

CONTRASTIVE GRAMMAR AS A LEARNING STRATEGY

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Abstract - Contrastive grammar is an excellent strategy that can accelerate the learning of new concepts by using previous knowledge. It is a very effective tool for both teaching as well as learning a foreign language. The following article aims to demonstrate how contrastive grammar has been and continues to be pertinent, and is being increasingly used as an effective learning strategy in many foreign language textbooks. Likewise, this study proves that contrastive linguistics in its current form can be used for important didactic objectives as evidenced by its noteworthy place in the writing of said texts.

Keywords: contrastive linguistics, contrastive grammar, learning and communication strategies, textbooks.

Contrastive grammar constitutes an excellent strategy that accelerates the acquisition of new concepts based upon previous knowledge, and it is quite effective for both the teaching as well as for learning a foreign language. As a result, contrastive grammar can be very beneficial for professors, students, and textbook authors. In fact, numerous foreign language textbooks benefit from, and use the results of research in the field of contrastive linguistics.

The influence of the mother tongue is not as problematic as previously thought, and it is evident that the acquisition of grammar is very difficult – in fact almost impossible – without the frame of reference provided by the native tongue. The grammar of one's mother tongue constitutes a starting point, a frame of reference, and a foundation upon which new knowledge can be built. This, in turn, will orient and guide the student during the process of foreign language acquisition. The student will always turn to previous knowledge. For this reason contrastive grammar can be very beneficial for professors, students, and authors of foreign language textbooks.

The use of contrastive grammar is a beneficial learning strategy, as it facilitates comprehension and memorization of the concepts studied. It can also be considered a

communication strategy as one can turn to the native tongue as a tool to overcome certain communicative difficulties or challenges. There is no doubt that relying on one's mother tongue to aid learning and to resolve certain communicative problems must be considered a strategic resource. According to E. Kellerman (1979) the student turns to this strategy in order to compensate for certain gaps in knowledge of the foreign language. Therefore, the use of contrastive grammar serves as a direct cognitive strategy as well as a memorization strategy according to the classification set forth by R. Oxford (1990), as it aids comprehension and memorization of the grammar of the language being studied through deductive analysis and associations based on previous knowledge. According to J. Martinez Agudo (2004) the mother tongue constitutes a starting point for the foreign language student. K. Merio also stresses the importance of the influence that grammatical knowledge of the mother tongue has on construction of new linguistic knowledge. J. Martinez Agudo (2004) asserts that the native tongue seems to guide, and even control, the development of a new process of linguistic learning, as the new cognition seems to be subject to a strict control or revision based on the models or constructs of the mother tongue. For the student, the natal tongue provides a foundation for fundamental linguistic cognition that serves as a guide and frame of reference. From the beginning of their foreign language learning, students have at their disposal innate linguistic knowledge (that of their mother tongue), that guides the formation of new linguistic constructs. D. Larsen-Freeman and M.H. Long (1991) share the opinion that the influence of the mother tongue is not as prejudicial as once thought. The linguistic differences between the L1 and L2 do not necessarily imply difficulties in the process of acquisition. J. Holmes and R. Ramos (1993:103) assert that grammar acquisition of a second language is much more difficult and almost impossible without the frame of reference provided by the native tongue and without the substantial influence

of previous knowledge. The grammar of the native tongue provides a basis for the formation of new linguistic concepts (J. Martinez Agudo, 2004).

Recognizing similarities between both languages during the first stages of learning increases the self-confidence of the student, and at the advanced level having knowledge of the differences helps avoid certain errors caused by interference from the mother tongue. It is an extremely common phenomenon for second language learners to look to their natal tongue for guidance in resolving grammatical or lexical problems.

Docents also turn to transference in order to resolve linguistic conundrums caused by their lack of knowledge (J. Martinez Agudo, 2004). The foreign language learner draws certain conclusions in order to build upon language transfer based on linguistic knowledge and control of previous linguistic processes (E. Bialystok, 1990). Contrastive grammar is one of the resources to which the student may turn in order to undertake communicative activities. The application of contrastive grammar is just one of these techniques on which the student may rely.

