

Contrastive Analysis between English and Shona and Its Implications: the Teaching of English as a Second Language in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT: *This research interrogates the relevance of Contrastive Analysis (CA) in predicting errors in L2 learning as a way of improving second language instruction. The paper compares Zimbabwean L2 learners whose L1 is Shona (an indigenous language spoken by the majority of Zimbabweans). It comes out that CA is mainly useful in predicting learning difficulties occurring at phonological level, meaning that pronunciation difficulties can be predicted and ameliorated. Furthermore, it has also emerged that the theory could be useful when teaching discourse, given the communicative approach to language teaching currently recommended. Ipso facto, due to cultural differences, the second language teacher can readily predict likely errors thereby getting ready to remedy them. Overall, the research has shown the limited relevance of CA in second language teaching since most errors made by many second language learners are developmental.*

Key Words: *Contrastive analysis, error, false prediction, avoidance, register*

INTRODUCTION

Lado's assumption that Contrastive Analysis (CA) has the capacity to predict learners' difficulties in learning a second language by comparing the two languages is controversial, to say the least. Whilst this could be proven in a few instances, most researches reveal that there is a whole furor of difficulties which cannot be traced back to mother tongue interference hence the incapacity of CA to predict learning difficulties in the study of the second language. Contrastive analysis is "a systematic branch of applied linguistics which deals with the linguistic description of the structure of two or more different languages" (Salim, 2013).

Ellis (1985: 39) observes that "CA was developed in order to predict the areas of difficulty that learners with specific first language (L1s) would experience so that teaching could provide massive practise to eliminate the chances of errors induced by the first language." He is in total homology with James (1980: 145) who notes that "CA has applications in predicting and diagnosing a portion of the L2 (second language) errors committed by learners with a common L1." Despite all this loud hypothetical rhetoric, various field studies have proven to the contrary as shall be noted hereunder.

Another area clouded with controversy is on the definition of a difficulty. Kellerman (in Winter, 1984:346) thus argues "... we have no satisfactory definition of 'difficulty.' It is not clear whether difficulty is something experienced by the learner or may be something hypothetically attributed to him when he makes mistakes or avoids." Equally, Kellerman (in James, 1980) qualifies this claim by rightly pointing out that we may find low incidence of error in conditions where the learner is experiencing great difficulty. This phenomenon, he claims, could be accounted for in terms of learner's operation of an "avoidance strategy." However, for the sake of progress and for our purpose in this discussion, we will simply take a difficulty to mean a cause of error.

THEORY AND APPLICATION

When conducting a CA, we compare and contrast the L1 and the L2. We study the structures of two languages from two different families (i.e., the source language and the target language) in order to determine the points where they differ. These differences are assumed to be the chief source of difficulty in learning a second language (Salim, 2013). We are therefore, enquiring whether the two languages employ the same devices, that is, arrangement or relative order of elements in constructions. We also look at the phonetics and phonology to see whether there are any disparities. Areas of lexis of the two languages can also be put in juxtaposition. Again, meanings portrayed through the employment of supra-segmental features could be an area of interest, especially in tonal languages. Finally, discourse or pragmatics of late has been an area of exploration in CA although traditional CA does not analyse units larger than a sentence.

To begin with, at phonological level, a Shona student studying English as her L2 is predicted to have problems with the /l/ consonant sound. A word with a number of /l/ sounds such as 'parallel' is likely to be pronounced as /pararrel/. This is mainly because the /l/ sound is virtually absent from the Shona sound system. Having predicted this difficulty, the teacher can then choose a barrage of words with the /l/ sound for pupils to practise. One is quickly reminded of a similar dilemma faced by a French speaker. For instance, Oller (in James, 1980: 145) notes that French L1 speakers are likely to use /s/, /z/ or /t/, /d/ sounds for /θ/, /ð/ (as in 'theory' and 'this' respectively) sounds in English. The latter example brings us to the first weakness of CA's ability to predict errors where it fails to ascertain likely substitutions the learner will select. Kellerman (1979) calls this problem indeterminacy. So the teacher here guesses whether the French child will pronounce the sounds as /s/, /z/ or as /t/, /d/. Similarly, in the Shona example given, a child might be over-conscious of his lack in the /l/ sound to the extent of over-supplying it to /palallel/. Therefore, in both French and Shona examples given above, the contrastive analyst 'guestimates,' an exercise that is academically suspect, thus betraying the theory's inadequacy in predictive capacity.

