

Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis: Limitations and Practical Implications for Foreign Language Learners

Anson C.Y. CHAN

Introduction

Learning a foreign language (FL), learners often inevitably make errors. Errors, however, should not be deemed negative as they inform us about how learners pick up an FL (Jabeen et al., 2015). A distinction should be made between “error” and “mistake”: the former refers to the slips that are caused by the lack of linguistic knowledge and are not self-correctable while the latter refers to the slips that are caused by other factors, such as carelessness, and are self-correctable (Richards, 2015). From 1950s to 1960s, the most popular paradigm for second language learning was Contrastive Analysis (CA) (James, 2013). It was believed to be an effective model of second language learning that could predict all of the difficulties possibly faced by learners by virtue of contrasting their native language with an FL (James, 1971). This is known as the strong version (SV). After the heyday of CA, Error Analysis (EA) replaced CA and became prevalent in the 1970s (Zaki, 2015). Different from the SV of CA, EA starts not from predictions, but actual errors made by learners (Khansir, 2012). This paper argues that the SV of CA is less useful than its weak version (WV) while EA is more useful than CA. This paper will be divided into two main sections: Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis. An introduction of both analyses will be provided, and extensive case studies will also be considered.

Section I. Contrastive Analysis

CA was proposed by Lado (1957) in his book *Linguistics Across Cultures* to contrast one’s native language with an FL. The similarities should be easier to learn whereas the differences should be more difficult to learn. Educated in the University of Michigan, he was influenced by structural linguistics, which considers language as a science and a system of rules and structures (Harris, 1951; Zaki, 2015). CA is also linked to behaviorism because of the belief that habits formulated in the first language will interfere with the FL learning (Joze-Tajareh, 2015). The SV is the aforementioned belief that the comparison of the native language and the FL predicts all of the difficulties possibly faced by learners, i.e. the a priori approach. The WV sees CA as playing a role in explaining the difficulties as shown in the errors made by the

learners, i.e. the a posteriori approach, which is nowadays commonly called “cross linguistic influence” (Wardhaugh, 1970). The WV was later developed into EA. It is worth noting that Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970) developed a moderate version in which attention is shifted to “minimal distinction”. They hold that similarities are actually more confusing and therefore more difficult to learn while differences can be easier to be internalised. For present purposes, the moderate version will not be discussed.

The SV has limitations that render it not useful for FL learners. First, empirical evidence suggests that predictions made by CA can produce contradictory results. Schachter (1974) carried out an experiment in which subjects from Persian, Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese backgrounds were asked to learn English relative clauses. According to the SV, since Persian and Arabic languages have relative clauses, their speakers should make fewer errors than those of Chinese and Japanese who do not have such a feature in their languages. However, it was found that Persian and Arabic speakers actually had more grammatical slips of this kind than the Chinese and Japanese speakers. Similar results were obtained in Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970)’s experiment on spelling errors. They tested two groups of subjects: one had a Roman writing system, and another had no such system in their native language. Again, according to the SV, the speakers whose native language shares the same writing system with the FL should not have much difficulty in spelling. The results were the other way round: it was found that having the same system actually confused the speakers. Lennon (2008) also researched into German learners of English and found that although German language also distinguishes singular nouns from plural nouns, the learners showed confusion about “many” and “much”. In another experiment, 2500 Japanese speakers were tested on the syntactic level of English (Whitman & Jackson, 1972). The results, compared with the predictions, differed greatly, in which items that were predicted to be easy to learn turned out to be difficult for the Japanese learners while items that were assumed to be difficult to learn seemed to be easy for them. The SV provides counterfactual information to the learners and therefore cannot facilitate FL learning.

The second problem is that it predicts errors that do not exist at all and therefore misleads learners. This version makes use of the differences between the two languages to suggest problems that learners may come across. Sometimes, the predicted errors are not only inaccurate but rather nonexistent. Lightbown and Spada (2013) illustrated the example of English and French sentence structures. While subject-verb-object structures exist in both English and French, subject-object-verb structures are possible only in French. According to

the SV, English native speakers will produce incorrect French sentences with a subject-verb-object structure while French native speakers will produce incorrect English sentences with a subject-object-verb structure. However, the results showed that while English speakers did make such errors, French people did not. They suggested that this was because French speakers have two structures but only hear the subject-verb-object structures when learning English. This sentence structural error is therefore unidirectional. Knowing the nonexistent possible errors does not help learners a lot with their learning.

