

## SOME PEDAGOGICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CONTRASTIVE STUDIES IN ELT

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**ABSTRACT.** *The role of the native language (L1) in the process of learning a second language (L2) has been often discussed. A number of recent publications in Second Language Acquisition and Contrastive Studies have given evidence of a movement to re-assess the potential contribution which L1 can make to second language teaching by incorporating CS in the classroom. First, I will mention some of the most relevant theoretical and pedagogical implications of Contrastive Studies (CS) in SLA. Then, I will move to more practical grounds suggesting ways of using contrastive analysis (CA) in the class. Finally I will argue some reasons that justify CA in the English as a Foreign Language class.*

**KEYWORDS.** *ELT (English Language Teaching), SLA (Second Language Acquisition), L1 L2 Contrastive Studies, Translation*

**RESUMEN.** *El papel de la lengua materna (L1) en el proceso de aprendizaje de la L2 es un tema constante de debate en la enseñanza de segundas lenguas (L2). En los últimos años han ido apareciendo publicaciones que defienden su potencial contribución en ese proceso cuando la L1 se incorpora como otra estrategia más de aprendizaje en clase. Desde esta perspectiva los estudios contrastivos juegan un papel importante. Dos son los aspectos que abordaré en las páginas que siguen. En primer lugar daré cuenta de ciertas implicaciones teóricas y pedagógicas que acompañan a la incorporación de los estudios contrastivos en el aprendizaje y enseñanza de las lenguas; y, en segundo lugar, propondré modos de utilización del análisis contrastivo en clase. Finalmente, concluiré con la exposición de algunas razones que justifican el uso de la L1 en clase de L2.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE.** *Enseñanza y adquisición de segundas lenguas, Lingüística Contrastiva, Análisis contrastivo, Traducción.*

The role of contrastive studies in monolingual classes has been a topic often ignored in discussions of methodology and teacher training in the last two decades.

However, research in SLA and a number of recent publications in second language teaching have given evidence of a movement to re-assess the potential contribution which L1 can make to English language teaching, after the rather sweeping dismissal of L1-mostly identified with translation- which followed in the wake of the growth of the communicative movement.

Articles by Baynham (1983), Titford (1983), Edge (1986), Thomas (1984), Tudor (1987) in *ELT Journal*, and the valuable collection of papers edited by Titford and Hieke (1985) or Fisiak (1984, 1990), as well as the research in language transfer done by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), by Gass and Selinker (1992), or by Ellis (1994) all point to the methodological value of a selective and directed use of learning strategies in which L1 and L2 are involved.

It was after the Second World War that a great interest in foreign language teaching took place in the United States, and, as part of this interest, Contrastive Analysis (CA) was recognised as an important part of foreign language teaching (FLT) methodology assigned to them. CA was founded on the assumption that languages could be compared, and, as the term *contrastive* implies, contrastivists were more interested in differences between languages than in their similarities. As a result, a series of contrastive theses, dissertations, papers and monographs began to appear with a pedagogically oriented bases. Their aim was to discover and predict learning difficulties by comparing the native and the foreign language.

Until the 1980s, both pedagogical and descriptive contrastive studies tended to be exclusively concerned with language systems, as opposed to language use, and therefore generally to restrict themselves to sentence syntax. A shift of emphasis from language as a self-contained system to language as a means of communication has taken place since then, and a new approach to contrastive studies is evinced, opened to valuable new contrastive ventures and to the expansion of the framework, i.e. contrastive work beyond the sentence, resulting in both theoretical and applied studies in contrastive text linguistics (Enkvist 1985), pragmatics (Wierzbicka 1991), discourse analysis (House & Blum-Kulka 1986), sociolinguistics (Janicki 1985) and cross-cultural studies (Pordány 1990), in keeping with general developments in contemporary linguistics and due to research in SLA, where grammatical competence has been replaced by communicative competence, which means the ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally in culturally restricted contexts.

Since the 40s, historical developments of types of analysis in SLA have been developed (Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis, Performance Analysis, Interlanguage Studies). All of them were interested in the comparison of languages, and each one made its own contribution, even though each new type started by detecting the failures and lackings of the previous one. Thus, with the movement of contrastive linguistics (CL) during the last decades to more communicative positions, CL may account for the processes of inter-textual, inter-cultural and inter-lingual transfer.

