

## CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTICS IN THE CLASSROOM<sup>1</sup>

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The subject of the present paper will be the question: in what way can language teachers make use of a knowledge about similarities and differences between learners' native language (L1) and the language that they are trying to teach them (L2)?

Before the discussion, a word of warning would perhaps be fair. What this paper attempts to provide is only a set of principles rather than a teaching method. If the principles are sound, they should be translatable into a body of practical suggestions, but unfortunately this stage has yet to come. Seeing that the destructive potential of grammar teaching (cf. below) has manifested itself in so many different forms, including some where the contrastive angle was implicated, I have felt it was worth trying to say something about where grammatical knowledge, especially contrastive knowledge, can do some good, and what form it has to take if it is in fact to do it.

The issue discussed in this paper is one that has existed as long as language teaching itself. That the question is well-known, however, does not mean that there is a well-known answer to it. Until applied linguistics came into being each teacher had to work out his own answer, and although systematic discussion and investigation of problems of this kind has now been going on for some time, it has not provided us with a platform of substantial agreement which the teacher can take as his starting point. In fact, certain features of the history of the issue can make it difficult to tackle the problems in a constructive way. Past discussions have left us with some emotionally loaded questions, of which at least two are relevant in this connection, one being

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the status of grammar in language teaching, the other being the role of the mother tongue in learning a foreign language. In order not to invite misunderstanding, it will therefore be necessary to make clear what assumptions are being made in relation to these questions.

The first question, that of grammar in language teaching, is something of a skeleton in the language teacher's cupboard. In the bad old days of the grammar-translation method, explicit teaching of the rules of grammar was more or less an end in itself; it was supposed to teach the 'logic' of the language and what was worse, it was also an excellent means of disciplining recalcitrant pupils, since rote learning of abstract rules as a task for the pupil had all the marks of abject submission under the teacher's arbitrary rule.

When 'direct' methods slowly began to supplant the grammar-translation method, the artificial and deductive method used in grammar teaching had become synonymous with the word grammar in the minds of generations of teachers and pupils. Learning language the 'natural' way became established as the ideal towards which language teaching must strive — and what could be more unnatural than grammar as it was known from language teaching. As pointed out in Wagner and Petersen, grammar has remained a shibboleth in the discussion on language teaching methods, regardless of what other issues have come and gone.

The second question, that of L1 influence on L2 learning, is a comparatively modern issue compared with that of grammar in language teaching. Mother tongue influence was brought into the purview of linguistics in the USA during the forties and fifties, when behaviorism was the accepted frame of reference in psychology as well as linguistics. Since language learning was a matter of habit formation, foreign language learning must be a matter of learning new habits — and if the new habits had to be superimposed upon old ones, it was natural to assume that there would be a struggle. It was this basic assumption which motivated the first wave of contrastive analysis, sparked off by Lado's *Linguistics across Cultures* (1957). In its most crude form (which Lado did not represent) the assumption was that language learning was a process of gradually changing more and more of the L1 into L2. Therefore all the differences between the two languages were more or less automatically assumed to be so many problems, to be solved by energetic contrastive description followed up by appropriate teaching measures.

Since behaviorism was such a well-established paradigm, there was a whole framework of concepts that could be immediately used to interpret what went on in the process of learning a foreign language, with interference and transfer as the most important ones. There was also a whole battery of teaching strategies worked out on the basis of behaviorist principles. When applied to language learning, the behaviorist ideas yielded results like the language

lab, designed as the best place in which to hammer home the new habits of the foreign language. But the theoretical alliance between the contrastive approach and behaviorism on the one hand and behaviorism and "audiolingual" teaching materials on the other hand did not mean that audiolingual teaching methods to any great extent reflected the contrastive approach, however logical that would have been in principle; most audiolingual materials were designed for a mixed international market, where a contrastive angle would have been inconvenient.

Interestingly enough, although the new model of language teaching did not build on contrastive grammar, it did include an emphasis on grammatical patterns. This meant that in spite of being totally different from the grammar-translation method in every other way, it reintroduced mindless rote learning of grammar into foreign language teaching. Instead of chanting deductive rules, the learners chanted 'pattern drills', but the feeling of boredom and unnaturalness was presumably about the same.

