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SOME ISSUES ON CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS AND ITS TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

Abstract

The paper aims to differentiate between two prominent branches of linguistics: contrastive linguistics and comparative linguistics. Besides, the paper endeavors to establish a distinct boundary between two terms, namely, comparative analysis and contrastive analysis. Finally, the paper seeks to apply the findings related to these issues to the process of learning and teaching English within the context of Vietnamese schools. The intention is to provide implications of Contrastive Analysis (CA) for both Vietnamese educational institutions and the specific teaching situation of the author.

Key word

Contrastive Analysis, Contrastive Linguistics, Comparative Linguistics, English Language Teaching.

1. Introduction

English, being one of the most influential languages globally, has been the subject of extensive study by individuals from diverse countries, Vietnam included. It is evident that during the process of language acquisition, learners encounter a phenomenon known as "cultural particulars" in contrastive rhetoric (Connor, 1996: 5). This aspect contributes to variations in learning outcomes among different learners. This prompts the exploration of distinctions between two languages, as contrasting language units in different languages emerges as one of the most effective approaches for achieving proficiency in language learning.

The main focus of this paper is to distinguish between two key branches of linguistics: contrastive linguistics and comparative linguistics. Following this, the paper aims to clearly delineate the boundaries between two terms, specifically, comparative analysis and contrastive analysis. The subsequent objective is to apply the insights gained from these distinctions to the realm of learning and teaching English in Vietnamese schools. The ultimate goal is to draw implications from Contrastive Analysis (CA) for both educational institutions in Vietnam and the unique teaching circumstances of the author. This outlined structure encapsulates the fundamental content of the paper.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Contrastive Linguistics and Comparative Linguistics

2.1.1. Definitions

According to the Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics, comparative linguistics is defined as "a branch of linguistics which studies two or more languages in order to compare their structure and to show whether they are similar or different" (1992: 68). On the other hand, contrastive linguistics is explained as "the comparison of the linguistic system of two languages, for example, the sound system or the grammatical system" (1992: 83). This distinction underscores the focus of comparative linguistics on broader structural comparisons between languages, while contrastive linguistics specifically involves comparing the linguistic systems of two languages in various aspects, such as phonetics or grammar.

Contrastive linguistics is also briefly defined by Krzeszowski (1991: 10) as "an area of linguistics in which a linguistic theory is applied to a comparative description of two or more languages, which need not to be genetically or typologically related". Comparative linguistics, according to Oxford dictionary, however, is "the study of similarities and differences between languages, in particular the comparison of related languages

with a view to reconstructing forms in their lost parent languages."

In general, it is obvious that although comparative linguistics and contrastive linguistics are two branches of linguistics, they have different aims. While comparative linguistics is used to show similarities and differences, contrastive linguistics is used to show differences rather than similarities.

2.1.2. Basic features

Based on the definitions provided earlier, there are certain points that require clarification. In essence, comparative linguistics and contrastive linguistics emerge as distinct branches within the field of linguistics, each with its unique set of objectives. A key differentiator gleaned from the two definitions is that, whereas comparative linguistics delves into the study of two or more languages, contrastive linguistics exclusively involves the examination of precisely two languages. Consequently, the quantity of objects under scrutiny differs for each branch. In the realm of contrastive linguistics, the focus is exclusively on two specific languages, as elucidated by James (1980: 3) through the use of the term "two-valued typologies" in his explication of Contrastive Analysis (CA).

Comparative linguistics is often associated with the historical dimension of language. According to information available on Wikipedia, it encompasses the examination of historical relationships between languages through comparison. Likewise, it finds application in the exploration of language types or typology and in the field of comparative historical linguistics. In the context of the latter, the focus is on two or more languages that are recognized to share common origins. On the contrary, contrastive linguistics, stemming from challenges in language learning, is extensively utilized in language instruction and various language domains, including discourse analysis, without any connection to the historical aspects of languages.