As a whole, these types of analyses can be considered as a series of phases defined by the modes of inquiry researchers have utilised in their work. Most of them are

theoretical approaches to SLA, but many of the basic research questions have remained the same. And, among them, there is always an underlying question: What is the role of the first language in SLA?

When trying to put the researchers' findings into practice, criticism rises, and CS has been so vigorously attacked that some linguists and language teachers have gone so far as to reject its validity and usefulness altogether. Nevertheless, as Fisiak (1986: 6) points out, this attitude results from a number of misinterpretations and misunderstandings created by such factors as the peculiar methodological status of CS and from the lack of a clear-cut distinction in the past between the theoretical and applied branches and of a precise formulation of their different aims. The failure to recognise the existence of these two branches (theoretical and applied CS) is clearly explained by Sanders (1986: 2): "To use the results of CA 'raw' in the classroom is rather like presenting a customer in a restaurant with the ingredients and a recipe".

This position has led to the major criticism against CS that its results have no immediate use in the classroom. This argument, however, contains several misunderstandings. Firstly, the results of theoretical CS cannot be used directly in the classroom unless they are adapted to the student's situation. Secondly, even in applied CS there must be a selection of topics and parts of the grammar that students at a certain age and with a certain education and linguistic background can digest. And thirdly, in selecting "what" to teach, the teacher must consider such other factors as the previous knowledge of the learner, the potential areas of interference between the native and the foreign language, the learner's needs, and the results to achieve, that is, how, when, where and why to teach, and then to decide the most appropriate techniques to be used.

It is in this set of decisions that the teacher has to take where CS can have an interesting role. If this assumption is accepted, the next step will be to provide an answer to the following question: Is CS essential for designing syllabuses and preparing materials, as well as for textbook writing? I assume that it is. My answer is based on some theoretical studies on the influence of the mother tongue in SLA, but also on my own experience as a foreign language teacher and a teacher of Contrastive Linguistics at the University of Alcalá de Henares in Spain and of Translation courses at the University of Minnesota in the United States.

As for the first point, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 106), among others, after an analysis of the main findings in interlanguage studies, conclude that the role of the L1 is considerably more complex, but not as negative as was first thought by proponents of the contrastive analysis hypothesis. L1 influence can lead to errors, overproduction and constraints on hypotheses but it works in co-operation, rather than in conflict, with universal developmental processes.

Nevertheless, these theoretical points still need to be incorporated in teacher training does the potential of L1 use in the classroom needs further exploration. Likewise, Atkinson (1987: 241) points out:

This gap in methodological literature is presumably partly responsible for the uneasiness which many teachers, experienced and inexperienced, feel about using or permitting the use of the students' native language in the classroom.

From the point of view of the learner, the role of the mother tongue in the learning of a second language has also been discussed (Sweet, Palmer, Jerpersen, Sridhar, Fisiak, Dulay, Fries, etc.). Widdowson (1978: 159) calls our attention to the fact that, in the process of learning a foreign language, there is an inevitable association in the mind between the new language and the one we already know, an assumption that was also defended by contrastivists.

As for my experience with learners of a second language, both Spanish learning English and Americans learning Spanish, this theoretical claim becomes true. The students, consciously or not, look for similarities and differences between the languages. And it seems to me that to contrast both languages can be useful at those stages when they master the grammar of the foreign language.

I am not alone when considering that a wrong interpretation of the communicative approach by some participants in the educational process approach in the 70s and part of the 80s has led some course designers and teachers to think that language, in abstract, was communication and dialogue in the new language, and this was, and still is, put into practice through the repetition and memorisation of often useless dialogues that the student had to analyse and repeat. Obviously, this memorisation and repetition can be useful in certain periods of the process of learning, but not always, as some defenders of the communicative approach thought when considering the use of L1 a dangerous tool. Once this method has ceased to be a boom, regardless of its virtues, it is clear that it is not the perfect approach. As Swan (1985: 87) says: "It is likely to be seen as little more than an interesting ripple on the surface of twentieth-century teaching."