When behaviorism began to go out of fashion, thinking about language and learning developed in a number of new directions. Within linguistics, of course, the rise of Chomskyan generative grammar completely changed the accepted way of thinking about language. When, later on, this wave began to effect actual teaching materials, the continuing story of grammar as the evil familiar of language teaching acquired yet another chapter. Generative grammar gave a tremendous boost to the general interest in linguistic theory, and the association between creativity, cognitive development and linguistic structure led some people — in spite of warnings from Chomsky himself — to linguistify the basic language teaching programme, even for children in mother tongue education.

Within psychology, the word cognitive became symbolic of the change away from regarding man as being a product of influences to man as being active, and able to impose patterns on his environment rather than just the other way round. The assumption of L1 influence, however, survived in a kind of theoretical limbo, as an unspecified tendency among language learners. The way in which most people continued to think about it can be described by the quotation from Lado (1957) used as the starting point in Gass and Selinker (1983): ". . . individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings... of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture" — in which the words "tend to" takes the place of a theory of what actually goes on.

The reason for this survival was no doubt that practical experience overwhelmingly confirmed the existence of something like what Lado was talking about. Theoretical clarification began only when some people were actually bold enough to suggest that L1 influence might be a myth. Studies of morpheme acquisition patterns demonstrated that a case could be made for certain developmental stages being independent of learners' linguistic back-

ground, which led a number of researchers, among whom Dulay and Burt were probably the most influential, to propose a theory of L2 learning in which the learning process proceeded according to precisely the same patterns as it did in the case of L1 learning, the "L2=L1" theory. Obviously that left very little room for L1 influence on L2 learning.

This provocation made it necessary to rethink the issue, if one felt that L1 influence could not be spirited away just like that. How keenly the need to begin afresh was felt can be seen if you look at what has happened to the terminology. The words "interference" and "transfer" had continued to be the standard way of talking about L1 influence, in spite of the fact that the theoretical assumptions that led to the formulation of these concepts had been discredited. Now this heritage became uncomfortable. "Interference" was the first to go. Using the word after, say, 1975, increasingly demanded the presence of inverted commas, since on close examination it carried an assumption that to a certain extent the speaker was a helpless repository of habits which got in the way of his attempts to speak a foreign language. Since the active, hypothesis-forming, creative speaker and learner had taken the place of the habit-forming automation of the behaviorists, this word had to be rejected.

In 1981 a conference was held at the University of Michigan on what was then called "transfer" — so that was still okay, while the introduction to the volume containing the conference papers carefully explains why "interference" was not. Although this conference came to mark symbolically that the phenomenon had survived the onslaught of L2=L1 theorists (cf. Færch and Kasper *in press*), the fact that this was still a contaminated area can be seen from the circumstance that three years later, at the Edinburgh conference on interlanguage, people who were content to use the word in 1981 had to renounce it in favour of "cross-linguistic influence" (cf. Kellerman (1983, 1984); Andersen (1983, 1984)). The general feeling about the issue today, however, seems to be that the residual behaviorism which the issue has been infected with has been cleared away, and the process which is now at work is to find out more about the phenomenon rather than discuss its greater or lesser importance (cf. Færch and Kasper 1986).

One of the basic points on which the general feeling goes against the L2=L1 hypothesis is probably the one expressed by Widdowson (1980), when he points out that the difference between the L1 learner and the L2 learner is that the L2 learner already knows how to form communicative intentions of great subtlety and complexity: what he has to learn is the way to express them in a new language. In its extreme version, the L1=L2 hypothesis would imply that the L2 learner forgot everything and started all over again. No matter how convincingly one could argue that morpheme acquisition proceeded according to a fixed sequence, morpheme studies could of course

never in themselves prove that the learning process as a whole was completely insulated from the already existing, fully developed communicative competence of the learner. To put it simply: a learning process requires the presence of two factors, a learner and a learning task, and it would be very surprising indeed if the process was not influenced by both of these. What the morpheme studies prove is that there are aspects of the learning process which are dictated by the inner logic of the task itself, a fact well-known from other situations in life. A Danish proverb warns against trying to build a house chimney first; but the universal validity of this principle does not force us to the conclusion that all housebuilders necessarily proceed in the same manner, regardless of cultural background, training and accommodation requirements.

