

Lecture 02: Approaches in Applied Linguistics

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, several researches pointed out that the language of second language learners is systematic and that learner errors are not random mistakes but evidence of rule governed behavior (Adjemian 1976; Corder 1976; Nemser 1971; Selinker 1972). Applied Linguistics has viewed errors not merely by native speakers, but also by non-native speakers.

1. Contrastive Analysis

“we can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student” (Lado, 1957).

- “Lado was the first to provide a comprehensive theoretical treatment and to suggest a systematic set of technical procedures for the contrastive study of languages. This involved describing the languages (using structuralist linguistics), comparing them and predicting learning difficulties.”
- “Contrastive analysis is the systematic study of a pair of languages with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities. Contrastive Analysis was extensively used in the 1960s and early 1970s as a method of explaining why some features of a Target Language were more difficult to acquire than others. According to the behaviourist theories, language learning was a question of habit formation, and this could be reinforced by existing habits. Therefore, the difficulty in mastering certain structures in a second language depended on the difference between the learners' mother language and the language they were trying to learn.”
- “CA is a term introduced by behaviourists in order to explain how L1 habits interfere with or affect the L2 learning ... The goal of CA was to identify and catalogue the structural similarities and differences between languages. Similar structures or patterns (i.e. rules or concepts) between L1 and L2 are predicted to aid the L2 acquisition process, while different ones are predicted to impede such process.”
- “Lee (1968:186) stated four assumptions for CA in the following manner:
 - The prime, or even the sole, cause of difficulty and error in L2 learning is interference coming from the learners' L1. In other words, L2 difficulties are chiefly, or wholly, due to the differences between the two contrasted languages.
 - The greater these differences are, the more acute the learning difficulties will be.
 - The results of a comparison between the two languages are needed to predict the difficulties and errors which may occur in learning the L2. 4. What there is to teach can best be found by comparing the two languages and then subtracting what is common to them (i.e. similarities), so that what the student has to learn equals the sum of the differences established by the CA”

The Theory of Transfer

“Similar structures or patterns (i.e. rules or concepts) between L1 and L2 are predicted to aid the L2 acquisition process, while different ones are predicted to impede such process. The similar patterns are easier to learn and are grasped more effortlessly because they are ingrained in the learner's behaviour. The dissimilar patterns are more difficult to learn because the learner needs to activate new efforts to form new ones in his behaviour. The habits which were transferred from the L1 to the L2 may constitute either facilitation or inhibition in learning the L2.”

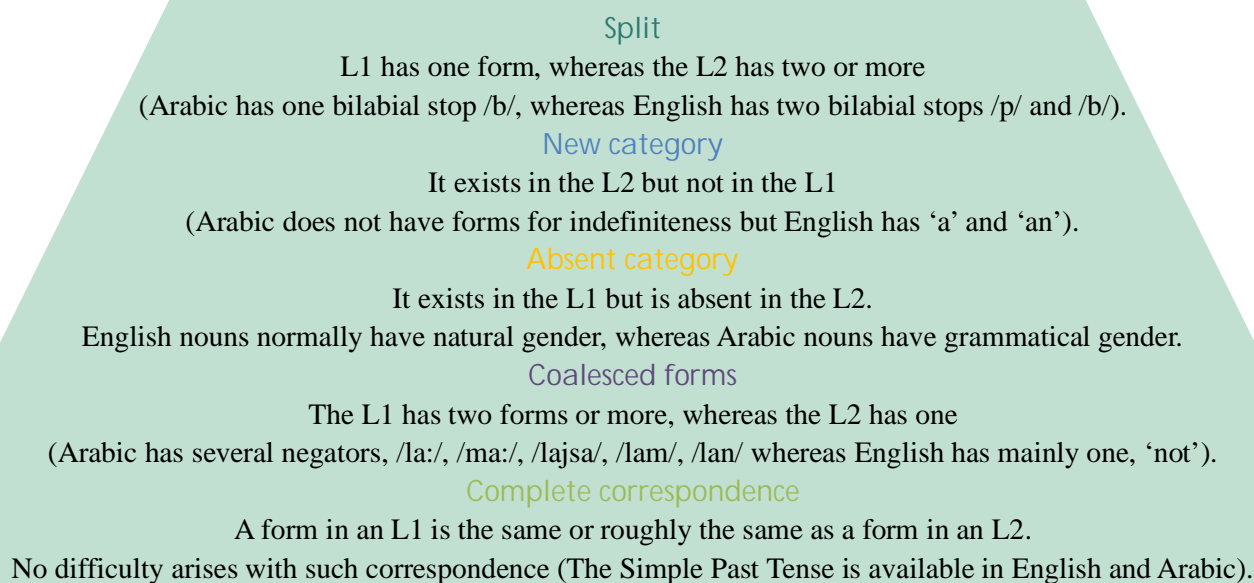
“The transfer in learning a task of an L2 is either facilitated or impeded by the learning of a previous task of an L1. This depends mainly on the similarity or difference between the tasks, as already explained by positive and negative transfers, which are derived from behaviouristic psychology.”