Closely linked to that, CA can be employed where there are far-reaching discrepancies in the sound systems of the two languages. For instance, there are five to seven vowel sounds in Shona

(Fortune, 1990) whereas there are at least twenty one vowel sounds in English (Quirk 1968: 17). In such a case CA will help the teacher to predict those unfamiliar vowel sounds like [æ], [è], [i:] and [3:] sounds will pose difficulties. With a word like 'cat' /kæt/, the Shona speaker is likely to pronounce it as /k^t/ or /ket/, the sounds nearest to her L1 vowel sounds. In this respect CA has helped predict such errors and therefore the teacher prepares to emphasize on these aspects. However, in this modern era of the communicative approach to language teaching, to consider 'mispronunciation' as an error despite some level of communication having taken place actually trivialises the theory than promote it.

At lexical level, English, for instance, normally adds an 's' to many a noun to achieve plurality. A learner who has Shona as her L1 who is used to prefixing her nouns to achieve the same goal is expected to have problems. Where the noun "book" becomes "books" in its plural form we can predict that such a learner will have it as "sbook" since her "dombo" becomes "matombo" in its plural form and not "domboma." Howbeit, such a prediction is as false as it is naïve. James (1980:183) calls this false prediction "an error which fails to materialise." Instead of such a difficulty, once the student has been given the rule, she gets them right. Paradoxically, such rules can lead to unpredictable difficulties like adding an "s" to uncountable nouns. "Urine" becomes "urines" and "advice" becomes "advices," a more common error. This leads us to another of CA's weaknesses – failure to predict errors which do occur.

The next level of syntax (structures) is an interesting one in CA. Taking English and Shona as examples, CA can help us anticipate problems resulting from differences in explicitness of languages. Compare the following utterances which "mean" the same thing:

Shona: *Akaenda kumba kwavo.*

English: He went to their home.

Here Shona is implicit in that it does not state the sex of the subject whereas in English we have the pronoun "he" to make the sentence explicit, though we have the same structure (subject + verb + noun phrase). Even if we try and add a pronoun to the Shona utterance, it becomes, "*Iye akaenda kumba kwavo.*" The pronoun "iye" is still sexually neutral. In this case the teacher expects her students to be quite ambiguous, hence the need to hammer on this weakness. Whether ambiguity is indeed characteristic of Shona learners learning English is debatable. Urban students who speak Shona in their homes are generally better in English expression than those with a rural background. Such a pattern is consistent to Aitchison's 1997 metaphor of the language web where a child surrounded with, or rich in the target language is likely to learn the target language faster than one who resides in a linguistically starved environment such as the Zimbabwean rural learner. All this is happening regardless of the learner's L1. This, therefore, means that our prediction of difficulties basing on L1 can be wayward in that exposure to the L2 can render the predictions of difficulties null and void.

The last area is one of pragmatics. The social context of L1 and that of L2 may differ. This is consistent with Ngugi's definition of language as a carrier of culture (Ngugi, 1981). So the English culture is totally foreign to the Shona learner. A knowledge of this difference can genuinely help us anticipate problems. For instance, when teaching office register under the topic of "Register and Communication," we predict that pupils may have difficulty since the whole concept is completely foreign to the African child. A pupil, having entered the office is not expected to take a seat until she is offered one, but in the Shona culture it is very rude to "stand before the elders." So the first thing a Shona student does after entering an office is to immediately sit down, kneel down or squat, which is interpreted as bad manners in English register. In this respect, we predict serious difficulties in teaching Appropriate Register and Communication, hence the need to find intensive methods to ensure mastery. Therefore, CA in this case has helped in predicting difficulty.