In summary, contrastive and comparative linguistics stand out as two distinct branches within linguistics. The former leans toward a synchronic perspective, while the latter is more diachronic in nature. Contrastive linguistics involves the juxtaposition of two languages, whereas comparative linguistics entails the comparison of two or more languages. Moreover, these two linguistic branches differ in their approaches to studying linguistic objects. The subsequent chapter will delve into the realm of contrastive linguistics, specifically under the umbrella term of contrastive analysis (CA) and the notions of "compare", "contrast" will be considered within the boundary of CA.

2.2. Contrastive Analysis

According to Richards, J.C et al (1992), CA is "the comparison of the linguistic systems of two languages, for example the sound system or the grammatical system". James (1980:2), however, confirmed that the term "contrastive" concerns "the differences in languages than in their likenesses". In his book, he called CA a "hybrid linguistic enterprise" (James, 1980: 3) and emphasized on basic features concerning the study of CA which was revealed in his definition that "CA is a linguistic enterprise aimed at producing inverted (i.e. contrastive, not comparative) two-valued typologies (a CA is always concerned with a pair of languages), and founded on the assumption that languages can be compared" (1980: 3).

CA, thus, describes similarities and differences among two or more languages at such levels as phonology, grammar, pragmatics, and semantics. Since CA is only a peripheral enterprise in pure linguistics and CA is central concern of applied linguistics; so, the term CA we use within this study intends "Applied CA". What can be inferred from James' definition (1980: 3) is threefold. Firstly, "to contrast" means to find the differences between two language units while "to compare" means to find both similarities and differences between them. Secondly, CA does not concern the comparisons but the contrasting of two language units. Finally, those two language units must be contrastable, i.e., they must belong to the same category.

Nonetheless, as per Trần Hữu Mạnh (2007), the purpose of contrasting two languages, specifically English and Vietnamese, is to identify both similarities and differences evident in each pair of expressions

related to the same phenomenon. According to Trần Hữu Mạnh (2007), the overarching objective is to establish a foundation for the study of a positive transition from the native language (Vietnamese) to the foreign language (English) based on similarities, and a negative transition based on differences. Aligning with this viewpoint, Lê Quang Thêm (2008: 43-44) contends that there must be more or less similarity between the two languages, emphasizing that these similarities serve as the foundation for contrasting the languages. He asserts that the identification of differences is just one aspect of Contrastive Analysis (CA), and without acknowledging similarities, CA lacks comprehensiveness. Therefore, it can be said that the nature of CA is still an argumentative issue that need more in-depth studies to clarify from both linguists and researchers.

In the case of Vietnamese - English (V - E) contrastive analysis, the contrastive units are basically gradable. In his book, at the level of sentence element, Trần Hữu Mạnh (2007) provided his analysis of V - E verbs which he considered one thorny area and of V - E nouns. He also gave detailed analysis of V - E at sentence level. As outlined by Trần Hữu Mạnh (2007: 45-46), Vietnamese and English exhibit fundamental differences across three key dimensions. English is affiliated with the Indo-European language system, whereas Vietnamese is a constituent of the Austro-Asiatic language system. Furthermore, English is notably analytical, while Vietnamese is characterized as a unique language. In English, there exist distinctive grammatical categories such as tense, aspect, and case for verbs and nouns, whereas Vietnamese lacks these categories and instead relies on additional components to convey ideas. The contemporary trend in foreign language instruction emphasizes not only teaching learners about the language itself but also instructing them on how to use the language effectively. To a certain extent, Contrastive Analysis (CA) was developed to meet this pedagogical requirement.

2.3. CA and English Language Teaching

According to Charles Fries (1945:9), "The most efficient materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner". Robert Lado (1957) stated that "individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture - both productively and when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and culture as practiced by natives." Then Lado made a conclusion that "those elements which are similar to the learner's native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult". Obviously, teachers can make use of CA to minimize the effects of that interference.