This brings us back to the issue of language teaching. Above we saw how grammar in language teaching had brought its bad reputation up to date, and how gingerly one has to approach the contrastive angle in order not to be caught up in the shadows of the past. In a teaching perspective, opposition to both grammar in language teaching and assumption of L1 influence has found its most implacable representative in Krashen. According to his views, language acquisition (the true way of coming to master a foreign language) works in a mysterious way, its wonders to perform, inaccessible to outside influences other than L2 input, impregnable to potential sources of confusion, past (L1) or present (teaching). The laborious, conscious process of "learning" is only useful in situations when one has the time to construct utterances consciously and will, according to Krashen, never turn into or even help acquisition.

The general feeling among applied linguists, however, tends not to support these views. Færch (1986), among others, gives a number of reasons why this hard and fast distinction is improbable, comparing language acquisition with learning how to drive a car. It is true that explicit instruction does not immediately enable you to drive, just as explicit rules do not enable you to speak, but nevertheless there are points in the process of learning when it is useful to be told what to do and how. If explicit knowledge was always useless, there would be no reason for people who wanted to acquire a language to look words up in a dictionary; if they really wanted to know the word they would have to wait patiently for a chance to pick it up in a natural communicative situation. The process that potentially converts explicit teaching to learner competence is automatization: the first time you try to change gears while driving, you do it clumsily, the cogs grind against each other, and the engine probably conks out, but with practice you learn to do it "fluently".

The fact that Krashen's views have not been widely accepted, however, does not mean that there is any agreement on precisely what form explicit teaching, promoting conscious processes of learning, should ideally take.

Brumfit (1984) begins by outlining three models of language teaching, of which the most widely accepted is in fact the one where the teacher's only role is to provide a favourable environment for communicative interaction, with no attempts to control learner performance. After giving an overview of the situation, Brumfit describes his position as 'cautious dualism', which means that without rejecting the model described above he leaves open the possibility that explicit teacher intervention in the learning process may sometimes (note the ubiquitous modal qualification) be a good thing. The reason for this cautious stand probably has something to do with the reaction against the grammar-translation method as described above; it is still true, as pointed out by Allen and Widdowson (1975), that most of us remember it so well from our schooldays that we do not want to associate ourselves with anything remotely resembling it.

Therefore, it is still not entirely clear in what way the teacher can interfere with the learning process without experiencing a relapse to the dead and unsavoury past. As a first step one should therefore emphasize that recognizing a potential role for explicit knowledge, of course, does not imply any scepticism with respect to the importance of natural communicative interaction or language acquisition. In contrast to Krashen's views, it is possible to take a stand where the fundamental driving force in the learning process is the attempt to carry out communicative action in the L2, while leaving room for that assumption that other factors may help (or obstruct) the process. Once this is clear, as pointed out by Færch (1986:128), this stand raises as a crucial issue how pedagogic grammar can be used in the foreign language classroom in a way which is reconcilable with communicative, learner-centred language teaching. It is this question which the remainder of the paper will be devoted to.

In pinpointing the potential niche for explicit knowledge, I would like to suggest that there is one particular situation type which is of particular interest, namely that in which the learner feels forced to drop out of the natural flow of automatic rather than conscious speech production, not because of the teacher's interruption, but because she comes across a problem which cannot be solved at this level of production. This type of situation can be conveniently illustrated with reference to the occurrence of L1 influence in learner speech. Færch and Kasper (1986) define two types of transfer, "automatic" and "strategic" transfer, which differ with respect to two dimensions, attention and automatization. Briefly speaking, automatic transfer is unattended and highly automatized, whereas strategic transfer occurs when the learner directs his focal attention towards the solution of a problem in the planning and execution of speech. A situation where automatic transfer is likely is e.g. in the case of the exclamation associated with sudden pain — even if you know it is "ouch" in English, you may have said Danish "Av"

before you think of it. Strategic transfer, on the other hand, is part of the speaker's conscious attempt to get his message across in spite of deficient resources.

Of these two types it is the strategic case of transfer that is most interesting here. As pointed out by Corder (1983), it is difficult in practice to distinguish between interlanguage (IL) rules (i.e. the already established rules that the learner depends on when he tries to speak a foreign language), strategies of learning and strategies of communication. What may have come into being as an attempt to solve a problem here and now, may (after the fact) be used as a means of increasing the learner's linguistic resources — and finally become part of the IL rule system. Whether, at a particular time, a way of expressing has the first, second or third status is very difficult to tell.

