focus of the case study was to analyse the written compositions of learners of English in order to identify the common grammatical errors made by them due to the influence of their first language.

The study was conducted with a random sample of one hundred and five students with thirty five students each from B.A. II (Bachelor of Arts – second year), B.Sc. II (Bachelor of Science – second year) and B.Com I (Bachelor of Commerce – first year). The subjects were asked to write an English composition of 100-150 words. They were given some topics for composition writing and they were instructed to choose any one topic. In order to diagnose the grammatical influence of the first language in the writing of the learners of English, error analysis of the written compositions of the L2 learners was conducted. This error analysis was focussed on the transfer errors committed by the learners.

Analysis of the sample compositions

The errors identified in the written composition produced by the subjects were classified into the three main linguistic categories of syntax, lexicon and morphology. These three main categories were further subdivided according to the different parts of the sentence:

Syntactic Transfer Errors

- Article Errors
- Preposition Errors
- Pronoun Errors
- Tense Errors
- Word Order Errors
- Punctuation Errors
- Emphasis Errors
- Direct Translation Errors

Lexical Transfer Errors

- Word Errors
- Redundant 'be' Errors
- Conjunct Verb Errors
- Spelling Errors

Morphological Transfer Errors

- Plural Markers Errors
- Subject / Verb Agreement Errors

- Comparative and Superlative Forms Errors

The boundaries of different categories, especially syntax and morphology, may overlap as these two categories are inter-related areas of study. Morphology sometimes interacts with the study of syntax and vice versa.

It must be acknowledged here that the written compositions of the learners were

analysed to identify transfer errors at the syntactic, lexical and morphological levels. No attempts have been made to study and analyse deviations at the level of discourse as this was beyond the scope of this study. Based on the findings of this analysis, a contrastive grammar was created covering all the areas of the target language where maximum errors are made because of the first language.

Results

In order to examine the relative occurrence of different errors in the three groups, an overall comparison of the frequency of all errors is made in terms of number and percentage. A comparison of the overall performance of the three groups of learners is presented in the following table.

There is a sharp contrast between the error rates of the three groups (See Fig.2 on p. 150). The highest numbers of the errors committed by all the learners are syntactic

transfer errors followed by lexical and morphological errors. The learners of B.A group produce greater number of transfer errors as compared to B.Sc. and B.Com. groups. Moreover the error rate of B.Sc. group is greater than the B.Com. group.

The results of the study revealed that 57% of total errors committed by learners are due to the influence of their L1. The following figure shows the overall percentage of transfer errors committed by the three groups of the learners

Learner groups	Average length of composition	Total number of errors	Syntactic transfer errors	Lexical transfer errors	Morphological transfer errors	Total number of transfer errors	Percentage of transfer errors
B.A. group	80-120	1104	504	131	39	675	61.1
B.Sc. group	80-150	998	430	104	39	573	57.4
B.Com. group	100-180	672	256	87	13	356	52.9