“L1 transfer in its negative aspect is very clear in pronunciation; this confirms what is called in the literature of applied linguistics, a foreign accent. The foreign accent is clearly recognized by linguists and also by native speakers of the L2 ... L1 transfer is also involved in other linguistic levels. Gass (1979:328) clarifies this notion in her definition of transfer, “that patterns of the native language (of all levels of linguistic structure), including both forms and functions of elements, are superimposed on the patterns learned in a second language.”

“For instance, Arab learners of English do not add the inflectional morpheme ‘-s’ to the Present Tense of the verb when the subject is a third person singular (e.g., *he/she/it “come” instead of he/she/it “comes”), and they use the Past Simple Tense of the verb more than the Present Perfect Tense (e.g. * ‘Look what you did!’ and * ‘Did you see Ahmed today?’ instead of ‘Look what you have done!’ and ‘Have you seen Ahmad today?’). The first error is due to the fact that there is an absence of the third person Present Tense morpheme in Arabic and it is not psychologically (i.e. cognitively) productive for adult native-Arabic speakers (Al-Qadi 1997:12). The second error is attributable to the fact that there is no well-defined counterpart in Arabic to cover all the meanings of the Present Perfect Tense in English (Kharma and Hajjaj 1989:159–160).”

3. CA Hierarchy of Difficulty

The linguists of the 1960s recognized different kinds of contrast between languages and attributed to them different degrees of difficulty. Stockwell et al. (1965:282–291) established a hierarchy of difficulty that is also a hierarchy of learning an L2. This hierarchy of difficulty, from the greatest to the least, is as follows, with examples for Arab learners of English:



“The heirarchy shows that difficulties will be the greatest when there is a split, and the least in the case of coalesced forms. It is noticed that the split is the opposite of coalesced forms and a new category is the inverse of an absent category.”

Notes

4. CA Methodology

“Accurate and explicit descriptions of languages under comparison are a prerequisite for any CA. These descriptions should already be made, or can be made by a competent researcher. With the availability of such descriptions, the CA will be undertaken by using the following technique (see Sridhar 1980:96–99):

- Select tasks to be compared. Note that one cannot select positions in English and compare them with articles in Arabic.
- The tasks selected should be compatible from a theoretical point of view. Compatibility is on the deep structure, since constructions have identical deep structures, even if they are markedly different on the surface structure. Chomsky presented the two sentences: John is easy to please. John is eager to please. to indicate that their surface structures are the same but their deep structures (i.e. meanings) are completely different. The meaning in the first sentence is that it is easy to please John by other people, whereas the meaning in the second is that it is John himself who would like to please other people.
- The tasks selected in the contrasted languages should be described in the same way, i.e. using the same model of description, such as traditional, structural, generative, etc.
- Find out points of similarity and contrast (i.e. predictions of possible positive and negative transfers).
- Develop teaching material on the possible positive and negative transfers.

However, new supporters of CA go beyond the five steps above of CA undertaking by using the following three ones:

- Build hypotheses on the possible positive and negative transfers and empirically test these hypotheses, i.e. checking the predictions against data from L2 learners' performance through the way of oral, written tests, interviews or questionnaires.
- Analyze the data and then accept or reject the hypotheses.
- Build teaching material on the obtained results, especially if other researchers support these results.”

- The most effective teaching material to be learned by L2 learners are those that are based upon a CA between a learner's L1 and an L2. This includes the selection of teaching items, the degree of emphasis, different kinds of practice drills, etc.
- Criteria for selecting testing items can ideally be done on the basis of CA.
- The importance of CA in choosing teaching material is generally evidenced as a method of preventing L1 transfer, remedying errors, and exploiting similarities between languages.
- CA can be helpful in drawing up a curriculum.
- CA is very useful in a homogeneous classroom (e.g. teaching English to Arab learners only) more than in a heterogeneous classroom (e.g. teaching English to Arabs, Chinese, Japanese, etc.). In the homogeneous classroom, Arab learners have almost the same ease and difficulty since they all have a similar background which is Arabic as their native language. This means that significant results for L2 learners could be achieved, as well as facilitating instruction for L2 teachers

Notes

2. CA Criticism

“CA is mainly criticized for:

- Being based on the notion of ‘habit-formation’, which neglects the role of the mind in the SLA process.
- Adequate knowledge of languages to be contrasted may not be possessed by some researchers. Some researchers may well know the L1 but not the L2 or vice versa. This deficiency on the part of researchers may produce imperfect similarities and differences between the contrasted languages.
- Overprediction of errors: A number of predictions about difficulties in L2 learning, which are based on CA, were not confirmed by the actual performance of L2 learners, whether in speech or writing. The English

affricate sound /tʃ/, for example, is predicted to be difficult for Arab learners since it does not exist in Arabic, but from the authors' experience with Saudi Arabian learners of English, it is not completely so.

- Underprediction of errors: Certain errors cannot be discovered and justified on the basis of CA, such as *goed, *comed and *hurtet. These errors are not only committed by some learners of English as an L2, but also by children of English as an L1. These errors are simplifications as a result of an overgeneralization of a regular English pattern which is the Past Simple Tense in English.
- The contrast between an L2 and an L1 alone does not tell much about how a learner goes about the learning process of a task.”

Further reading

Whitman, R. L. (1970). Contrastive analysis: Problems and procedures. *Language learning*, 20(2), 191-197. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1970.tb00476.x>