In addition to this, according to the European Union's report *Les chiffres clés de l'éducation dans l'Union Européenne, 94*, published in Brussels in 1995, English is the most studied language (83%) in the European Community, but only 50% of the students are able to have a conversation in English. In other words, a third of these ESL students can not communicate in a language other than their native one, while 89% of them have received formal training at school.

Considering these alarming figures together with the above methodological discussion and research tendencies in SLA as well as the real situation of our ESL students, the need for new approaches seems obvious. And CS undoubtedly has an important role to play in connection with new developments in sociolinguistics, pragmatics and cultural studies, as well as with new tendencies in the training of SL teachers. As García Calvo, Chairman of the Department of Modern Philology at the University of Valencia (Spain), points out in an interview (*El País*, 9 April 1996) at present it is more important to train teachers to be able to use contrastive linguistics in the classroom, that is, to have teachers that are able to relate the new language with the students' knowledge and their environment, than to have native speakers teaching the new language.

How can CS be integrated in the design of SL courses? Probably the first idea is to associate CS with translation. But using 'translation' in its widest sense of transfer of information from one language to another does not mean to give the students a text for

them to put it in the other language. This sort of procedure was often followed, and it is one of the reasons why translation is of little interest for many scholars and teachers in the teaching of L2. Its use has been quoted as 'non-communicative,' 'boring,' 'a waste of time,' or, even 'more irrelevant than following a grammatical focus.'

Traditionally, translation had been reduced to two skills -reading and writing-, making oral interaction and group work impossible. Besides, time was needed, the mother tongue was involved, and, on top of that, it was considered a boring activity both to write and check, and, more than once, it has been used as a punishment in the English class.

This traditional focus does not mean that a different one is impossible. It only reveals that a new approach based on the co-operation between L1 and L2 is needed, a new approach in which translation is used as a communicative skill. And, at this point, it is worthy to emphasise that translation, as the process of conveying messages across linguistic and cultural barriers, is an eminently communicative activity thanks to which international relationships are possible. This means that, with a new focus, it could be well used in a wider range of teaching situations than may currently be the case, as for example, through comparison and contrast in parallel texts, filling in the blanks in the other language, summarising a text in the foreign language, paraphrasing, adapting the text to a new situation in the foreign language, etc.

The new methodological tendencies analyse and recognise translation as a useful tool. Thus, Widdowson (1978: 159), talking about the process of learning a second language, says:

What we are aiming to do is to make the learner conceive of the foreign language in the same way as communicative activity. This being so, it would seem reasonable to draw upon the learner's knowledge of how his own language is used to communicate. That is to say, it would seem reasonable to make use of translation.

Moreover, translation, as any other resource or didactic method that may help the teacher and the student, can not be excluded. And my experience in the teaching of English at university level shows that the use of L1 is a useful tool at advanced levels more than at a beginner level, a fact supported by other researchers and teachers of ESL, as for example Tudor (1987: 268) when he says that a selective and directed use of translation activities are particularly valuable "with respect to the development of an improved awareness of stylistic appropriacy in more advanced learners." Besides, the boom of Translation Studies and the new degrees, masters, and postdoctoral courses on Translation and Interpretation offered in an increasing number of Spanish universities have led both teachers and students to pay more attention to this activity in their curricula.

At this point, it should not be forgotten that the development of any foreign language teaching (FLT) program involves dealing with 'real teachers,' 'real students,' 'real data,' and coping with 'real circumstances.' In other words, the more closely a

them to put it in the other language. This sort of procedure was often followed, and it is one of the reasons why translation is of little interest for many scholars and teachers in the teaching of L2. Its use has been quoted as 'non-communicative,' 'boring,' 'a waste of time,' or, even 'more irrelevant than following a grammatical focus.'

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second language teaching program is based on the specific needs of the students, the more successful and effective the course will be, as Selinker, Trimble and Vroman (1972) anticipated.