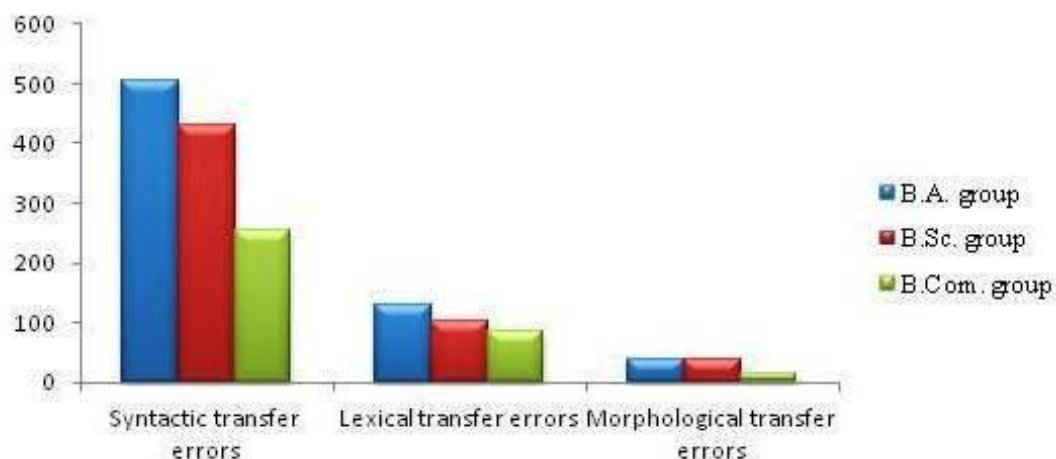


Figure 2: Frequency Distribution of Errors in Main Linguistic Categories

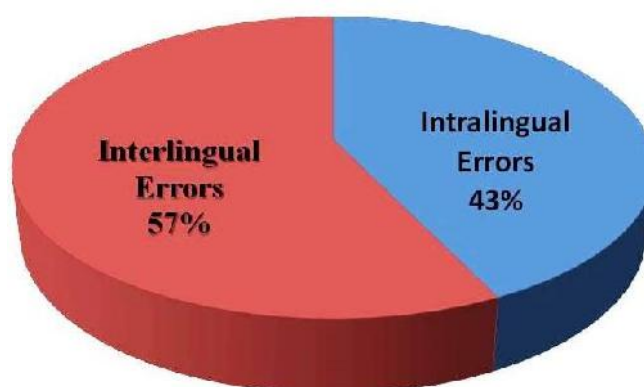


Figure 3: Percentage of Interlingual vs. Intralingual Errors

The percentage of transfer errors again confirms the fact that a considerable amount of errors committed by adult learners is due to transfer. Therefore the significance of using empirically tested Contrastive Analysis in the second language classroom cannot be overlooked.

The poorer performance of B.A. group as compared to the B.Sc. and B.Com. groups showcases their different teaching learning environments. Most of the learners of B.A. group get fewer opportunities of exposure to the target language as most of them studied in the government schools where students learn English in the EFL like situation. Furthermore, most of them study most of their subjects in Punjabi medium which further reduces their chances for exposure to English. On the other hand, the learners of B.Sc. and B.Com. groups get maximum exposure to the target language as

they study all of their subjects in English. Alternatively, it can be stated that B.Sc. and B.Com. groups study English in an ESL like environment where they get opportunities to learn English outside the English language classroom also.

These findings lead the present study towards another revelation. The revelation is that the necessity of maximum exposure to the target language cannot be dispensed with while acquiring a second language. Therefore, though the present study seeks to establish the role of first language in the English language classroom, it also strongly advocates the obligatory use of the target language in the second language classroom. In other words, the need to subject the learners to maximum exposure to English should not at all be eclipsed by the indiscriminate use of their first language. A balanced and judicious approach should be

used which justifies the use of first language as a scaffold in learning a second language. This scaffold should be gradually removed

overtime to provide the learners to get maximum exposure to the target language, as it happens in an ESL like situation.