The third problem is that the SV mistakenly holds that learners' first language is the cause of all the errors spotted. This belief is untrue because some errors are not errors at all but merely careless mistakes (Lennon, 2008). Instead of the influence from their L1 linguistic knowledge, learners may make these mistakes due to other factors, such as carelessness, and they can correct them by themselves. For instance, if a Chinese learner of English writes "I eat many apple", from the perspective of the SV, it is an error of missing a plural marker "-s" due to the lack of such a feature in Chinese. However, the strong version misses the possibility that it is merely a mistake and that the learner merely does not concentrate enough or cannot yet control his or her FL well.

Regarding the usefulness of CA, Zaki (2015) mentioned that by predicting the similarities and differences, course materials could be arranged in accordance with the level of difficulty so that students could start from respectively easier items and gradually move on to learn more difficult items. Although Irujo (1986) discovered that Venezuelan Spanish learners of English could better learn identical idioms found in the two languages, Kellerman (1986, as cited in Gass, 1988) found that Dutch learners of English were more hesitant when there were direct translation equivalents of the expressions. Together with the previous examples provided, it is shown that contrasting the native language with the FL inadequately predicts the difficulties faced by learners. Therefore, it is impossible to wholly rely on CA to categorise grammatical items into easy items and difficult items and hence decide which items should be learned first. Besides, some problems may arise because of the negative transfer within the FL, known as intralingual errors (Sari, 2016). It is this uncertainty of the SV that makes its usefulness questionable.

As an overall assessment, the SV is too strong that it has a number of limitations that render it impractical for the learners.

As for the WV, it has one major limitation – it is too weak to explain all of the errors made by learners. While the SV focuses on predicting the errors, the WV concentrates on explaining the actual errors (Al-khresheh, 2015). Although this version is not as radical as the SV, which claims that it can predict all of the difficulties arisen in the learning process, it cannot holistically account for all of the errors. At the end of the day, the WV can only explain those errors that are caused by L1 interference. Pichette and Lesniewska (2018) studied 34 research projects and found that only 42% of the errors made by English as a second language speakers are L1-based. This implies that the WV can only explain not even half of the total errors in the context of learning English as an FL.

Having said that the WV is too weak to account for the errors made, to some extent, it is useful for language learners to improve their L1-based errors; language instructors can also use it to shed light on slips of this kind and come up with better teaching methods. On the phonological level, Yang (1992) provided a detailed review of literature related to L1-based errors that contributes to the teaching and learning of FLs. For example, he cited Erdmann (1973)'s research on the L1 influence on English speakers of German. It was found that the [v], which is represented by the letter “w”, in German is often mispronounced by English speakers as [w]. He also included Lehn and Slager (1959)'s study on Arabic speakers of English, which found that since Arabic does not have [ð], its speakers used [s] and [z] instead. Unlike the SV, these errors are based on an a posteriori approach that can provide language teachers and learners insights into their real common errors – at least learners can pay more attention when learning these items.

As an overall assessment, although the WV cannot account for all of the errors, it is still useful for learners to improve their actual errors that are caused by L1 interference.

Section II. Error Analysis

Realising that CA cannot account for all of the errors, EA was then developed. Like the WV of CA, EA starts from actual errors committed by learners. It should be noted that EA cannot be seen in isolation of CA because some errors do stem from L1 interference. EA, however, accounts for more errors since it analyses not only interlingual errors but also intralingual ones, which occur within the target language itself (Schachter & Celce-Murcia, 1977). EA can give learners and their teachers information about their competence and their difficulties at different learning periods (Johansson, 1975). Corder (1967, as cited in Jabeen et al., 2015) mentioned

four types of errors: addition (unnecessary items added), omission (necessary item missed), selection (wrong form picked), and ordering (wrong sequence). Besides, Richards (2015) discussed four causes of errors: overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions (using a rule in an inappropriate context), incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized (wrong hypotheses made by the learners). Additionally, EA also opens the discussion on the psycholinguistic causes of errors, contributing to the development of Interlanguage (IL), which views that learners have an internal linguistic system that is independent of their L1 and L2 but moves in the direction of L2 (Zaki, 2015; Ellis, 1994).

