



LANGUAGE INTERFERENCE AND CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS HYPOTHESIS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

This article examines two pivotal concepts in foreign language teaching: language interference and the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). Language interference arises when a learner's first language (L1) affects their acquisition of a second language (L2), often resulting in errors at phonological, grammatical, lexical, and morphological levels. The CAH, introduced in the mid-20th century, offers a framework for anticipating these errors by systematically comparing L1 and L2. While the strong form of the hypothesis asserts that all errors can be predicted through contrastive analysis, the weak form takes a more nuanced approach, acknowledging the influence of additional factors in language learning. This article explores the pedagogical implications of these concepts, emphasizing how contrastive analysis can enhance teaching practices through error correction, curriculum development, and fostering learner awareness. It also addresses the limitations of the CAH, underscoring the importance of integrating it with other methods to achieve a more holistic understanding of second language acquisition.

The field of foreign language teaching has evolved considerably over the years, with the emergence of numerous theories, methods, and approaches designed to improve the language acquisition process. Among these, two key concepts have had a profound impact on how educators approach the teaching of foreign languages: language interference and the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). These concepts are essential for understanding why learners make certain errors and how language instructors can address these challenges effectively. In this article, we will explore these ideas in depth, examining the factors that contribute to language interference, the development and implications of the CAH, and the ways in which these concepts can be applied to foreign language teaching to improve learning outcomes.

Language Interference: Cross-Linguistic Influence

Language interference, or cross-linguistic influence, refers to the effect that a learner's first language (L1) has on the learning of a second language (L2). This can be both a positive and negative influence, depending on the similarities or differences between the two languages. While positive transfer occurs when similarities between L1 and L2 facilitate learning (e.g., similar word orders or cognates), negative transfer—or interference—occurs when differences between the languages lead to errors in the L2. This interference can be seen across several linguistic domains:

Phonological Interference: Pronunciation issues often arise when learners attempt to apply the sound patterns of their native language to the target language. For example, a French speaker learning English may find it difficult to pronounce the "th" sound because it does not exist in French. Similarly, Chinese learners may struggle with English intonation patterns, as Mandarin is a tonal language while English is not.

Grammatical Interference: Syntax and grammatical rules vary greatly across

languages, and this can lead to interference when learners attempt to apply L1 grammatical rules to L2. For instance, Russian learners of English may omit articles ("a" and "the") since Russian lacks articles, while a Spanish speaker might struggle with the rigid word order of English sentences, given that Spanish word order is more flexible.

Lexical Interference: This occurs when learners make incorrect assumptions about the meanings of words in the target language based on their knowledge of similar-sounding words in their native language. These are called false cognates. A classic example is the word "embarazada" in Spanish, which means "pregnant" and not "embarrassed," despite sounding like the English word "embarrassed."

Morphological Interference: Languages vary in how they handle tense, aspect,

number, and gender. For instance, German learners of English might struggle with the lack of grammatical gender in English, and Japanese learners might have difficulty with pluralization rules in English, as Japanese does not mark plural nouns in the same way.

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis: Predicting Learning Difficulties

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) arose in the mid-20th century as a theory aimed at explaining the nature of errors that language learners make by comparing their L1 and L2. Developed most notably by linguist Robert Lado in his 1957 book *Linguistics Across Cultures*, the CAH posits that the key to understanding learner difficulties in L2 acquisition lies in contrasting the two languages. The hypothesis operates on the principle that similarities between languages will facilitate learning (positive transfer), while differences will cause learning difficulties and errors (negative transfer or interference). According to this hypothesis, by systematically comparing two languages—at the phonological, grammatical, and lexical levels—teachers can predict where errors are likely to occur.

There are two versions of the CAH:

The Strong Version: This version of the CAH claims that by comparing the L1 and L2, it is possible to predict all the errors that learners will make. For example, a French learner of English may be predicted to make errors with the placement of adjectives, given that in French, adjectives often follow the noun, whereas in English, they typically precede the noun.

