

A CRITICAL LOOK AT INTERLINGUAL COMPARISONS IN FOREIGN-LANGUAGE GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

Abstract

Foreign language teaching research is rich in recommendations in favour of making use of the native language in the classroom for various purposes whenever possible. This paper presents a critical review of the literature on using contrastive analysis in teaching grammar. Both predictive and error-based comparisons are evaluated together with some related studies conducted over the past two decades. Upon close examination, all kinds of teacher-centred formal contrastive analysis - whether predictive or error-based - seem to fall short of achieving their goal compared to learner-centred informal comparisons. Based on the foreign-language learners' natural tendency to make their own informal comparisons between the native and the target language, pedagogical contrastive comparisons can be made simple in terms of the amount and depth of analysis and the use of grammatical terminology.

Purposes, Conditions and Advantages:

Although the role of the native language in second or foreign language learning has been noticed throughout the modern history of language teaching, its usefulness in teaching has remained a point of debate. In some teaching methods, the use of the native language in the classroom is considered an indispensable aid (e.g. Grammar-Translation, Community Language Learning and Suggestopedia); in some other methods it is not allowed (e.g. the Direct Method, The Audio-lingual Method), yet in other methods it is neither encouraged nor totally banned (e.g. The Silvent Way and the Communicative Approach), (see e.g. Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989). Attitudes towards the use of the native language vary even among teachers using the same method with a homogeneous group of learners. Some teachers see it as a taboo while some others believe that it can occasionally be used. Yet some others feel that they cannot do without it, (Larsen-Freeman, 1987).

It goes without saying, not all of the problems in second or foreign language learning are due to the influence of the native language and there are cases where the use of the native language is a short cut to teaching and learning. As such, it would be no where near practical to

stick to an extreme view, especially when teaching is viewed in terms of what has so far been revealed in language acquisition research about language learning strategies. According to Kharma and Hajjaj (1989:225) “changing climates across history... could reflect changing needs but not necessarily changing strategies of learning. One such strategy that has persisted is the use of the mother tongue”.

Second and foreign language teaching research is rich in recommendations in favour of making use of the native language in the classroom for various purposes at the different stages of the lesson. The following are some of the purposes frequently suggested:

- (1) Giving instructions in activities and tests, and for classroom management; (see e.g. Nolasco and Arthur, 1988).
- (2) Establishing contact and an atmosphere of relaxation, warming up learners for a new activity, and establishing context for the communicative use of the target language; (see e.g. Atkinson, 1987).
- (3) Checking comprehension.
- (4) Teaching study skills; (e.g. Summary writing, see Mohammed, 1991).
- (5) Explaining the meaning of some unfamiliar grammatical and lexical items; (e.g. Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989).
- (6) Teaching pronunciation; (e.g. The Key Word Method, see e.g. Oxford and Crookall, 1989)
- (7) Comparing and contrasting the grammatical structures of the native and target language; (see e.g. Michaelides, 1990).
- (8) Comparing the native and target texts to facilitate comprehension; (see e.g. Hague, 1987).
- (9) Teaching reading techniques and strategies; (see e.g. Alderson, 1984).
- (10) Role playing; (see e.g. Piasecka, 1988).

The use of the native language in the second or foreign language

classroom is believed to have the advantage of arousing the learners' sympathy. Lee (1983:110) says, it "reassures them that the teacher is on their side... it suggests that he is trying to see things from their viewpoint". It is also maintained that the use of the native language helps in increasing language awareness by having the learners think about their own language when learning another language; (Collingham, 1988, Lee, 1983). The use of the native language may also bring about a sense of security, particularly in learning situations where the learners are psychologically inclined to feel as if they have been pushed into a world where everything looks strange to them. Collingham (1988) believes that reducing the learners' anxiety by using the native language increases confidence and motivation. As Tezer (1970) points out, comparisons between the native and the target language may be a way of satisfying the adult learners' need for a change from rule learning or rule memorization. There is a consensus among language teachers and specialists that the use of the native language saves time. Short and accurate explanations in the native language can be used instead of elaborate explanations in the target language which learners may not understand, thus sparing class time for other activities. The use of the native language also serves the purpose of building on what learners already know; (Mackey and Mountford, 1978).

Interlingual transfer is one of the learning strategies which most of the learners prefer; (Atkinson, 1987). It may even be the major strategy in acquisition-poor classroom situation where the use of other achievement strategies are limited or not possible. The presence of the negative effects of the native language as a result of employing the strategy of interlingual transfer implies the existence of positive transfer as one of the factors which contribute to the development of the target language, (see e.g. Tarone, 1988). Thus, the use of the native language can be seen as having the advantage of being in conformity with the learners' tendency to make use of their native language in formulating hypotheses about the target language.

However, these and any other possible advantages should not be tempting to overuse the native language, especially when explaining the lexical and grammatical items. The following are some of the conditions that need to be met before using the native language:

- (1) Homogeneity of learners: all learners in the class should have the same native language background.
- (2) A reasonable degree of cognitive maturity on the part of the learners so that they can benefit from comparisons and contrasts.
- (3) The teacher's native, or at least near-native, command of the learners' native language, or of the structure he or she is using in case of non-native teachers.
- (4) Economy: the amount of time and effort which the use of the native language requires should be less than that which the use of any other method would require.
- (5) Safety: incorrect hypotheses about the target language may result from the indiscriminate use of the native language. For example, presenting the English preposition '*in*' as equivalent to '*fi*' in Arabic may account for an error such as *in the same time* since '*in*' is used in this case.

It is the violation of these conditions that often renders the use of the native language impossible, useless, or harmful. Otherwise, there is no reason to banish the native language from the second or foreign language classroom and hence deprive both the teachers and the learners of the benefits that could accrue from it.

