Dual Language Instruction and Contrastive Analysis in the Elementary Grades

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Contrastive Analysis is the systematic study of a pair of languages with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities. This systematic approach to studying two languages has been visited and revisited since the 1960s and 1970s, probably reaching its peak in the mid-1980s. Contrastive Analysis attempted to predict errors due primarily to first-language interference in the acquisition of a second language. Through Contrastive Analysis study, it was thought that a curricular design could be developed to directly address and "head off" these problem areas.

Contrastive Analysis has been critiqued and defended over the decades. It has gone through revision from time to time due to these critiques, such as when Contrastive Analysis was not able to predict errors in acquiring a second language and this resulted in some speakers of the second language not experiencing the predicted errors, while others did. In fact, in some cases, errors in the first language occurred unpredictably even with speakers of different first languages. Over the years, Contrastive Analysis has been utilized more and more to explain *why*, when acquiring a second language, errors were committed. Contrastive Analysis shifted to an "after-the-fact" posture instead of trying to predict those same errors before they occurred. This white paper is a study of Contrastive Analysis within Dual Language programs at the elementary level.

For purposes of this paper, I am going to make several assumptions. First, I am going to presume an elementary Dual Language program of two languages. Furthermore, I am going to establish the two languages to be English and Spanish. One last caveat, this paper is not intended as a scholarly work but rather as part of an ongoing discussion for classroom teachers and school administrators to create the most successful and effective academic and linguistic Dual Language programs in their schools.

Though it is true that there is an increased likelihood that students learning a second language will commit errors based in part on similarities and differences between their first and second languages, it is usually not worth the time and effort necessary to create a curricular design intended to

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prevent or significantly reduce the predicted errors. For example, a Spanish native language speaker might have a tendency to add an "e" in front of English words that have an "s" in the initial position due to this being the way these words are written in Spanish. Words in Spanish such as *estrella*, *estudiante*, and *escalera* are examples of this specific structure. Thus, a Spanish native learning English might say and write "eschool," "estar," and "estudent." This error would be a classic example of predicting first-language interference. However, the key word here is "might." Although some native Spanish speakers might commit this error when they are acquiring English, other native Spanish speakers might not! The predictability that every single native Spanish speaker, or even a high number of such students, would commit this error in learning English simply does not hold true. Although some native Spanish speakers *will* make this error when learning English as a second language, is it practical to attempt to prevent all native Spanish students learning English from making this specific error? If the answer to this question is held in the affirmative, then what would that mean in regard to time dedicated to this effort? Would this effort to prevent this error be one 20-minute activity? Or perhaps a couple of activities each day for five days? Should it be a once-a-week activity for a full year? Would success be claimed when 100 percent of native Spanish speakers are prevented from making this error? Or perhaps 80 percent is deemed good enough as a preventive measure? When the effort to prevent errors in learning a second language is laid out in planning, it very quickly loses its attraction as a viable strategy. On the other hand, is it a valuable tool for teachers and administrators to be aware of potential sources of errors when students are

acquiring a second language? Is there value to understanding *why* some second-language learners are committing certain errors? I believe the answer to the last two questions is *absolutely!* Not as an attempt to prevent errors, but rather as a means of recognizing and understanding the errors that survive the "natural" second-language acquisition process in order to target and eliminate those errors with highly effective language-acquisition activities.

Over the span of 22 years assisting more than 160 school districts (across 11 states) in implementing highly effective one-way and two-way Dual Language programs in about 900 schools, my experience is that native Spanish speakers learning English as a second language will naturally learn and correct most of the errors identified through Contrastive Analysis as potential "problematic" areas IF (very significant "IF") those native Spanish speakers are placed in learning environments designed to enhance "transference" from one language to the other. In fact, the best strategies to assist native Spanish speakers learning English as a second language are as follows:

1) **Create a learning environment where native Spanish speakers can develop strong literacy and writing skills in their *native language!***
   Dual Language programs that produce a strong first language will result in rich and ample opportunities for transference to occur from the first language to the second language. Systematic vocabulary-building strategies, such as robust word walls in Spanish and English, are imperative to capitalizing on the considerable benefits derived from transference.

2) **Establish student-centered classrooms where students produce more than three quarters of the talk and work in the classroom.**
   It is essential for students learning a second language to speak, listen, read, and write in *both* languages as much as possible! Teachers and their students have a "one or the other" language relationship. Either the teachers use most of the language in the classroom and their students minimize their language production, or students use the lion's share of language in a classroom in return for teachers' herculean effort to minimize their language production. It is one or the other, teachers or their students. Thus, teachers must limit their direct instruction to no more than 15 to 20 minutes, giving their students the balance of the core block in which to build language skills.