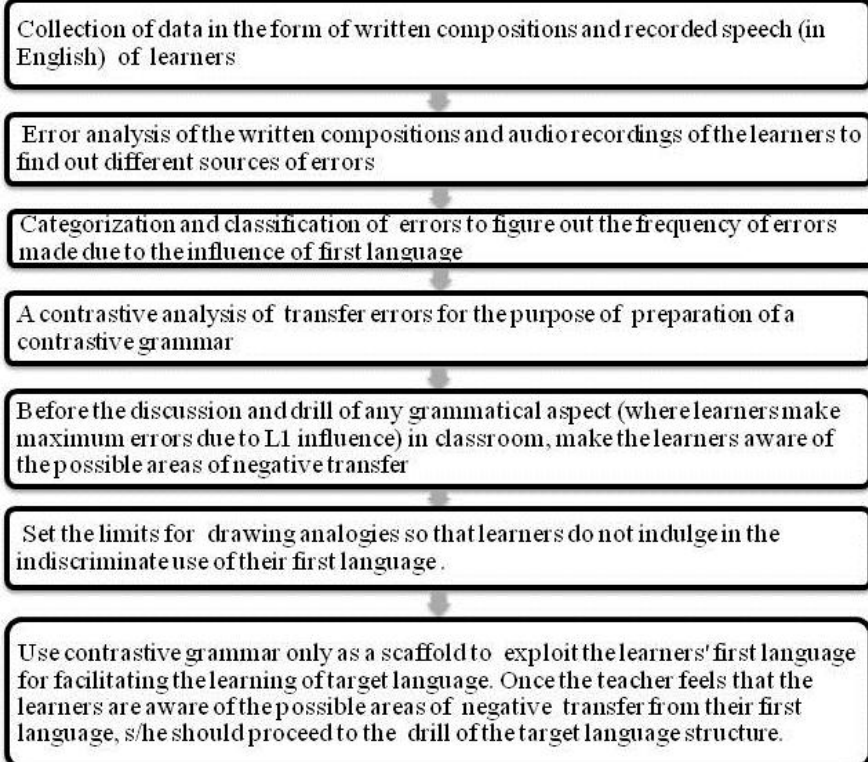


Figure 4: Visual Summary of recommended action plan

Conclusion and Recommendations for Teachers

Based on the results of the study, the present article seeks to recommend a teaching strategy where EA and CA can be used in complementary form to use the L1 of learners in English language classroom in a judicious manner. Though the present research study is based only on the errors in the written data of the students, still the same recommended strategy can be used for improving the errors made by students in speaking English.

An empirically tested CA may prove to be very beneficial for language teachers. It provides an insight into those errors which are made by the learners of English as a foreign/second language due to the influence of their first language. A potential method for using both EA and CA in English language classroom for improving the writing skills of FL/L2 learners is

suggested here. The figure above is a reflection of how the present study envisages the use of EA and CA in the English language classroom. All of this should be done before the practice of the given structure so that habits are formed on a conscious, cognitive basis.

While following this plan in English language classroom, a teacher needs to use a juxtaposition of EA and CA for improving the transfer errors committed by students while writing English. The steps to be followed for this teaching strategy are as follows:

- i. First of all, a teacher needs to collect the data in the form of written compositions and record the speech of the students. The written data may be collected by asking the

- ii. students to write in English on some given topics. The data in the spoken form may be collected by asking the students to try to speak in English on any topic and then recording whatever they speak in English.
- iii. The next step is to find out the errors in written and spoken form, carefully identify and analyze those errors which are made due to the influence of their first language.
- iv. Finally a contrastive analysis of transfer errors has to be conducted to find out the source of particular errors made due to the influence of L1. This may be quite a painstaking study for the teacher, but the results of will definitely be worth the amount of time and effort spent on it.
- v. After the completion of this process, the teacher can use this newly gained insight in warning the learners of possible difficulties that will come in their learning of English because of their L1.
- vi. The teacher should take care to use this technique in the small groups of four to five students each, so that individual attention can be paid to the difficulties faced by each student.
- vii. All this should be done before the drill of a particular target language structure. Frequent use of translation as a contrastive technique for learning grammatical structures would be one of the characteristics of this approach, although it would not become the only or even the main technique.

As suggested above, EA and CA are indispensable for improving the teaching and learning process of a second language. L2 learners are more prone to errors made due to the influence of their L1. But just to predict the errors made in L2 on the basis of L1 using CA only can be very painstaking and of little use because most of the errors predicted by CA are actually not made by L2 learners. So it is always advisable to use empirically tested CA in classroom where CA follows EA.

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Shivani Saini completed her PH.D in 2015 under Prof. Deepti Gupta, Ph.D.'s able supervision. It was Prof. Gupta who suggested that she send an article for publication in *Beyond Words* journal. She is now a teaching at the Post Graduate Govt. College, Chandigarh, India

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