The arguments raised by the proponents of some teaching methods and learning theories (e.g. the Direct Method in the 1960's and the Creative Construction Hypothesis in the 1970's) against the role and use of the native language seem to have been swept away by numerous recent publications acknowledging its role and recommending its use, (see e.g. Ringbom, 1987; Nicholls and Hoadley, 1988; Odlin, 1989). Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) conducted an empirical investigation to see when the use of the native language is desirable. They administered questionnaires to 185 teachers and 223 students and found that the vast majority of the teachers and students use the native language (Arabic) in the foreign language (i.e. English) classroom for various purposes (e.g. giving instructions, checking comprehension, giving meanings, teaching pronunciation, etc...). The authors believe that "the use of the

mother tongue... is widespread even when it has no advocates and is now supported by theory" (p. 225), (See also Richards and Rogers, 1986).

The Use of Translation:

Translation is believed to be a useful pedagogical device; an effective means of consciousness raising and deepening the learners' explicit knowledge and understanding of target language, (see e.g. Thomas, 1989; Tudor, 1988). The usefulness of translation in teaching English for science and technology (EST) has been stressed by Mackay and Mountford (1978) and Widdowson (1979). Indeed, there is nothing to worry about when using translation in EST classes since scientific terms, facts, processes, procedures and scientific discourse are mostly language neutral. However, the EST students, like students of general English, make grammar and other errors due to interlingual transfer and other factors. The EST teacher can make use of the students' familiarity with scientific terminology and discourse organisation in their native language and help them to communicate grammatically in the target language. The teacher can focus on accuracy and see where the native language can help.

George (1972) points out that many foreign language teachers do not want to use translation because it is deceptive since each language reflects a particular view of the world. However, as Van Els et al (1984) point out, the lack of correspondence between the native and the target language forms and concepts should not be exaggerated. There are shared concepts and forms which can help in learning the foreign, as there are differences which may also help if the learners are shown the negative effects of transfer. The teachers' fear is justified if translation is viewed simply as a matter of replacing the native language concepts and forms by those of the target language and nothing more. Translation is in fact one step in the process of using the native language for the purpose of consciousness raising. It is a part of the contrastive comparison intended to make the learner aware of the problems resulting from the partial similarities between the native and the largest language. According to Belyayev (1963) translation is not a true comparison. If a teacher uses translation, it does not mean that

comparison has been made. For further discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of translation in language teaching see, for example, Daugherty (1984).

Pedagogical comparisons between the native and the target language can be based on translation followed by explanation, since the use of translation alone may reinforce the expectation of total correspondence between the two languages and may encourage constant recourse to the native language. Teachers can see it as an important ingredient of consciousness raising when coupled with explanation. Objections to translation should not deprive the students of its advantages when used as a step leading to the discussion of the differences and similarities between the two languages, otherwise the baby may be thrown out with the bath water. Unfortunately, the assumption that translation is dangerous is often inculcated in the learners' minds with the result that they cannot see when it is safe to rely of the native language, (Wolfe, 1967). According to Littlewood (1984) the learner may think that whatever he learns differs from his first language when in fact the first language can directly be transferred in many ways. It is important for the teacher to know when translation helps and when it hinders and convey that knowledge to the learners in a way that it can contribute effectively to the development of the target language.

Contrastive Comparisons:

One of the most widely and frequently suggested uses of the native language in second or foreign language teaching is to present learners with contrastive comparisons of the two languages so as to make them aware of the similarities and differences. This technique is believed to be useful in that the learners will know when to transfer from their native language and when not to. They will know the reasons behind some of their errors and, hopefully, avoid them, (see also Faerch and Kasper, 1987; Sinleton, 1987). When the language teaching methods were under the influence of the behaviourist habit-learning theory, such comparisons were recommended only as a guide for the teacher and the textbook writer to combat the negative effects of the native language as the major or even the single source of error in second or foreign

language learning. Those days have gone and the use of contrastive comparisons, as James (1980) says, is in keeping with current trendemphasizing the cognitive aspect of second language learning. There is no reason not to facilitate second or foreign language learning by means of contrastive comparisons, making use of the adult learners' analytic abilities (Lombardo, 1985), their knowledge of the native language (Titone and Danesi, 1985), and more importantly, the fact that the learners will make contrastive comparisons anyway, (Butzkamm, 1985; Shawrood-Smith, 1983; Widdowson, 1979). Although it is difficult to know what goes on in the learners' minds, the strategies they employ and the hypotheses they formulate, as indicated by errors, show that they engage in a process of comparison. Therefore, the similarities and differences between the native and the target language can be presented and discussed with the learners in an open manner as a short cut to hypotheses formulation and testing, (see also Marton, 1981; Tezer, 1970). Thus the use of the contrastive comparisons should not remain only in the background, confined to the stages of materials designing and teacher training.

Predictive Contrastive Comparisons:

With the shift of emphasis from a teacher-centred linguistic approach to a learner-centred psycholinguistic approach to second or foreign language teaching, it may not be reasonable to recommend using contrastive comparison in the classroom on the basis of its predictive power. The weaknesses of using predictive contrastive comparisons in the classroom have been pointed out by many researchers. One of the most frequently raised criticisms is that the predictions are not always reliable. There are cases where the predictions are misleading because the linguistic differences between languages do not always pose learning problems; negative interlingual transfer is not exclusively related to interlingual differences, (see e.g. Long and Sato, 1984; Odlin, 1989; Van Els et al, 1984).

