

THE CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS HYPOTHESIS AND ESL PROFICIENCY TESTING

By Kenneth G. Aitken

The idea of using contrastive analysis as a basis for the construction of ESL proficiency tests has been around for many years.

Although the theoretical foundations of contrastive analysis (CA) have been challenged many times since Chomsky (1959) reviewed B.F. Skinner's verbal learning theories, many classroom teachers continue in blind faith to accept the validity of CA in testing and teaching English as a second language. It is the purpose of this paper to review some of the flaws in the CA hypothesis that tend to destroy its creditability as a basis for constructing proficiency tests.

To introduce the topic, I will begin by examining the fundamental assumptions of the CA hypothesis, and those aspects of verbal learning theory upon which they are built, then discuss a number of flaws in these assumptions and their implications for ESL proficiency testing.

The CA hypothesis rests on the following assumptions from verbal learning theory:

1. Learning is the process of making responses automatically.
2. Acquiring a new response to a particular stimulus or context requires the extinction of the old response.

These are linked with the notion of transfer of learning. As Upshur (1962:124) explains it:

In general, transfer may be considered as a tendency to make a habitual response to a novel situation as a function of the similarity between the stimulus of the old habit and the stimulus of the new situation.

Sometimes an old response (or habit) will fit in a new situation. This is called positive transfer. Negative transfer occurs when the old response (habit) does not fit the new situation and has not been extinguished.

From this foundation Charles Fries (1945) and Robert Lado (1957) propose these concepts:

3. Language learning is habit formation; in other words, the automatization of responses.
4. Where the second language differs from the native language, (i.e. old habit) impedes the learning of the second language (new habit).
5. A systematic contrastive analysis can identify the second language habits which will be difficult to learn because of interference from native language negative transfer. The degree of interference can also be ascertained by these analyses. (Upshur 1962)

When we examine the above statements, it appears that if learning is automatization of responses, it follows that language learning is automatization of response too. Dulay and Burt (1972) point out that, according to the verbal learning theorists, if learning is automatization of response, then it must necessarily follow that acquiring a new set of responses to a particular stimulus or context requires the *extinction* of the old set of responses. Herein lies one of the problems of the CA hypothesis: if a new response is learned, the old response must be unlearned. This implies that the first language must be unlearned or extinguished so that the second language can be learned. The existence of bilingual individuals in our schools and communities runs counter to this implication.

Presumably to account for bilingualism, Lado, in *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957: 59) has substituted the notion of *difficulty* for extinction. He discusses similarity and

difference between first and second language as determiners of ease and difficulty in language learning. As previously mentioned, statement (2) is a necessary condition for statement (1). If it can be shown that statement (2) is false, i.e. extinction does not take place, then is statement (2) false. But he continues to assume that language learning is habit formation (statement 3), another necessary condition for statement (1). Lado has violated the conditions upon which he has based the CA hypothesis. However, he has not replaced the now falsified theoretical foundations with a new verbal learning theory.

The CA hypothesis, restated, predicts that if language learning is habit formation, then it must follow that where the second language differs from the first language of the speaker, the first language hinders the formation of the second language. Conversely, where the second language is similar to the first language, then second language learning becomes easier. However, if it were found that where the two languages differ there was no hindrance, or negative transfer, this would falsify the idea that language learning is habit formation. Similarly, if language learning errors occurred in places where the languages are similar, these errors would provide counter evidence that would undermine the habit formation concept. Lance (1969) reports that one-third to two-thirds of his adult foreign students' English errors were not traceable to their first language. Studies by Hocking (1969), Richards (1971), and Dulay and Burt (1972) also provide evidences of the non-predictive and mis-predictive ability of contrastive analysis which challenge the assumptions of the CA hypothesis. Dulay and Burt (1972:241) point out that:

"If it is true that L2 learners make (errors) in L2 that would have been avoided had they followed the rules of L1, the question is raised as to whether negative transfer can be used as an underlying principle that can explain and predict L2 goofs."

With such evidences available one would certainly question whether learning difficulties can be predicted by a contrastive analysis of the native and target audiences.

There is, however, still another weakness in CA that has consequences in ESL proficiency testing. Contrastive analysis supporters propose to compare and contrast

the language learner's mother tongue with the target language he is learning, then to predict or explain learning on that basis. However, soon after second language learning begins, a learner language, or *interlanguage*, emerges which, unlike the mother tongue and target language, is unstable and therefore difficult to contrast.

The interlanguage hypothesis proposed by Corder (1967, 1971), Nemser (1971), and Selinker (1972) regards the speech of a second language learner as a real language with a systematic grammar. They propose that interlanguage is transient in that it develops in successive stages of acquisition during the learning process. Corder (1971) refers to learner languages as idiosyncratic dialects, which implies that they are unique to each learner as well as being approximations of the target language.

Contrastive analysis based tests are devised after making comparisons of the learner's mother tongue and the second language. This comparison ignores the learner's interlanguage development which may have tentative rules contrary to the rules of the target language, yet not related to the learner's mother tongue.

To develop a CA based test for each learner's unique interlanguage at any given moment would be a formidable task, probably impossible, and certainly useless. Such tests would take so long to develop and validate that the learner's approximation of the target language would probably have changed, thus invalidating the tests.

It seems that the CA hypothesis as a tool for predicting certain errors and points of difficulty in L2 acquisition is probably best regarded as an experimental basis of research and not as a pedagogical panacea. It is unfortunate that so many test developers, textbook writers and applied linguists have made the much stronger claim that the CA hypothesis is the best basis for language proficiency testing, program designing and classroom procedure.

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