In addition, Lê Quang Thiêm (2004:69) confirmed that CA helps to find out the root of mistakes that language learners may make. The study of CA has its important application in teaching and learning a foreign/second language as it triggers the idea of finding errors in learning a second language. Although CA is not meant to cover all specific errors in learning a specific language, it creates the background for learners and teachers and helps them to achieve the higher goal in studying and teaching a language. For example, applying CA in writing will help learner improve their writing skill which involves a massive frequency of appearing errors.

3. Discussions

Back to the definition of CA, it is widely accepted that its appearance originated from learning difficulties. Specifically, according to Dictionary of language teaching & applied linguistics (1992: 83), CA is based on three assumptions:

- The main difficulties in learning a new language are caused by interference from the first language;
- These difficulties can be predicted by contrastive analysis;
- Teaching materials can make use of contrastive analysis to reduce the effects of interference.

The third assumption reveals the role of CA in teaching situation. It steers teacher's attention to the

interference of learner's first language to their acquisition of second language. By working out these interferences (language transfers), teacher will find a specific solution to a specific interfere whether it is positive or negative. For example, Vietnamese learners at elementary level often omit the article "a" or "an" in such sentence as "I am a teacher/an actor". Indeed, they tend to say that "I am teacher/actor". This is understandable since in Vietnamese, we tend to say:

"Tôi là giáo viên/diễn viên".

Instead of:

"Tôi là một giáo viên/ một diễn viên".

Lado (1957) emphasized that foreign language's similar features to native language tend to be perceiver more easily by learners than the dissimilar features. For examples, in studying pronunciation of English sounds, Vietnamese learners tend to be quicker and more fluent in such sounds that also appear in their native language (Vietnamese) as /b/, /m/, /n/, /l/ while they have to take more effort for such "foreign" sound as /w/, /p/, /j/.

Therefore, the knowledge in CA is not only useful in teaching English language for learners but also essential for teaching and studying other branches of linguistics such as translation theory and error analysis. For example, while studying the use of "what" in English and its corresponding item in Vietnamese "gì", learners can find that the position of "what" is reverse to that of "gì" as in this pair of sentences:

<u>What</u> did Thao told you? (1)

Thảo đã nói <u>gì</u> với anh? (2)

We should, therefore, not translate sentence (1) into (2) in such a sentence like (3) "*Điều gì Thảo nói với anh*?" with the same position of wh-question word as in the original question. In the next step, we should be able to find out the error in (3) so that a general rule can be pointed out to avoid further similar bad translation.

In her investigation into English negative questions in comparison between English and Vietnamese, Ngô Thị Thu Hiền (2007) identified errors made by students. Her findings led to the conclusion that English negative questions differ from their Vietnamese counterparts. Consequently, students must gain awareness of these structural distinctions and understand how to employ English negative questions for various purposes. This underscores the necessity for extensive practice to achieve proficiency and effectiveness in using English. Besides, mistakes are inevitable during the learning process although those mistakes are not strange. The important thing is that students can find the causes of those mistakes to correct them and try their utmost to avoid them in the future.

Language teachers have the duty of delivering lectures and assisting students in comprehending and utilizing the language with accuracy and effectiveness. Different teaching methods can be employed for each type of lesson. Emphasizing structures and lexical devices becomes essential when introducing English negative questions to Vietnamese learners. Furthermore, teachers should not be preoccupied with their students' errors; instead, they ought to communicate that mistakes are ordinary and inevitable. It is acknowledged that nobody can master everything, and the same holds true for our students. Guiding students to correct the mistakes is more important and helpful. However, in order to achieve the success, it is necessary to have attempts of both teachers and learners.