Predictive contrastive comparisons fail to take into account other factors that determine transfer such as the distance between the two languages as perceived by the learner. The two or more languages are usually juxtaposed and compared on a linguistic rather than psycholin-

guistic basis. Such purely linguistic analyses ignore the learner and the learning process. Another point against predictive comparisons is that it is practically difficult to undertake a complete and systematic comparison of two languages, (see e.g. Jackson, 1981; Sharwood Smith, 1988). Predictive comparisons are also believed to be of very little or no help to language teachers who, from their experience as teachers and ex-learners of the target language, know (not necessarily systematically) where negative interlingual transfer actually occurs, (see e.g. Corder, 1981; Michaelides, 1990). What these teachers actually need to know is how to eradicate or minimize errors, a problem which predictive comparisons have nothing to do about. The problem of the unreliability of the results of predictive comparisons is further complicated by the fact that there are cases where the learners know more than one variety of the native language. For instance, there are considerable linguistic differences between modern standard Arabic (MSA) and Non-standard Arabic (NSA). An analysis of the errors made by Sudanese learners of English revealed that learners rely on MSA as well as on NSA, (Mohammed, 1983, 1992). Other things being equal, reliance on two somewhat different sources of linguistic knowledge may be the reason why a learner produces a target form correctly while another learner gets it wrong. The same learner may transfer a form positively from one variety at one time and negatively from another or even the same variety at another time. As such, which variety of the native native language is it that should be compared with the target language? As Jackson (1981) points out, not many teachers have the time or the skill to make a detailed contrastive comparison of the native and the target language. it follows then that no teacher would be expected to undertake comprehensive comparisons between the target language and more than one variety of the native language.

Predictive comparisons also fail to account for the learners' problems within the native language carried over to the target language. A comparison between two languages predicts no problems in learning or using certain linguistic forms because a distinction is made in both languages. Yet learners make errors which, among other possible factors, can be attributed to interlingual transfer. Informal discussions with some of the Sudanese teachers of Arabic revealed that using

yusallif (lend) in stead of *yastalif* (borrow) and vice versa, is one of the frequent errors made by Sudanese students in Arabic. This is not an interlingual error since there is no difference between MSA and Sudanese NSA in this respect. Thus, the error in ... *if I borrowed him all my money* is most probably due to transferring the confused form from Arabic into English. A contrastive analysis of English and Arabic would not predict such an error which may still be due to the influence of the native language.

Tran-Thi-Chau (1975) questions the validity of predictive comparisons on the grounds that they fall short of accounting for the errors made due to problems within the target language. He also believes that different analysts may come up with different predictions as a result of using different models of linguistic analysis. He agrees with Klein (1986), and Long and Sato (1984) that predictive comparisons focus on linguistic differences and ignore the learner and the learning process. Thus predictive contrastive comparisons endorse a teacher-centred rather than a learner-centred approach to foreign language teaching and learning. Odlin (1989:161) says that predictive contrastive analysis:

emphasizes product over process... focuses more on static forms and functions in two languages than on the way people learn a second language. Without question, teachers must be concerned not only with forms and functions, but also with the learning process.

The traditional preoccupation with the role of the teachers and the language to be learned is now being replaced by an interest in the role of the learner and the language learning process. The prediction of learners' problems on the basis of linguistic comparisons between the native and the target language is a job done in an ivory tower and does not seem to have a place in the learner-centred approach.

Error-Based Contrastive Comparisons:

What differentiates the learner's language from the adult native-speaker's language is, among other things, that the former exhibits signs of linguistic incompetence. There are systematic instances of deviation in comprehension and production as a result of incomplete or unsyste-

matic knowledge of the code. In a learner-centred approach, then, the use of pedagogical contrastive comparisons can be based on observed deviations rather than on hypothetical ones predicted by comparing full-fledged adult languages. Error analysis provides a more accurate source of information about the learners' problems; it provides empirical data on actual problems, (see e.g. Sharwood-Smith, 1988). In addition, error analysis endorses a psycholinguistic rather than a probabilistic linguistic analysis of the learners' problems, thus providing clues to the strategies learners employ in the process of learning and using the language. It also focuses on the process rather than on the product, (Faerch and Kasper, 1987). According to Richards (1975:120) the study of learner's deviations "enables comparison of teaching to learning strategies, a necessary prerequisite to drawing up realistic objectives for foreign language programs."

The error-based use of contrastive comparisons in the classroom is to be preferred to predictive comparisons since in the latter case the learners may not see the immediate reason for the comparisons that the teacher makes between the two languages. When learners are not aware of the negative effects of interlingual transfer or when the differences between the two languages do not cause problems, they may feel that predictive comparisons are a waste of time and, therefore, do not take them seriously. Such an attitude on the part of the learners may also be a result of the assumption that the two languages are totally different and, therefore, there is no need to refer to the native language at all in the second or foreign language class.

Predictive comparisons may also encourage continued indiscriminate reliance on the native language. In this respect McKeating (1981:128) writes:

Contrastive initial presentation is very likely to lead to cross-association and should in general be avoided, but at a later stage, once cross-association has occurred, learners may welcome clear examples of the correct use of the contrasting items and an opportunity to discriminate between them.

It can be claimed, then, that learners will be ready to attend to and value contrastive comparisons when they are based on attested

problems. Error-based comparisons may convince the learners that their native language does play a role in learning another language and therefore they may feel that the teacher's selective reference to native language is justified.

The shortcomings of error analysis have been overlooked. Some of its main weaknesses have been pointed out by Brown (1994), Schachter (1974), and Schachter and Celce-Murcia (1983). They believe that error analysis focuses on what learners cannot do and ignores what they can do. In other words, it focuses on errors and ignores the correct forms. However, error analysis by definition, focuses mainly on errors. As such, it is part of what has come to be known as interlanguage analysis, a field of interest to researchers who focus on the process of language acquisition. The correct forms are important for language acquisition researchers who depend on the learner's language, with its correct and incorrect forms, as relevant data. From a pedagogical perspective, working towards correct production and comprehension of the target linguistic forms necessitates focusing on errors. Correction of errors occupies a central place in language teaching in the hope that it inhances the hypothesis-formation process.