Assuming that the main task of the teacher is to communicate to the students the idea that the new language has a new system, different and independent from that of the L1, he/she must try to use L2, and avoid L1 when possible, and he/she must also ensure that the students will be able to understand and produce oral and written messages helped by any method or activity. But, instead of forgetting L1, the teacher must attempt to promote the fruitful co-existence of both languages. Marsha Bensoussan (1985: 45) makes an interesting comment:

Translation is said to reflect the student's ability to mediate between L1 and L2 and show insight into both languages. Translation appears to be convenient, for students are said to naturally think in their L1 while learning the L2. Translation is seen by some as a reliable test because it measures a great deal of language.

Other advantages concerning CS in the classroom can be underlined. The sporadic use of activities in which L1 is involved may be helpful not only in the acquisition of a new language, but also in a better use of the mother tongue as the grammatical competence of a speaker may vary according to his needs for communication. For example in the acquisition of vocabulary, the sporadic use of translation may help them to look for an equivalent item, or provide an explanation when there is not a word with the same connotations and meaning in both languages. In the case when this equivalent exists, translation may save time and effort that can be used for other matters.

CS also helps the student put into practice morphological and syntactical resources not frequently used in L1. And, through comparison/contrast of different types of texts, he/she may be able to use some information from his/her readings in his academic tasks as well as use the appropriate form in both languages.

CS may also be useful in helping the student improve his/her communicative competence when comparing situations where the language is used in a different way in L1 and L2, i.e. politeness formula, requests structures, ways of asking for information etc. The use of this strategy makes the student more aware of the fact that language is inevitably linked to culture, and that different communities have developed different ways of categorising.

As for the way of introducing CA in the classroom, the use of authentic materials, as Mackay et al. (1978) point out, is a strategy often considered in SLT. However, these materials do not need to be just in L2. Everything develops in the native language in the students' environment, and some advantage could be taken through the use of parallel texts, considering them, as Spillner (1981: 24f) defines them, as those texts which are not related through translation, but comparable from the standpoint of text thematics and text pragmatics.

The use and production of parallel texts may be an alternative in pragmatically oriented foreign-language courses, i.e. those which aim at language usage in a

correspondingly natural communicative situation. Through observation and the description and comparison of characteristic features in texts prepared by native speakers in L1 and L2, at least two types of information may be gathered: information concerning the system of the language, and information about the usage norms. Then, depending on the educational goals, the teaching priorities may be determined and the method used may be adapted. As Thiel (1985: 133) points out:

Since the teaching material guarantees the learner a reference to the reality of his everyday life, it is to be expected that this (the use of parallel texts) will be a further motivation for students learning foreign languages.

The above comments suggest that both L1 and L2 can be used at the same time. I am aware of the risks in using L1 in the second language class, if we make an extensive use of it. This is a risk that affects any method, but a sporadic use can be useful. I do not believe that using L1 in that way could lead the students to think that they can not understand anything unless translated, or that they need to translate everything literally, forgetting the semantic and pragmatic inequivalences, or that they will be unable to talk to the teacher or to express themselves in English. As Atkinson (1987: 247) writes:

(...) although the mother tongue is not a suitable basis for methodology, it has, at all levels, a variety of roles to play which are at present consistently undervalued, for reasons which are for the most part suspect. I feel that to ignore the mother tongue in a monolingual classroom is almost certainly to teach with less than maximum efficiency.

To bring this to an end, some of the reasons that justify contrastive studies in the classroom can be summarized as follows :

1. The influence of the mother tongue is inevitable. From a practical point of view, it could be used to correct some mistakes, improve the knowledge of both languages, clarify some concepts or grammatical structures, or help as a tool for evaluation at some stages.
2. Translation is a natural and necessary activity. Our own culture is a translated culture, and, everyday it is used in banks, airports, travel agencies, and most businesses in general. Why can it not be used in the classroom?
3. The linguistic competence of the speaker both in L1 and L2 may be increased, or strengthened by comparing/contrasting both languages because some resources that are not used in everyday language may be put into practice. It may also help to improve the knowledge of the L1 when using special registers, business letters, different styles and levels of discourse. The development of this skill may lead the students to think: 'How can I say X in English?' instead of: 'How is X said in English?'
4. The use of a contrastive approach in FLT makes it possible to work with authentic materials in both languages; this means using a wider variety of materials and opening the possibility of using the same materials that are used for other activities: catalogues, articles in magazines or newspapers, instruction



manuals, diagrams, booklets, etc., materials the students frequently use in L1 -and a wide range is available- instead of concentrating on texts which are only appropriate for the students' speciality or restricting these students to those materials available in L2.