Two major problems remain unsolved even with the introduction of EA, with the problem of avoidance being one of them. Some learners, especially those who are conservative, are afraid of using new and complicated structures in their FL because they do not want to misuse such structures. These learners tend to use only easy or familiar structures so as to avoid using the complicated ones wrongly. As a result, the analysis obtained by looking into the errors made by these learners cannot tell us the full picture of the errors and the causes behind them (Schachter, 1974). Without having learners try new and complicated structures, EA cannot help very well improve learners' language proficiency.

Another problem has to do with identification of errors. It is still a difficult task to distinguish errors from mistakes, especially when the database is not large enough. It is common for learners to have both correct and incorrect forms of the same item in one single task; and sometimes what counts as grammatically correct but stylistically unidiomatic expressions and as simply erroneous expressions is ambiguous (Lennon, 2008). Besides, even if the identification of errors is successful, the same error can be explained in several ways. Schachter & Celce-Murcia (1977) provided an example of errors made by Japanese learners of English: "Americans are easy to get guns". They argued that it is possibly a misuse of extraposition, as in "Americans are easy to please"; but it is also possible to be related to misclassification of adjectives, i.e. whether or not the adjective can be followed by infinitival complements. The problem of multiple interpretations possibly reduces the usefulness of EA.

Having said that EA has its limitations, literature and empirical evidence suggests that it is useful for the language learners and their instructors. EA covers more errors than CA and allows learners to obtain information related to the common errors made by them and their counterparts and the causes behind so that they can improve their language proficiency. Learners, upon knowing their own errors or some commonly made errors and the causes

behind, should be more aware of their learning of certain features in the target language that may cause difficulties to them and be able to make improvements accordingly (Hasyim, 2002; Khansir, 2015). Besides, EA is closely related to IL and helps learners know their progress in their FL learning and their difficulties in different learning phases (Johansson, 1975). Wu (2017) used EA and Corder's categorisation of IL stages to examine the IL of freshman students learning English in China. After analysing 100 writing examination papers, she came up with the conclusion that their IL was in between the pre-systematic stage and systematic stage, which meant that they were midway between not knowing the rules and knowing some rules but requiring further internalisation.

EA is also useful for language instructors and is therefore also indirectly useful for FL learners. One of such uses is to design remedial teaching for students after analysing their actual errors (Khansir, 2012). Zafar (2016) used EA as a tool to improve business English skills of her Saudi Arabian university students. She required her students to write an English composition at the beginning of the semester and then carried out an EA. She then designed remedial teaching plans for her students according to the problems she identified: more grammar exercises and sentence structure exercises to improve their intralingual errors; more translation exercises to tackle problems related to false friends and transfer of L1 sentence structures etc. She observed a significant decrease of errors made by her students at the end of the semester. Hasyim (2002) even believed that by understanding the causes, EA is able to help teachers evaluate how successful their teaching is and which parts of the teaching materials need to be amended to suit the needs of their students. Richards (2015) found that especially for intralingual errors, EA allows us to re-examine the language-learning assumptions underlying the teaching materials. He provided an example related to the present continuous tense that has to do with how it is taught in English textbooks specially designed for FL learners: he found that it is commonly taught in a narrative sense. Examples can be "Anson is coming out from his home. He is closing his door. He is going to take the elevator." A clear problem here is that in a sequence of actions that happen consecutively, the simple present tense instead of the present continuous tense should be used, like how a commentator describes an ongoing football match. This design feature misleads students to believe that the present continuous tense is used for a narrative description. Using EA, Richards identified how the design of textbooks possibly leads to the misuse of English language features.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper draws on extensive case studies as well as literature and argues that the WV of CA is more useful than its SV and that EA is useful to FL learners despite its limitations. The SV of CA fails to predict correctly the difficulties faced by the learners and sometimes even makes counterfactual predictions, which severely undermine its usefulness to the learners. The WV of CA is more reliable than the SV since it adopts an a posteriori approach but is still inadequate to account for the errors that are independent of the learners' L1. EA, though faced with criticism regarding identification of errors and avoidance, covers more errors than CA does. Empirical evidence and literature show that it is advantageous to the learners and has pedagogical implications for language instructors.

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