Error analysis is also believed to have the limitation of focusing on the learner's language at a single point in time; it does not shed light on the dynamic aspect of the learner's language. However, this is a problem in using error analysis for the purpose of investigating the language acquisition process. Language teachers are concerned with the achievement of specific objectives in a specified period of time and with the causes and eradication of errors. The dynamic aspect of the interlanguage may be studied by analysing the errors of one or a group of learners at different stages of their linguistic development. Among the points raised against error analysis is also that it focuses on production and ignores comprehension, (see e.g. Brown 1994). However, the matter rests with the analyst and the goal of the analysis. Like production errors, errors of comprehension can also detected and analyzed by using relevant procedures.

A frequently raised criticism of error analysis is that it falls short of accounting for the forms that learners avoid producing because of their

difficulty resulting from the difference between the native and the target language. It is the inability of error analysis to account for the avoidance phenomenon that has given Schachter (1974) the credit of discovering '*an error in error analysis*'. She believes that prior contrastive analysis is more powerful in this respect since it can predict the areas of difficulty where avoidance may be expected. Indeed avoidance is a strategy that learners employ for fear of making errors. Yet it may be the case that they make other errors in their attempts to avoid using certain forms. For example, one of the present writer's students tried to avoid using the word '*intermediate*' because he could not spell it. He defined the term as the school in it the people read the English for the first time. Such linguistic problems might not have been revealed if the learner had not employed the avoidance strategy, thus making at least three errors instead of only one, (i.e. a spelling error).

Teachers usually do not consider avoidance as a serious problem when learners express themselves in other correct forms. By observing the learners' language, teachers may see the forms which are usually avoided. Many Sudanese teachers have been observed complaining that their students do not produce passive constructions in English. Such an observation is most probably not a result of predictive contrastive analysis of English and Arabic, and such an analysis would not reveal a learning problem since passivization is also found in Arabic, (see e.g. Smith, 1987).

Contrastive analysis may not be as powerful in the prediction of avoidance as Schachter (1974) maintains for a number of reasons:

- (1) Differences between languages do not always cause problems that lead to avoidance, otherwise many interlingual errors would not have been made.
- (2) There are cases of avoidance which cannot be predicted simply by juxtaposing the linguistic forms of two languages. For example, the present writer observed that the Sudanese learners of English would always avoid saying the words zip, fuss and unique although there are Arabic words which are almost identical to them in pronunciation. The reason behind avoidance is that these are taboo words in Arabic. This reason would not have been known unless the cultural

aspect had been considered. If contrastive comparisons go beyond the juxtaposition of linguistic forms to the comparison of the native and target culture as well, this will be a task which most of the teachers cannot do due to the lack of time, skill or both.

- (3) Learners may avoid producing certain forms as the degree of difference between the native and the target language decreases, (see also Van Els et al, 1984). In this case, learners tend to avoid what is similar rather than what is different in the belief that similarity may be deceptive and lead to negative interlingual transfer. Such an assumption on the part of the learners may also be due to the teacher's indiscriminate warning against reliance on the native language. This kind of avoidance goes contrary to the predictions of contrastive analysis.

The phenomenon of avoidance will continue to be a problem in error analysis as well as in predictive contrastive analysis until further research suggests more efficient elicitation techniques that can encourage learners to produce the desired forms when expressing ideas in their own words. The elicitation procedures so far in use either fail to control for avoidance (e.g. translation, free composition), or are too controlled to allow learners to reveal their interlanguage, (e.g. the cloze procedure, multiple-choice and short answer items, etc...).

Tran-Thi-Chau (1975) believes that both contrastive analysis and error analysis have failed to offer a convincing solution to the problem of difficulty in learning from psychological perspective. However, error analysis is not in the same position as contrastive analysis now. Error analysis is intended to solve this very deficiency in contrastive analysis by taking the learner into consideration as Tran-Thi-Chau himself suggests. The fact that contrastive analysis makes predictions that it cannot keep and that the learner processes the target language in a way that is totally or partially different from the way it is taught have drawn attention to the psycholinguistic, rather than purely linguistic, aspects of the language teaching-learning process. The learning problems have come to be viewed in terms of the distance between the linguistic forms,

across languages or within one language, as seen by the learner rather than by the linguist. Thus error analysis has been revived as a promising line of development in this respect.

Some researchers (e.g. Mohammed, 1990) believe that contrastive analysis is more practicable than error analysis for pedagogical purposes on the grounds that once a contrastive analysis is made between the two languages, it can be used with generations of learners speaking the same native language. In other words, there is no need to undertake a contrastive analysis for each batch of learners whereas a new error analysis has to be undertaken for each group because the errors of one group would be different from those of the other groups. However, without going further into the problem of individual differences among the learners in a single group, it can be claimed that, with learners of almost the same age sharing the same native language and teaching background, an analysis of the errors of one group may indicate the problem areas of future similar groups, (see e.g. McKeating, 1981). In addition, in situations where the second or foreign language has been taught for a long time, there may not be any need for predictive contrastive analysis since the learners' interlingual problems would already be well known to the teachers.