Whereas there could be a number of areas which seem to benefit the teacher to predict difficulties in so far as CA is concerned, Winter (1984: 339) observes that different scales of difficulty emerge for the different groups of learners as he found out in his research of Jordan learners. In brief, it does not seem to be possible to talk of scales of difficulty," he says. Even if the L2 learners have the same linguistic background, the same years of instruction in the target language and the same syllabus, variation of difficulty depends on other educational factors and an individual capacity rather than L1.

James in Richards (1974:84) also notes that interference from L1 is not the source of errors in the L2 learning. There are other errors CA fails to predict. He thus humorously asserts "even the unsophisticated teacher who knows no linguistics is conscious of more errors than CA can predict." Though this is indeed hyperbolic, it has some rays of truth in it. For example, most rural high school students have serious problems with tense errors and tense inconsistencies, a difficulty untraceable in Shona.

Similarly, Dulay and Burt in Ellis (1985: 28) carried out a research in which they found 85% of the errors to be developmental, 12% unique and only 3% interference. So they concluded that children do not organise an L2 on the basis of transfer or comparison with their L1, but rely on their ability to construct the L2 as an independent system in much the same way as in L1 acquisition. No wonder why a student who is weak in English is most likely to be weak in Shona as well. Generally, pupils in Zimbabwe who are good in Sciences are not as good in both English and Shona. Therefore, the cause of difficulty claimed by CA here has nothing to do with interference, but general lack of talent. James in Winter (1984:313) thus concludes, "interference is an otiose idea: ignorance is the real cause of error." So prediction is impossible where ignorance causes error.

As a result of the controversies associated with CA's capacity to predict errors in the second language, most modern proponents of CA are cautiously optimistic that this theory is useful.

They conveniently forget to mention the cause of error but vaguely label the theory as useful in teaching. This is evident in Salim's 2013 contrastive analysis of English and Arabic where he concludes that

...it has been observed that both languages share some common features as well as several differences. In the light of such findings, the linguistic problems of the Arabic speakers learning English may be solved. In other words, through this comparison and contrast, the teacher will be aware of the structure of the two languages and the areas of difficulties of the learners at the morphological level. It is also hoped that the analysis and results of this study would be useful both to teachers and textbooks writers of English and Arabic as foreign languages.

This vague conclusion is still silent on the study's capacity to predict error and the cause thereof. In other words, a second language teacher of English with an Arabic background has just about very little advantage, almost negligible, over another without. This argument could be authenticated by facts on the ground in this present study. For instance, just after independence there was an influx of ex-patriate teachers who would come to Zimbabwe to teach different subjects including English. These foreign teachers did not perform any worse than their Zimbabwean counterparts who were well-versed in Shona and Ndebele, the pupils' L1. Therefore the local teachers of English did not have any significant inherent advantage over foreign teachers of English.

Finally, Ellis (1985: 29) rightly gives a balanced conclusion to the effect that although "contrastive analysis hypothesis fell into disfavour because it was apparent that the large number of errors could not be predicted or explained by it, L1 is an important determinant of Second Language Acquisition though not the only and most important. L1 is, therefore, not useless, but a resource of knowledge which learners will use both consciously and subconsciously." The influence of L1 is likely to be evident in L2 phonology and L2 pragmatics where difficulties can be easily predicted.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, one can draw the dimension that, to a great extent, CA falls far short of predicting many a learning difficulty. Some predictions are totally false while others, though correctly predicted, could be attributed to other factors like linguistic background other than the L1. Bernstein (1977) would controversially argue that the ESL learner's problems have more to do with his social background which might lead to either a restricted or an elaborated code than the influence of L1. Moreover, determining a difficulty is not an easy task since commission of an error could only be a sign of avoidance by the learner and not a difficulty. But more importantly, some "difficulties" are common in all languages regardless of the learner's L1. This means that the errors are developmental. After all, all this fuss about errors and how to cure them is a traditional and archaic approach to language teaching because current methods such as the

communicative approach focus mainly on communication which could lead to a natural reduction of error. However, we are not bound to out rightly jettison CA since it has some considerable predictive power of language learning difficulties at phonological level and, of late, in contrastive pragmatics.

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