5. Working with parallel texts may also be used to illustrate specific aspects of the structure of the language (passive voice, prepositions or conditional sentences), or aspects connected with vocabulary and context (rhetoric conventions) or pragmatic considerations (cultural differences, ways of expressing politeness, etc.), because through the inevitable comparison of both languages, the student may easily assimilate the structural, semantic and pragmatic differences between the languages and becomes more aware of them.
6. Translation, as a possible activity related to contrastive studies, is an activity that may lead to discussion -contrary to what was believed. It is usual to find more than one answer, and this does not need to be written. Students may compare their answers, or one student may explain to the class what the teacher or other classmate has just said. They can work with short texts that, after being translated, may be read or discussed.
7. Translation, as Duff (1990: 7) points out, serves to develop the three essential abilities in the learning of a second language: "Translation trains the learner to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity)."
8. We live in a multilingual and multicultural society, with a rising cultural and scientific cooperation. So, if we think consciously in the students' current and future real needs, and not only in their hypothetical needs, it will be worthwhile to introduce the students to contrastive linguistics in order to make them more aware of the differences and similarities between their native language and the new language as a way of increasing their communicative competence and producing, as a result, effective communication.

To conclude, contrastive studies are still in use, and of use in language teaching. Even though more research needs to be done in order to determine how to incorporate CL in FLT, it is the teacher or course designer the one that should decide what, when, how and with which frequency a CA approach can be introduced. This means that there is still a place for continuing research and the part CL can play should neither be exaggerated nor understated as happened before with translation.

Summarising, to ignore L1 in the FL classroom means almost certainly to teach with less than maximum efficiency since, in the learning of a foreign language, there is an inevitable association in the mind between the new language and the one already known. This means that forgetting L1 in L2 classes is a utopia. The use of contrastive exercises may be helpful to explore some problems concerning the acquisition of a foreign language as well as provide the linguistic and pragmatic competence needed to master the language.

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## LA ESTRATEGIA DE INFERENCIA LÉXICA EN TEXTOS DE ECONOMÍA Y EMPRESA: APLICACIÓN Y AUTOMATIZACIÓN POR UN GRUPO DE ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS ESPAÑOLES

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**RESUMEN.** *La inferencia léxica puede ser un instrumento válido para mejorar la competencia de recepción de los estudiantes en textos académicos en lengua inglesa como L2. Partiendo de este postulado, hemos realizado un estudio que investiga el resultado de aplicar la estrategia de inferencia léxica a palabras desconocidas por estudiantes universitarios españoles de economía y empresa en sus limitaciones léxicas para comprender textos específicos de ámbito académico.*

*Este artículo da cuenta de los resultados obtenidos en un estudio empírico de tipo longitudinal llevado a cabo con 80 estudiantes españoles. Nuestra hipótesis tiene dos partes: 1ª) que un grupo experimental de estudiantes mejorará en su modo de inferir el significado de palabras desconocidas frente a otro grupo control si aplica la estrategia de inferencia léxica de modo sistemático; 2ª) que los estudiantes con menor competencia lingüística y estratégica deberán beneficiarse más de la aplicación de la estrategia que los estudiantes con mayor competencia lingüística.*

*Los resultados mostraron un cumplimiento de las dos partes de la hipótesis planteada. Una observación interesante fue el desarrollo de un cierto criterio discriminatorio de las claves formales frente a las contextuales en el grupo experimental. Los aprendices podrían, así, haber automatizado la estrategia de acuerdo con las características discursivas de la lengua objeto, aunque también por razones desconocidas para esta investigación.*

*Las implicaciones para la investigación sugieren que son necesarios más estudios que profundicen en la relación entre estrategias y tipos discursivos.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE.** *Estrategia, comunicación, inferencia, léxico.*

**ABSTRACT.** *Lexical inference in academic English texts can be used as a valid tool for students to improve their reading competence. Bearing in mind this fact, research was designed to look for new ways of helping students with their lexical meaning limitations in English as an L2.*