Error analysis has also been attacked for a number of methodological problems, (see e.g. Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982; Schachter and Celce-Murcia, 1983). Some of these problems are:

1. the lack of objectivity in identifying and analyzing errors
2. the lack of precision in the definition of error types
3. the inadequacy of statistical analysis
4. sampling bias, including the learners, the native language background, the type of data, and the elicitation method used
5. analysing errors in sentences devoid of context
6. basing the analysis on utterances constructed by the researcher himself

For these and other possible problems Rutherford (1988), Schach-

ter and Celce-Murcia (1983), and Tarone, Swain and Fathman (1976) warn language teachers and materials designers against using the results of error analysis for pedagogical purposes. However, not all of these methodological problems are inherent in all error analyses. Different analysts commit different errors in different situations and, as Ringbom (1987) says, most of such criticisms are avoidable drawbacks in individual studies. For useful suggestions to counteract Such methodological deficiencies in error analysis see, for example, Corder (1981), Faerch et al (1984), Lott (1983), McKeating (1981), Mukattash (1986), Poullisse et al (1984).

Related Studies:

Comparisons and Redundancy:

Although the use of contrastive comparisons, whether **intralingual** (e.g. Taylor, 1980) or **interlingual** (e.g. Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989), is believed to be an effective teaching technique, some researchers have some reservations. George (1972), for example, maintains that the technique of contrast enforces redundancies, thus working against the learner's tendency to eliminate them as part of the learning strategy. However, there is a general consensus among language learning and teaching specialists that learners attempt to relate what is to be learned to what they have already learned. They come to the learning task with their previous linguistic knowledge which they make use of in order to formulate hypotheses about the target language. Thus the negative effects of the linguistic transfer strategy are reflected in the learner's interlanguage not only in the form of redundancies but in the form of omissions and substitutions as well. The technique of contrast can be used to enlighten the learners as to the reasons behind the occurrence of such features in their language. Thus when Arabic speakers, for example, make errors such as *The life is very...* or *.. the same person whom I saw him* the juxtaposition of the native and target language constructions accompanied by non-technical explanations may be more effective than giving the target language rules which will most probably include terms like 'definite article, abstract noun, relative clause, object pronoun'.

Comparisons and Confusion:

Richards (1985) believes that the error in *he was climbed the tree* and *I was going down yesterday* could be due to contrastive-based teaching which pays excessive attention to differences. He refers to George (1972) who observes that the contrast between the simple and the progressive tense is presented as '*is = present state, is + ing = present action*'. Accordingly the learner formulates hypotheses about the past: '*was = past state, was + ing = past action*', and produces *was climbed and was going... yesterday*. However, the confusion which results from such a contrastive presentation is not a point against the principle of using contrasts, rather it is, as Richards himself says, the result of '*premature*' contrastive teaching; it is the result of violating the condition of safety when comparing and contrasting linguistic forms.

Comparisons and Isomorphism:

James (1983) believes that communicative language teaching will lose its momentum unless it reconsiders the teaching of structure and recognizes the learners' contribution to the learning task. He suggests a teaching approach that rests on the teaching of grammar in a way that makes use of the learners' natural tendency to transfer their native language forms. Basing his approach on the learners' interlanguage, James suggests the presentation of the target language structures, which are isomorphic (i.e. similar) to those of the native language, through translation. According to him the learners' contribution is their partial knowledge of the target language through isomorphic forms. He refers to the contrastive analysis hypothesis and says that isomorphic forms will be easy to learn.

However, Andrew (prepared comments on James' paper, in Johnson and Porter, 1983) points out some of the problems with such an approach. He shows that isomorphism can be only one motive among others in designing a language course. He points out that easy forms are not necessarily isomorphic. He also refers to the problem of using the native language when learners come from different native-language backgrounds, and the problem of using isomorphism as a criterion in cases where the native and the target language are different. Furthermore, such a focus on isomorphic forms has the danger of

encouraging indiscriminate transfer, (Van Els et al, 1984). In four out of five experiments, Politzer (1968) found that presentation of contrasting forms first was more effective than presentation of isomorphous ones first.

James refers to Kirstein's (1972) hypothesis that negative interlingual transfer can be reduced by providing learners with quick and inconspicuous oral translations based on the results of contrastive analysis. James rephrases this hypothesis in a way that serves his purpose: to provide translations "in the sense of exposing learners to NL-TL isomorphic forms". Kirstein wants to counteract negative transfer while James aims at encouraging positive transfer. Although both approaches take the learner into consideration as far as they are motivated by the learners' natural tendency to transfer the native language forms, however, their effectiveness may be questionable if teaching is to be based on the predictions of contrastive analysis and if translation is not accompanied by explanations as an important element in the use of the native language for the purpose of consciousness raising.

If the isomorphic forms are easy to learn, why should they be the point of focus to the extent of building a whole approach around them/ Learners do not bring only the isomorphic forms discarding those which are not isomorphic. Their interlanguage also exhibits signs of native interlingual transfer which can be detected relatively more easily than positive transfer. Thus the learners' contribution can also be seen in terms of their actual learning problems revealed by interlingual errors. The presentation and discussion of isomorphic forms can be the first step in comparing the native and the target language following the principle of proceeding from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

Comparisons in Teaching Syntax:

Mukattash (1984) used contrastive analysis in teaching English syntax to adult EFL students majoring in linguistics. He compared the linguistic facts and concepts of English (e.g. subject vs objects, transitive vs intransitive, etc.) with those of Arabic. He found that the students who were taught by means of contrastive comparisons performed better than the previous groups of students who had studied

the same course without such comparisons. However, Mukattash admits that his finding is subjective; it “has not been substantiated by statistical evidence and still needs empirical validation: (p. 181). What makes contrastive comparisons useful in teaching about the language may be that most of the linguistic facts and concepts are neutral and almost the same in English and Arabic. Although Mukattash’s finding is concerned with the use ‘*predictive contrastive analysis in teaching ‘about’*’ the language, he recommends contrastive pedagogical grammar to be based on the results of error analysis because error analysis:

- (1) yields valuable insights into the nature of language learning
- (2) would make adult learners aware of their prevalent errors
- (3) reveals different types of error that contrastive analysis cannot predict

Counteracting Negative Transfer:

Lott (1983) reports about 50% of the errors made by his Italian students of English to be due to interlingual transfer. He classifies these errors into three types:

1. Over-extension of analogy: misusing a vocabulary item because it shares features with an item in the native language.
2. Transfer of structure: grammar errors resulting from transferring the native language rules.
3. Interlingual/intralingual error: misusing a grammar or vocabulary item because a grammatical or lexical distinction does not exist in the native language.