The Weak Version: This more moderate form of the hypothesis argues that not all errors can be predicted through contrastive analysis. While many errors may be explained by L1 interference, others arise due to the internal complexities of L2 acquisition itself. Errors like overgeneralization (applying a rule too broadly) or developmental errors (mistakes made

as part of the natural learning process) may not be accounted for by CAH alone. Over time, the strong version of CAH has largely fallen out of favor, as it has proven difficult to predict every learner error through comparison of languages. However, the weak version remains influential, as it acknowledges that while interference is a major source of errors, other factors like developmental stages, learning strategies, and the learner's proficiency level also play significant roles in error production.

Types of Interference and Contrastive Features

Interference is often classified according to the types of transfer involved. These classifications can guide language teachers in addressing specific challenges:

Negative Transfer (Interference): This occurs when features of the L1 conflict with the rules of the L2. Examples include the use of incorrect word order, confusion over tense usage, or the application of L1 phonology to L2 speech. For instance, a French speaker learning English might say "the house red" instead of "the red house," applying the French rule of adjective placement after the noun.

Positive Transfer: Positive transfer occurs when similarities between the two languages help rather than hinder learning. For instance, a Spanish speaker learning Italian may benefit from the many cognates shared between the two Romance languages, or a Dutch speaker learning German may find similarities in word order and verb conjugation.

Overgeneralization: While not directly caused by L1 interference, overgeneralization happens when learners apply a grammatical rule too broadly in L2. For instance, an English learner might say "goed" instead of "went," overgeneralizing the regular past tense form.

Pedagogical Implications of the CAH

The pedagogical applications of the CAH, especially in its weak form, are significant. By analyzing the structural differences between L1 and L2, language teachers can anticipate specific areas where learners are likely to struggle. Here are several ways in which contrastive analysis can be applied in the classroom:

Error Analysis: Teachers can use contrastive analysis to inform error correction practices. For example, if they are aware that their learners' native language places adjectives after the noun, they can be vigilant in correcting word order mistakes in the L2 and design exercises that reinforce the correct structure.

Curriculum Design: Language instruction can be tailored to target specific points of difficulty that arise from L1 interference. For instance, in teaching English to Arabic speakers, lessons might focus more heavily on vowel sounds, articles, and sentence structure, given the significant differences in these areas between the two languages.

Focused Drills and Practice: By identifying areas of difficulty through contrastive analysis, teachers can create drills and practice activities that address specific types of interference. For example, if learners struggle with the use of articles, teachers can design exercises that focus exclusively on article usage in different contexts.

Consciousness-Raising: By explicitly drawing attention to the differences between L1 and L2, teachers can foster metalinguistic awareness in their students. When learners are made aware of potential sources of interference, they are better equipped to self-monitor and correct their mistakes. This approach not only reduces errors but also deepens students' understanding of how languages differ.

Criticisms and Limitations of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

While the CAH has proven to be a valuable tool in language teaching, it is not without its limitations. The strong version of the hypothesis has been criticized for being overly deterministic, as it fails to account for many errors that are not the result of L1 interference. Furthermore, the CAH does not explain why learners sometimes avoid structures that are different in L2, leading to avoidance errors rather than direct interference.

Another limitation is that the CAH largely focuses on errors rather than on successful acquisition. Not all language learning difficulties arise from interference; other factors, such as cognitive development, motivation, and exposure to L2, also play crucial roles. In light of these criticisms, modern language teaching approaches often integrate CAH with other theories, such as Interlanguage Theory and Error Analysis, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of L2 acquisition.

Conclusion: Navigating Language Interference in the Classroom In conclusion, language interference and the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis remain valuable

frameworks for understanding the challenges learners face in acquiring a foreign language. While language interference can impede the learning process, it also provides opportunities for educators to target specific areas of difficulty and to design instruction that minimizes errors and maximizes positive transfer. By applying contrastive analysis in a thoughtful and nuanced way, teachers can enhance the effectiveness of foreign language instruction, helping students navigate the complexities of L2 acquisition and achieve greater linguistic proficiency. While the CAH alone may not predict every error a learner will make, it offers a structured approach to error analysis and curriculum design, making it a vital tool in the arsenal of language educators. By understanding and mitigating the effects of language interference, teachers can better support learners in their journey toward fluency.

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