Whatever the precise relationship may be, achievement strategies of communication possess some features which make them more interesting from the point of view of language learning than is sometimes recognized (Kellerman (1984:120) says that some researchers wish to understand transfer as a "mere" communication strategy). Therefore it is worth emphasizing that in situations where learners are employing them, they are working at the limit of their resources, trying to do more than they really can; they feel the need of more L2 resources than they possess, and their focal attention is on language. Regardless of how this situation should be understood in theoretical details, it is obviously of considerable importance from the point of language learning. Without wishing to pursue the comparison too far, let me point out that Arnold Schwarzenegger has said that the critical factor in bodybuilding is the ability to cross the pain barrier: if you are able to go on, even when you feel that you can't, that is when you will really get better. I should like to suggest that in this respect language-building shares something with bodybuilding. If the learner frequently finds herself in situations where she feels the need to increase her resources and she actually succeeds in finding a way to expressing more than she thought she could, her L2 communicative potential is in a state of growth. Of course, there are learners who find a way never to tackle problems of communication greater than they can solve without showing signs of being in trouble, nevertheless picking up language as they go along. What is important is the fact that attention devoted to language and thus also degree of consciousness of language problems are things that vary during the process of speech. To the extent that the natural process of communication occasionally forces learners to rise to higher levels of consciousness than ideal for the natural flow of communicative exchange, intervention at this level of awareness is not necessarily an obstacle to "natural" learning, but may actually promote it.

One thing which may cause one to sympathize with Krashen is the tendency among some teachers to correct indiscriminately, thus preventing anything remotely approaching a flow of communication from ever taking place in

the classroom — partly because of the sheer interruption, but partly also because the students are so frequently forced to operate on a level of consciousness which impedes fluent language use. It is probably still necessary to emphasize that “you can’t learn without goofing” (cf. Dulay and Burt 1974), but forcing learners on to an oppressive level of consciousness is quite a different matter from being ready to assist them at the level of consciousness which circumstances have forced them to rise to. To take the simplest possible example: what does the teacher do, when the student asks, “How can I put “.....” in English?” — or even “Why can’t you say “...” in English?”

If, as I claim, we find ourselves at the growing edge of language whenever the learner is working with an achievement strategy, it becomes crucial for especially teachers to be able to help the learner in the best possible way. If we return to the unclear relationship between communication strategy, learning strategy and IL rule, we could express the problem for the language teacher as that of using the openings provided by the “strategic situations” of the learners in such a way that the process of converting the immediate problem which shows itself in the form of a strategy to language learning proper does in fact take place, and also functions in a way which is of the greatest possible benefit to the learner.

Let us consider the possible reactions of the teacher when he realizes that the student is trying to solve a communication problem in the L2. Apart from letting the learner struggle on the simplest reaction is to suggest a solution to the problem — finishing the sentence, typically. This has the advantage that it interferes as little as possible with the ongoing interaction, provided the teacher’s intuition as to where the problem lay was correct. It may also cause learning because next time the learner comes across the same problem, the teacher’s suggestion may be stored away for future reference. But if this is the only option open to the teacher, it means that all language problems are treated as lexical problems. All communicative intentions are treated as individual problems requiring individual solutions, to be memorized and invoked in isolation from each other. This cannot be the most efficient way of promoting the learner’s creative, hypothesis-forming activity.

If the teacher wants to help the students to learn the relevant generalizations, it might be useful to consider the types of solutions that learners “tend to” employ spontaneously. Such solutions would at least have the advantage that they are not totally alien to the learner. The type of solution that this paper will focus on is the L1-based strategies. How can the fact of L1-based achievement strategies, or strategic transfer, be an inspiration to the language teacher?

As described in Færch and Kasper (forthcoming), learners try in many ways to make predictions about L2 by inferences from L1, combining linguistic levels and generalizations in various imaginative fashions. The obvious

way of helping the learners based on this observation is to help her making the right inferences, based on whatever L1 material would be useful. To the extent that clues to troublesome L2 generalizations can be found in the L1, this source of knowledge is of potentially very great help to the learner, since it is already firmly established in her mind: saying that an L2 phenomenon corresponds to a particular L1 phenomenon is a short cut which renders superfluous the sometimes rather abstruse descriptions known from grammar books, relating the learning task directly to something the learner is already an expert in.