Lott outlines some possible ways of counteracting such errors. He believes that the first two types of errors can be tackled by making learners aware of the contrasts between the native and the target language. He says that the ‘*guided discovery*’ technique, suggested by McDonough (1981), proved to be useful in this respect. The recommended technique consists of the following steps:

1. Presenting learners with examples of errors and telling them that these are direct translations and “**not acceptable**” in the target language.
2. Asking learners to suggest alternatives.
3. Helping learners to develop hypotheses by explaining the differences between the native and the target language forms.
4. Giving oral and written practice in using the correct forms.

However, Lott’s assumption of the usefulness of this technique is not based on systematic empirical validation. He does not check his proposed technique against another teaching technique. In other words, he does not compare the use of interlingual comparisons with other procedures such as intralingual comparisons or giving target language rules without comparisons. As such, he presents a hypothesis that needs to be tested by a series of controlled experimental studies.

Lott’s error classification procedure confuses between causes and linguistic levels. What seems to be important in Lott’s procedure for counteracting errors is to classify them according to the influence of the native language rather than to group them according to linguistic levels. The first two types, which he categorizes according to the two linguistic levels of vocabulary and grammar, could be presented as one category under ‘*direct*’ interlingual errors. The third type would remain as it is to refer to the indirect ones. This two-category classification is also suggested by Nickel (1971) to whom Lott himself refers. Thus Lott’s himself refers. Thus Lott’s three categories could be reduced to ‘*direct*’ versus ‘*indirect*’ interlingual errors, where each category could be subdivided into grammar and vocabulary.

The four steps which Lott suggests for guided discovery are intended to counteract ‘*direct*’ transfer errors. However, from a psychological point of view, it might be better to make adult learners aware of the role of the native language as a source of previous linguistic knowledge and as an achievement strategy in second or foreign language learning instead of telling them that their constructions are ‘**not acceptable**’ from the beginning. Disclosure of such

judgments may lead to negative attitudes on the part of the learners towards the native language. The learner may come to believe that reliance on interlingual transfer invariably leads to error. Instead, learners can be helped to see their native language as a source of information rather than a stumbling block, and their errors as signs of creativity in learning rather than as frustrating and unacceptable features in their interlanguage.

Asking learners to suggest alternatives immediately after the first step may be a waste of time since it is the lack of alternatives that leads learners to fall back on what they already know. Instead, learners can be helped to understand how they formulate incorrect hypotheses and what the correct ones should be by comprising their deviant forms with those of the native and the target language. Based on the principle of proceeding from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and on the fact that there are instances where the native language may play a facilitative role, contrastive comparisons can begin with the confirmation of some correct hypotheses by presenting the learners with examples of their correct constructions where positive interlingual transfer can be given as a possible cause.

Lott presents the confusion between *make* and *do* as an interlingual/intralingual (i.e. indirect) error which can be tackled without any reference to the native language. He suggests giving learners pairs of sentences such as *I've made an error*, *He likes doing the cooking* so that they can see the basis for the difference. Like Lott, Sharwood-Smith (1988) also suggests comparisons within the target language to counteract interlingual errors. For example, an error such as '*He reads now*' would be tackled by comparing the simple tense with the progressive tense in the target language. Indeed the technique of contrast within the target language seems to be more effective than teaching the forms separately by giving complicated and abstract rules.

The use of **intralingual** comparisons with the aim of counteracting **interlingual** transfer errors seems to be an obligatory choice for a teacher who does not know the learners' native language. Such intralingual comparisons would not make the learners aware of the reason behind their incorrect hypotheses. For a teacher who knows the

native language of the learners, **interlingual**, rather than **intralingual**, comparisons may be more efficient and economical in terms of time and effort. For example, Sudanese learners of English often confuse pairs of words like *make-do*, *leave-let*, *read-study*, *steal-rob*. This is most probably because they transfer from Sudanese non-standard Arabic (NSA) where only one word is used for each pair. In modern standard Arabic (MSA), on the other hand, each of these English words has an equivalent. Hence, reference to MSA may be of great help in clarifying their usage in English. In this case, the comparison would involve both NSA and MSA together with English and the learners' deviant forms. Reference to NSA may enable learners to know the reason behind the error while reference to MSA may help them arrive at the correct usage.

Error-based Formal Comparisons:

In a previous study Mohammed, (1983) quantified and analyzed the grammatical errors in the written English of 243 Arabic-speaking, male and female, first-year university students. He found 50% to be due to the influence of the native language. The most frequent interlingual errors were made in the use of pronouns, articles, copula *is/are*, and prepositions. Mohammed suggests classroom presentation of error-based contrastive comparisons as a technique of minimizing the negative effects of the native language. The proposed technique includes the following two steps:

1. Explanation: discussion of the similarities and differences between Arabic and English with examples. The comparison includes the semantic and structural aspects of the item being taught.
2. Exercises: three or four types of exercises such as translation, sentence completion, multiple-choice items, and error correction.

However, the usefulness of the error-based technique of teaching grammar is not verified by means of systematic experimentation in the classroom, therefore, the study presents a hypothesis that needs to be tested. Although Mohammed acknowledges the role of errors as indicators of the strategies that learners employ, the teaching technique he proposes does not seem to be compatible with the learner's

interlingual transfer strategy. The sample lessons he presents contain explanations couched in metalinguistic terms. Compared with the learner's terminology-free hypotheses formation process, such explanations may not be simple since knowledge of grammar terminology cannot and should not be presupposed. Like the traditional technique of teaching grammar, the proposed technique may lead to the learning of facts about the language rather than the language itself.