Some linguists opine that language transfer severely hinders the process of second language learning (S.D. Krashen, 1985). However, R. Ellis (1994) justifies the use of transfer admitting that:

Learners can use the L1 to initiate utterances when they do not have sufficient acquired knowledge of the target language for this purpose. (R. Ellis, 1994; in Martinez Agudo, 2004:95)

Language transfer is also a way to compensate for lack of knowledge of the second tongue (E. Kellerman, 1979). In addition to this, S. N. Sridhar (1980) asserts that the terms “language transfer” and “strategic resource” –in other words “strategy”– are not contradictory. Contemporary research has classified language transfer as a communicative strategy (R. Ellis, 1986; C. Faerch and G. Kasper, 1983), as well as a learning strategy (R. Oxford, 1990; J. O’Malley y A. U. Chamot, 1990; A. Wenden, 1991) depending on whether it is used to resolve communicative problems or in order to foster and accelerate the learning process. It is evident that linguistic transfer is used in foreign language textbooks with the objective of aiding comprehension and the learning of diverse

concepts of the language being taught; as such it is considered a learning strategy.

Contrastive grammar comprises an excellent tool which is very effective for second language instruction and learning. Its application in no way excludes the use of other tools, but rather complements any other linguistic strategy, method, or approach. It is especially useful for adult instruction as they are more likely than children to be conscious of their mother tongue as a linguistic system, thereby allowing their first language to be an effective frame of reference, guide, and source of associations for the building of a new linguistic construct. Contrastive grammar serves as an aid to not only students and specialists in the field of contrastive studies, but to anyone, including the self-taught student that cannot rely on the aid of a teacher.

The application of contrastive grammar can be considered a learning strategy, as it aids the comprehension and memorization of the target language being studied through deductive analysis and associations with previous cognitions, as well as a communicative strategy, as the native tongue is used as a tool to overcome challenges and difficulties in communication. Obviously, in foreign language textbooks contrastive grammar is intentionally used as a learning strategy, and it is used knowingly with a clear objective: to facilitate the comprehension and learning of grammatical structures of the foreign language.

One hundred different manuals dedicated to either the teaching or learning of a foreign language were examined in the course of this study. Of these 23 taught Russian, 24 taught Polish (15 of these belong to two different series of textbooks), 42 taught Spanish (29 belong to five different series of books) and 11 taught English. It is worth mentioning that this research was begun with the intention of studying the use of contrastive grammar in manuals that taught only Russian and Polish. However, in order to present more complete and conclusive results, the study was expanded in order to confirm the hypothesis in texts seeking to teach other languages, such as English and Spanish. This choice was made principally because the author currently teaches Linguistics and Spanish in the United States, and frequently uses materials published in both languages. It was not the intent of this research to examine an exhaustive list of all the foreign language textbooks on the market, but instead to present a selection of materials that have been

used by the author, either to learn a given foreign language or during the author's educational career that spans twelve years and several different countries.

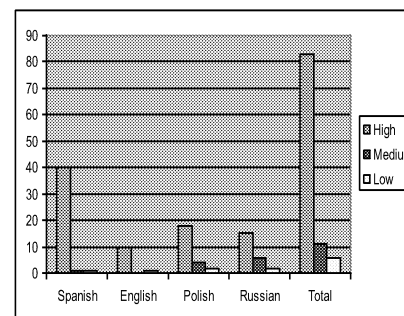
In order to study and quantify the level of application of contrastive grammar as defined by our methodological approach, the author has established criterion esteemed to be accurate, logical, and coherent: manuals that use 15 or more commentaries based on contrastive grammar are classified as having a high level of applied contrastive grammar, while texts containing five to 15 contrastive commentaries are grouped into a medium level, and those books containing less than five explanations based on contrastive grammar are deemed to have a low level of applied contrastive grammar.

This criterion allows us to determine that of the one hundred foreign language manuals analyzed, 83 have a high level of applied contrastive grammar. Among these, 40 are Spanish language texts, ten are English, 18 are Polish, and 15 teach Russian. Seventeen of the manuals studied have less than 15 explanations based on contrastive grammar, so they are considered to have either a medium level (11 manuals) or low level (6 manuals) of applied contrastive grammar. It is worth mentioning that of the five series that teach Spanish and the two series that teach Polish, all of the texts were characterized as having a high level of applied contrastive grammar.