Therefore the role of contrastive linguistics in language learning may in fact be potentially greater than is perhaps typically imagined today. It must be emphasized, however, that it will have to take a different form than what was typically found in the first wave of contrastive descriptions. Instead of focussing on the L1 “habits”, contrastive pedagogic descriptions will take their starting point in the L2, looking systematically for equivalences in the L1 to troublesome L2 generalizations. A contrastive grammar should provide a path into the L2, turning as much as possible of the L1 into operational assets for the learner. The L1, in the other words, should be described from the point of view of the L2, rather than the other way round.

I do not mean to imply that contrastive descriptions have never revealed this type of information, only that the perspective has traditionally been the other way round. Also, as pointed out by Ringbom in his review of Gass & Selinker, attention has tended to focus on the negative aspects of transfer rather than on its facilitating potential. Particularly when comparisons involving different linguistic levels in the two languages are relevant, much useful information has been overlooked. An example is the description given of the progressive aspect in a widely used school grammar of English in Denmark (Steller and Holst Jensen 1978). Before going into the description proper, the grammar gives a number of different examples of sentences with the progressive aspect, with translation equivalents attached. Every single translation equivalent is an example of the Danish type of idiomatic phrase that is the nearest equivalent in Danish to the progressive aspect — but this is nowhere pointed out. The translations stand simply as isolated instances of how one might choose to render individual cases of the progressive in Danish.

After such emphasis has been put on the usefulness of what the learners already knows, it should perhaps be added that there is no intention of rejecting the traditional strategy of looking for difficulties traceable to the L1. Wherever investigation confirms the existence of problems caused by excessive reliance on L1 structures, a pedagogic contrastive description must of course incorporate descriptions of the problematic differences between L1 and L2. However, instead of conceiving of the contrastive description as a form of trouble-shooting, as Lado and many others did, we should see it

as the attempt to make available all the possible support that the learning process can get from an awareness of similarities and differences between the two languages involved. In many cases, pointing out equivalences and warning against differences will probably go hand in hand, since differences that create problems often do so because they look deceptively like equivalences which are okay in other contexts.

If contrastive information is to be useful for the teacher, however, it will not be enough to work out theoretical descriptions of cross-linguistic equivalences and differences. In order to be of any use, grammatical information has to be available in a form that can help the learner, at her particular stage of acquisition, to form the relevant generalization. Recalling the "chimney-first" clause, such contrastive descriptions will therefore have to be worked out in a graded form. Possibly to the surprise of some, research into natural acquisition patterns could thus go hand in hand with endeavours to work out pedagogically suitable contrastive descriptions. Depending on how far the learner has got in the process, the rules will have different shapes and invoke different types of L1 knowledge. With respect to subject-verb inversion for instance, the first thing a Danish learner would need to know is that it is an exception in English, whereas in Danish it occurs whenever a sentence constituent other than the subject is in sentence-initial position. Very much later, contexts like "Not until later..." and "Then came what was to be the biggest experience in his life..." can be dealt with.

Among the problems which I have not touched on in this paper is the way in which grammatical information is best injected into the teaching process, as it were. To a great extent this must depend on the individual teacher, although continued research into acquisition patterns may bring some clarification. Once we know more about the relationship between schematic learning in Widdowson's sense (1983) and learners' hypothesis formation, we may be able to find better ways of establishing and utilizing such language schemata in the classroom; and this would of course also have implications for the way grammatical information should be introduced. It is important to be aware that grammatical information need not imply the deadening teaching practices that used to go with grammar in the classroom. Byrne (1978) gives an example of how grammatical structures can be taught by means of communicative teaching methods.

What this paper has tried to argue, however, is only that a certain type of linguistic knowledge would be useful, regardless of the precise way in which the teacher might choose to use it — and that this linguistic knowledge should be organized in a different way than most contrastive descriptions are, reflecting the learner's path into the L2. Until we know a great deal more about that path than we do now, such a description can probably only be worked out in cooperation between grammarians and language teachers if it is to be

useful in practice. In its full shape, such a contrastive description would embody the whole, complicated truth, but it would only come in the last chapter, so to speak. It would thus bridge the uncomfortable gap that at present exists between rules of thumb, which represent the teachers' (more or less individual) attempts to provide grammatical information in a useful form, and the 'gospel truth' of the grammar books, while systematically exploiting any L1 roads of access to the complications of the L2.

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