The proposed technique aims at making cognitively mature students aware of the reason behind their most frequent errors, but it does not take into account an important step: the psychological preparation of the learners and provision of a justification for interlingual comparisons in the classroom. Such a preparatory stage might help in involving the learners in the teaching process and in bringing the teaching technique close to the learning process. Thus, although the suggested technique is based on actual errors, it seems to fall short of being learner-centred because of the use of metalanguage and the lack of psychological preparation of the learners.

Learner-centred Comparisons:

In a recent study, Mohammed (1992) hypothesised that making the adult learners conscious of the interlingual transfer strategy and presenting them with, terminology-free explanatory comparisons between the native and the target language in the grammar area or areas where the most frequent translation errors have been made can be more effective in minimizing such errors than the traditional technique of lecturing about the language; giving rules and explanations using metalinguistic terms. He anticipated that the grammar errors made due to literal translation from the native language can be reduced if the adult learners who share the same native language are

- (1) made aware of the role of their native language in foreign language learning; its role as a source of linguistic knowledge; a frame of reference to formulate hypotheses about the foreign language, a strategy which in some cases helps and other cases hinders depending on the degree of similarity between the two languages.

- (2) presented with clear interlingual comparisons in everyday language in the area or areas where the most frequent grammar errors have been made due to negative transfer from the native language.

The teaching technique derived from the hypothesis includes:

- (1) A brief discussion of the role of the native language and the interlingual transfer strategy.
- (2) Presentation of examples from both languages to show the similarities in the grammar area being taught including the concept (e.g. definiteness) and its surface representations.
- (3) Presentation of examples of actual errors to discuss the negative effects of the interlinguistic transfer strategy in the grammar area in question.
- (4) Various recognition and production exercises.

Many researchers believe that comparisons between the native and the target language are useful in resolving confusions, but very few of them propose fairly detailed steps of how such comparisons can be carried out in the classroom. McKeating (1981), for example, suggests only one step: asking the learners why they say X (i.e. the incorrect form). Ringbom (1987) also suggests one step. He believes that presentation of examples from the native and the target language is enough to enable the learners to arrive at the correct form. Relatively detailed steps have been presented by Lott (1983) and Marton (1981, 1988). Marton's model consists of steps 2, 3 and 4 in Mohammed's (1992) (i.e. presentation of similarities and differences with examples, and exercises).

The first step in Mohammed's model - not included in Lott's (1983) and Marton's (1981, 1988) models - is intended to be an orientation stage. It aims at the psychological preparation of the learners for the following steps. It is intended to create context and provide a justification for embarking on contrastive comparisons. A brief and clear discussion of the role of the native language in foreign language learning and the use of the transfer strategy may help in giving impetus to the learners to attend to interlingual comparisons and arouse their

interest in knowing the reasons behind some of their problems. Such a preparatory stage seems to be necessary since the learners may not be able to see a convincing reason behind using the native language when the explanation starts with the presentation of the similarities. When the explanation starts with the differences between the two languages and the negative effects of the transfer strategy, it might generate a negative attitude on the part of the learners towards the native language and the errors at a time when they should be trained to see interlingual transfer and commission of errors as normal phenomena in language learning.

Recognition of the role of the native language as a source of linguistic knowledge in foreign language learning may be one of the reasons for many teachers and researchers to talk about its role in teaching, which implies that the use of the native language in foreign teaching should involve the learner and the learning process. Learners' involvement in the teaching of grammar by means of contrastive comparisons can be achieved not only by basing the explanations on actual errors or by giving informal analysis that approximate what Sharwood-Smith (1983:195) calls the learner's "psychocomparative operations", but also by giving the learners the feeling of participation in the teaching process. Before embarking on the discussion of similarities and differences, the learners can be made aware of the rationale behind what the teacher is going to do. Some acquaintance with the role of the native language in foreign language learning, and why, how and when the transfer strategy is employed may enable the learners to relate what the teacher says in the following steps to what they do when they learn and use the foreign language to the extent that the teacher's speech becomes their loud thinking.

The presentation of the similarities between the two languages is intended to relate what the learners already know to what they need to know. As ringbom (1987) says, the learners have a natural tendency to relate new knowledge to already existing linguistic knowledge and make generalizations. At this stage, the learners can be shown when the transfer strategy works and, hence, confirm the correct hypotheses which they might have formulated. Discussion of similarities is then a transitional stage leading to the discussion of the cases where the

strategy does not work. discussion of similarities might also be useful in that it can bring about a change in the view of the learners who believe that the two languages are totally different and accordingly deprive themselves of the benefits of positive transfer.

Presentation of the differences is the core of the explanation phase. It shows where transfer should stop. Through the presentation of actual common errors together with the native and target language forms, the learners can be made ware of the instances where the transfer strategy does not work. At this stage, the learners are expected to modify their incorrect hypotheses. In this respect, Mclaughlin (1984) maintains that many errors could be avoided when the limitations of a particular strategy are made clear to the learner. Discussion of similarities and differences alone may not eliminate or minimize the errors, therefore, various types of exercises are needed to consolidate the hypotheses which have been modified.