This analysis has allowed us to formulate the following conclusions:

- This research study shows that recently there have been a great number of series published that teach many different languages that use the same type of contrastive commentary that are used as a strategy to aid learning. These series enjoy great commercial success and popularity. The number of manuals published from these collections again demonstrates the great demand for this type of material, and in fact manuals for different languages are currently being published.
- Contrastive grammar, even though it has been harshly criticized, principally in its most rigid and strict form, is still useful, and its rejection has been more rhetoric than actual, as research in this field has never stopped, and methodology from contrastive linguistics has continued to be applied to the instruction of foreign languages. We can even say that contrastive linguistics is currently undergoing a

reassessment and is experiencing resurgence in the newer foreign language textbooks. Consider the following chart with the data previously stated.

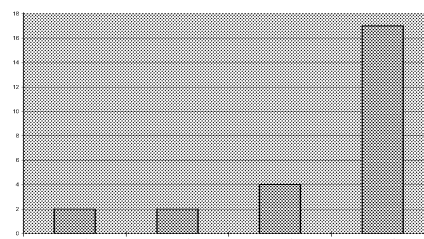


- Furthermore, this study has shown that applied contrastive grammar is a useful tool no matter how linguistically distant or close the mother tongue of the student and foreign language studied are. The manuals analyzed in this study compare languages that belong to the same linguistic family as well as languages that are quite distant, that is to say languages that apparently have very little in common. For example similarities and differences between Russian and Spanish, Polish and Turkish or Lithuanian, and Spanish and Hungarian or Japanese are studied. So then among the languages studied in texts analyzed there are three Slavic languages (Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian), one Greek (Greek), one Baltic (Lithuanian), one Indo-Iranian (Iranian or Persian), four romance languages (Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and French) including two variants (Brazilian Portuguese and Latin American Spanish), and two Germanic languages (English and German). All of these belong to the Indo-European language family, but two Asian languages are also analyzed: one Sino-Tibetan (Chinese) and one language isolate (Japanese), as was one Ural language (Hungarian) and one Altaic language (Turkish). In all, books with 12 Indo-European languages from six different subfamilies and four languages from different language families have been analyzed in this study.
- This research has also shown that contrastive grammar can be effectively used in any level of textbook: basic, intermediate, or advanced. This publication analyzed manuals written for students at varying stages of

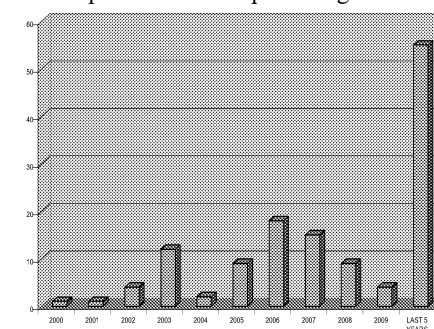
linguistic competence, specifically 35 were basic level, two were intermediate level, and 11 were advanced level instruction. It is important to note that some manuals could be used on two levels (basic and intermediate or intermediate and advanced) or even on all three levels. It was likewise observed in this research that of the 100 foreign language manuals that were analyzed, 25 were published before the year 2000. The other 75 were published between 2000 and the present, and among these, 55 were published in the last five years. Among this group 51 were deemed to have a high level of applied contrastive grammar. The oldest book that was analyzed was published in 1960, and the next oldest was published in 1965. Two textbooks were published in the 70's, four were published in the 80's, and 17 were published in the 90's. This does indeed show that contrastive grammar has continuously been used as a strategy that facilitates the understanding and learning of a foreign language even though it has been so harshly criticized. In fact it is still being used and we can even affirm that currently a resurgence of both contrastive studies in general as well as the application of contrastive grammar in foreign language text books in particular can be observed. The research that has been undertaken demonstrates that there is currently a great demand in the market for contrastive type manuals directed toward a specific reader, whose mother tongue is well defined and serves as a starting point for didactic materials.