Lee (1968) proposes that the comparison of two languages is valuable for predicting the challenges and errors that learners may face, helping teachers determine instructional priorities. In practice, teachers predominantly concentrate on the language being taught, with the primary goal centered around the language itself rather than the differences between the two languages. Consequently, Contrastive Analysis (CA) should not be the principal tool but rather a supplementary aid in the instruction of foreign or second languages. James (1980: 145-146) made a distinction between "prediction that there will be error" and

"prediction of the forms of that error" and showed his suspicion about the second prediction. He then proposed a solution that rather predicting form of errors, we can predict "types of error" that learners may make. For example, a teacher can predict that Vietnamese learners of English tend to make error in placing preposition "the", such as the lack of "the" in "English language" but he/she should not predict that learners will misplace "the" in specific cases.

James (1980: 148) stated that "an important ingredient of the teacher's role as monitor and assessor of the learner's performance is to know why certain errors are committed. It is on the basis of such diagnostic knowledge that the teacher organizes feedback to the learner and remedial work". As an English lecturer at Hanoi University of Mining and Geology and within the context of teaching English to technical students whose linguistic competence of English are extremely low, my application of CA in teaching may be not as much as in other situation where students study English as their majors. However, it really has something to do with CA as learners of English in this case often make errors a lot. By understanding the origin of errors (cultural interference, inter-lingual errors), I may address the problems of learners and help them to solve these problems. For example, students in my class often misplace the adverbs of frequency, so instead of saying:

They are always late

They said:

They always are late

In this situation, rather than predicting the error, I try to understand why they made such error and give the solutions for their further improvement. As James suggested (1980: 148), "even the learner should know why he has committed an error if he is to self-monitor and avoid the same errors in the future", my students will be explained for the origin of this error type. They should remember to avoid this error when they encounter such cases in the future.

To be active in finding and presenting errors is a hard but necessary task for a teacher. One important work that a teacher of English should do in each teaching situation is to record the error type that their students often make. These recordings can be made during class sessions or through their test papers. This will help a lot since it provides real basis of assessing students and creates the chances for diagnosing students' errors. After recording and studying those errors, the teacher may present them to learners so that they can learn by themselves for improvement. Another useful way to apply CA in teaching English is that the teacher may contrast, for example, some typical structures of English sentences to Vietnamese sentences so that learners may be clear about it even before they can make an error on it. For example, the teacher may contrast the passive structure in English and that in Vietnamese:

English: She has her hair cut

Vietnamese: Cô ấy đi cắt tóc

In fact, this still involves a process of predicting an error that Vietnamese learners may make when they translate this sentence (for example, they may translate this sentence into "*Cô ấy tự cắt tóc.*") in the teacher's mind. In this case, the teacher while teaching the passive voice may actively pair up these sentences to help students understand and avoid this error.

In short, during the process of learning English, Vietnamese learners may face with some problems and difficulties in using English for Vietnamese students are very much influenced by their mother tongue. However, it is obviously known that mastering a language is a great problem, so making error is not our fault, but our developing process. By realizing the mistakes, we will know what we still need to improve. Language teacher should not be disappointed when their students make mistakes. On the other hand, we should try to find reasons for these problems. Teachers should pay particular attention to structural, usage similarities and differences between two languages and make learners aware of the contrastive analysis between the

two languages so that they can avoid and correct their mistakes. What is more, teachers should build some exercises related to the mentioned mistakes to assign them to learners to do and then give them the feedback. It can be said that the role of both learners and teachers in relation to recognizing and understanding the errors are equal. They must be active in diagnosing errors so that improvement in English acquisition can be achieved.

4. Conclusions

This paper has just explored fundamental concepts in both contrastive linguistics and comparative linguistics, presenting implications of Contrastive Analysis (CA) in teaching English to entry-level Vietnamese learners. Notably, research in Vietnam on similar topics remains relatively limited. Future investigations could delve into the role of CA in teaching English to students majoring in non-language fields (e.g., mining, geology, accounting, information technology, etc.). Additionally, there is potential for in-depth research to distinctly delineate contrastive linguistics, comparative linguistics, and comparative historical linguistics. Another valuable avenue for exploration is conducting a study to identify specific strategies for capturing common errors learners may encounter while progressing in their English language learning journey.

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