An essential requirement of the proposed learner-centered technique of teaching grammar is that the explanations be informal and given in everyday language. They should be free as far as possible from metalanguage and complicated analysis. Based on what has so far been revealed about the language learning strategies and the process of hypothesis formation and testing (see e.g. Corder, 1981; Sharwood-Smith, 1979) and on the findings of the introspection studies (e.g. Gerloff, 1987; Faerch and Kasper, 1987), it seems necessary that pedagogical grammarians and teachers reduce the formality of their grammatical explanations in a way that reflects, as far as possible, what the learners engage in so as to arrive at a certain linguistic form. By observation of the language data the learners discover rules and patterns and may be able to talk these rules and patterns in everyday language which is different from the linguist's jargon. When a learner says *This word OLD needs AN*, a pedagogical grammarian might say *The adjective OLD should take the indefinite article AN since it begins with a vowel sound*. The teacher, whose task is to teach language as a skill and not as facts about language, can use the learner's language since it can bring teaching close to learning. Like the learner, the teacher can say '*This word, This part*' and use visual aids (e.g. pointing or underlining) to draw the learner's attention to the relevant features,

(see also Sharwood-Smith, 1988). Simplification of explanations by avoiding elaborate descriptions and the grammarians' jargon applies to the various techniques of teaching grammar including interlingual and intralingual comparisons as well as techniques which do not employ comparisons.

In order to verify the effectiveness of the above technique, Mohammed (1992) conducted an experimenting nine Sudanese secondary schools. The aim was to see if terminology-free interlingual comparisons would minimize the errors made due to transfer from Arabic. A total of 417 male and female third-year students were pre-tested, matched, paired and randomly divided into two equal groups in each school. The relative clauses were taught on the basis of the findings of a prior error analysis. The normal group was taught the lesson in its traditional format as in the textbook used (corbluth, 1982) and in teacher-made grammar notes collected from reference grammar or traditional structural grammar textbooks. The experimental group was presented with contrastive comparisons between Arabic and English with the least amount of metalanguage (only *noun*, *pronoun*, *subject*, *object* were used in some schools). The same pre-test was given again as a post-test. The difference between the means of the correct active object relative clauses (AORCs) was statistically significant in all schools. The correct AORCs produced by the experimental group in each school were more than those produced by the normal group. However, it is not clear whether that difference was due to the use of contrastive comparisons or terminology-free grammatical explanations or both. The two variables were manipulated together in the belief that second or foreign language students engage in such comparisons on an informal basis when they transfer from their previous linguistic knowledge. Further experimentation is needed to verify the efficiency of informal grammatical explanations when the other variables are carefully controlled.

Conclusion:

From the above review, it is clear that the native language has a role to play in the teaching of the grammar of a second or foreign language as well as in teaching the other language skills and sub-skills.

One of the most widely and frequently suggested uses of native language in a second or foreign language classroom is the presentation of contrastive comparisons between the native and the target language to make the learners aware of the similarities and differences as part of the process of grammatical consciousness-raising. However, predictive contrastive comparisons are seen as a waste of time and effort, especially with the shift of emphasis from teacher-centred approaches. Instead, error-based comparisons have been widely supported by researchers in the field of second and foreign language pedagogy not only because of its explanatory nature but also because of its movement away from a purely linguistic to a psycholinguistic approach to the use of contrastive comparisons in the second/foreign language classroom.

This paper reviewed some of the studies carried out in the eighties and early nineties regarding the technique of using contrastive analysis in the teaching of grammar. A critical examination of these studies reveals that such a technique needs to be more learner-centred not only by basing the contrastive comparisons on the actual errors made by the learners, but also by simplifying the explanations in terms of the amount and depth of the analyses as well as the use of metalanguage. In their attempt to simplify their error-based analysis, the teachers can be guided by the learners' own informal comparisons within the target language or between the native and the target language.

Language teaching can benefit from language acquisition research through the current psycholinguistic studies in Interlanguage, error-analysis, communication strategies, and introspection. This is particularly important in the face of the fact that the language teaching techniques do not seem to have gained very much from the traditional pedagogical error analyses, which begin with the collection, classification and analysis of the errors and end up with the statement that the analysis will be useful to the teacher and the textbook writer. As such, a traditional pedagogical error analysis may not be different from a book on linguistics written in the hope of being useful to the teacher and the textbook writer, but not to the language learner.

The formality of the grammatical explanations could be reduced so that they approximate the learner's mental grammar as reflected by his

or her hypothesis formation process. The more the metalinguistic terms and complicated analyses are avoided, the more the learner is involved, and hence the smaller the gap becomes between teaching and learning strategies. Needless to say, the achievement of this goal could be possible as language-acquisition researchers reveal more about the learning process, thus giving language-teaching researchers the opportunity to explore the possibility of bringing the teaching techniques closer to the learning process.

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دراسة نقدية في استخدام المقارنات اللغوية في تدريس قواعد اللغة الأجنبية

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ملخص

تكثرت في بحوث تدريس اللغات الأجنبية تلك التوصيات التي تحث على الاستفادة من اللغة الأم داخل الصف لمختلف الأغراض كلما كان ذلك ممكناً. وعليه تتناول هذه الدراسة بالتحليل والنقد ما كتب عن استخدام التحليل التقابلي في تدريس القواعد حيث يقوم الكاتب التحليل التقابلي بنوعيه السابق واللاحق كما يحلل بعض الدراسات النظرية والتطبيقية ذات الصلة والتي أجريت خلال العقدين الماضيين. وبنظرة فاحصة يتضح أن التحليل التقابلي الرسمي سواء أكان سابقاً أم لاحقاً لا يحقق هدفه إذا ما قورن بالتحليل غير الرسمي المستوحى من المتعلمين أنفسهم. بناء على الميل الطبيعي لدى متعلمي اللغات الأجنبية لعقد مقارنات غير رسمية بين اللغة الأم واللغة الهدف، يمكن تبسيط التحليل التقابلي التدريسي من حيث كمية التحليل وعمقه، ومن حيث استخدام المصطلحات النحوية.