Taking into account the author's current profession, a great many books analyzed in this publication are dedicated to teaching Spanish, currently a very popular language, and one for which many different textbooks directed toward students with diverse mother tongues are needed. On the other hand, the inclusion of numerous manuals that teach this language in this study shows that research on applied linguistics as pertaining to foreign language teaching is currently expanding in the United States where the author is presently employed.

Consider the following chart with the data specified in the previous section:



Consider the following chart that depicts the data presented in the preceding section:



- This research has shown clearly that there are numerous manuals that try to explain the most problematic grammatical concepts in function of the mother tongue of the student. Referencing the corresponding rules and structures of the native tongue that may either be equivalent or dissimilar to the language being learned is considered to be a strategy that helps the student in the conscious process of constructing new knowledge based upon associations with previous knowledge. However, as evidenced in this study, in order to prevent simplification and over-generalization as well as dependence on the mother tongue, it must be noted that it is not always possible to find direct equivalents in both languages. Likewise, a significant number of manuals (22 books, which constitute 22% of the research sample) analyse examples of the errors most frequently committed by students of the target language with a given native tongue and often provide suggestions for avoidance these mistakes with instructions on how to correct said errors. This information is normally gleaned from error analysis of actual examples of written or oral production by students. So then, commentaries based on contrastive analysis are used as tools that facilitate learning, and at the same time, to reduce negative transference and pre-empt certain errors. One should also note that contrastive commentaries are the principal strategy found in several books that promise to make learning a foreign language easy and efficient.

- This research has demonstrated as well, that although traditionally one of the harshest criticisms levelled against contrastive analysis consisted of its limitations to compare formal elements of the language without taking into account the communicative value, different registers of speech, and the socio-cultural context, various examples in the analyzed texts show that this opinion is no longer held. Furthermore, it is precisely this criticism that has contributed to the resurgence of contrastive analysis, which now is applied not only to communicative functions of different languages but also to universal categories.
- This research has made it clear that the use of contrastive linguistics does not exclude the use of other methods or approaches for teaching foreign languages, but that it can be applied to and complement them perfectly. It must also be noted that commentaries based on contrastive analysis can be used as a learning strategy not only for the teaching of grammar of a foreign language, but for any type of linguistic content such as lexical or socio-cultural concepts for example. Likewise it is possible to design exercises and activities using the same criteria, centred around the traits that are different between the native tongue and target language of the student and that are the most difficult to understand and assimilate. These exercises, whose principle objective is practice based on association and comparison of concepts (not just automated repetition of structures), are also dedicated to the detection of errors that the speakers of a given language commit most frequently when learning a certain foreign language. Likewise, this type of activity forces the students to reflect on what is correct and what is incorrect, and makes them conscious users of the language, an ability which is indispensable in order to communicate correctly and fluently in a foreign language. Without doubt, contrastive grammar applied to these exercises constitutes and excels as a method for self-correction and consolidation of material.
- This research has also shown that contrastive grammar is used in foreign language textbooks written for different types of readers, including those with very little formal education and grammatical knowledge. As we have been able to observe, contrastive grammar can be used in a very understandable way without using excessive meta-language. In some language courses specialized linguistic terminology is all but eliminated and such debatable labels are used, such as “little words” for articles or “personal words” to refer to personal pronouns, or “basic forms of action words” to refer to infinitives. Apart from that, as various authors have affirmed, some students find it difficult to learn the grammar of a foreign language because they have never learned the basic grammatical concepts of their native tongue. It is at this juncture that contrastive grammar becomes very useful for the student to acquire knowledge of grammatical structures, not only of a foreign language, but also of their mother tongue.
- This research demonstrates that contrastive grammar has continually been in use and remains up-to-date. It is an essential tool for teacher as they design their programs and didactic materials as well as for the authors of foreign language manuals. Furthermore, contrastive grammar serves not only as an aid to the teacher or specialist in the field of contrastive studies, but also is an aid to any student, even to those with very little knowledge of linguistic terminology. The analyses of contrastive grammar are a great help to those teaching themselves a foreign language, as they cannot depend on the help of a professor and do not have anyone of whom they can ask questions or verify hypotheses about the language being studied

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