3) More listening = more listening; more speaking = more speaking; more reading = more reading, and yes, more writing = more writing.
It sounds so simple. But it is so true. If you want your students to listen, speak, read, and write more in their first and second languages, then give students as many opportunities as possible to listen, speak, read, and write! Second-language acquisition is hastened when students practice the four modalities of a language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in the first and second language, all day and in each activity within each subject. A teacher asked me, "What can I do for three of my students who are very low in my Kindergarten classroom? They have difficulty writing even one word!" My response to her was, "Have them write more!" It is still one of the best pieces of advice to these kinds of questions. When students are behind, they need more, not less! Less only results in gaps getting larger. Only acceleration will begin to chip away on linguistic and academic gaps. Do you want better readers? Have them read more! Listening, speaking, reading, and writing should be going on as much as possible in the Dual Language classroom, across the entire core curriculum, all day, day in and day out!

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4) Pair students to produce rich and robust first/second language zones!
Second-language learners should be paired up for the entire day (high-medium and medium-low) for everything except independent practice activities, assessments, and going to the bathroom! Done correctly, pairing of students will result in:

a. More academic rigor

b. Closing of academic and linguistic gaps between students (acceleration)

c. More language (vocabulary) development in first *and* second languages

d. Brain (creative and problem solving) cross-pollination

5) Have clear end-of-year first- and second-language acquisition expectations.
The Gómez and Gómez Dual Language model brings with it very clear end-of-year expectations for the first two years of the program. Teachers and students must have a goal, and the goal must be a strong one. Districts implementing G & G Dual Language Enrichment Model accept the following two goals.

1. Pre-K (1st year) – At the end of the year, all Pre-K students are expected to "create write" a complete sentence in their native language that includes a capital letter to begin the sentence and a period at the end of the sentence.

2. Kindergarten (2nd year) – At the end of the second year in the Dual Language program, students are expected to write a full page of reflection writing (brainstorm writing) in approximately 15 minutes. Furthermore, they are expected to write a half-page of reflection writing in their second language. Literacy is the vehicle that will access all new learning. A strong reader and writer will more likely result in a stronger math, science, and social studies student.

In my experience, districts that implement Dual Language programs that meet our two-year benchmarks (high majority of our districts) and strongly establish the other four points explained above see their students commit a minimal number of errors in the usual problem areas as identified by Contrastive Analysis, by the end of first grade. Beginning in second grade, Dual Language teachers begin to identify any remaining negative trends that their students may still be experiencing in learning the second language. Second grade teachers strategically create language activities designed to eliminate these remaining areas of need. However, the lion's share of potential trouble areas that accompany the learning of a second language are resolved by students themselves. Strong fidelity to the five points described above will result in considerable strengthening of students' first *and* second languages.

For readers interested in learning of more potential problem areas as identified by Contrastive Analysis, please read the Coe, Swan, and Smith summary below of native Spanish speakers learning English as a second language:

Coe, Swan, and **Smith** (1987) provide some of the more common problematic areas related to native Spanish speakers acquiring English as a second language. They are:

1) Beginning Spanish students may make mistakes with the English vowels *a, e, i*. The consonants *h, j, r, y* may also cause trouble, since they have significantly different names in Spanish.

2) The length of the vowel sound plays an important role. It is not surprising, therefore, that Spanish learners may have great difficulty in producing or even perceiving the various English vowel sounds. Specific problems include:

   • failure to distinguish the sounds in words such as "ship/sheep," "taught/tot," "fool/full," or "cart/cat/cut"

3) Producing English consonant sounds is not so problematic for many Spanish learners, but difficult enough! They may have problems in the following aspects:

   • failure to pronounce the end consonant accurately or strongly enough; e.g., "cart" for the English word *card* or "brish" for *bridge* or "thing" for *think*

   • problems with the /v/ in words such as *vowel* or *revive*

   • difficulties in sufficiently distinguishing words such as "see/she" or "jeep/sheep/cheap"

   • tendency to prefix words beginning with a consonant cluster on s- with an /ɛ/ sound; so, for example, *school* becomes "eschool" and *strip* becomes "estrip"

   • swallowing of sounds in other consonant clusters; examples: next becomes "nes" and *instead* becomes "istead"

4) A major problem for the Spanish learner is that there is no one-to-one correspondence in the use of the tenses. So, for example, a Spanish learner might incorrectly use a simple tense instead of a progressive or a future one:

> "The lion's share of potential trouble areas that accompany the learning of a second language are resolved by students themselves."

   • "She has a shower" instead of "She's having a shower"

   • "I help you after school" instead of "I'll help you after school"

5) Problematic for beginners is the formation of interrogatives or negatives in English. The absence of an auxiliary in such structures in Spanish may cause learners to say:

   • Why you say that? / Who he saw? / Do you saw him? / I no see him. / I not saw him.

In conclusion, Dual Language elementary programs that focus on the creation of strong student-centered classrooms where students have many and consistent opportunities to use and develop all four modalities of language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) for both the first and the second language will find that their students will correctly apply many of the predicted errors identified through Contrastive Analysis. Best practices employed consistently within a classroom, such as robust word walls, paired learning, reflective journals, and so on, will create a powerful language-acquisition soup from which second-language acquisition students will emerge after three years with minimal errors. The minimal errors that are still evident in second grade should be targeted and thus eliminated, relatively quickly.

References

Coe, N. in Swan, M. & Smith, B. Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems. (1987) Cambridge University Press.