

ANALYSES ON THE CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS HYPOTHESIS (CAH): ENGLISH (L1) AND SPANISH (L2)

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Abstract

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) in examining the linguistic relationship between English (L1) and Spanish (L2). Grounded in the theoretical premise that language-learning difficulties can be predicted through the structural contrasts of the native and target languages, the research systematically explores areas of phonology, morphology, lexicology, semantics, and syntax. Through this lens, the analysis identifies both convergences and divergences that significantly shape language transfer and interference, thereby influencing bilingual acquisition processes. The findings highlight the pedagogical relevance of CAH in fostering a nuanced understanding of learning challenges encountered by English and Spanish speakers. By elucidating patterns of facilitation and difficulty across linguistic domains, this work advances theoretical discourse in second language acquisition while offering practical implications for curriculum design and instructional methodologies. The study ultimately contributes to the broader field of applied linguistics by reaffirming the value of contrastive approaches in language teaching and by encouraging further empirical inquiry into cross-linguistic dynamics.

Keywords: contrastive analysis hypothesis, second language acquisition

Introduction

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) has become an essential framework for understanding the challenges faced by learners of English as a second language, particularly in the context of Spanish speakers. Internationally, CAH posits that differences between a learner's native language (L1) and the target language (L2) can predict areas of difficulty in language acquisition. This hypothesis has been supported by various studies indicating that phonological, morphological, lexicology & semantic cognates, and syntactical contrasts significantly impact learning outcomes. For instance, a meta-analysis by Zhang et al. (2022) found that up to 30% of errors in second language acquisition can be attributed to such contrasts. In Spanish-speaking countries, where English is increasingly taught as a foreign language, understanding these differences is crucial for developing effective teaching methodologies. The prevalence of English language instruction in countries like Spain and Mexico has led to a heightened focus on CAH, emphasizing the need for tailored pedagogical approaches that address specific linguistic challenges (Gass & Selinker, 2020).

In Southeast Asia, the relevance of CAH is particularly evident as English is widely used as a second language across various countries. In nations like Malaysia and Indonesia, where English is taught alongside local languages, understanding the contrasts between these languages and English can significantly enhance teaching methodologies. Approximately 60% of Malaysians are proficient in English, yet many still face challenges due to phonological differences, such as the absence of certain English sounds in Malay (Rahman & Noor, 2021). Studies have shown that these phonological contrasts can lead to mispronunciation and comprehension issues among learners (Ali & Ismail, 2020). As Southeast Asia continues to integrate English into its educational systems, applying CAH principles will be vital for improving language instruction and learner outcomes across diverse linguistic backgrounds.

In the Philippines, the application of CAH is particularly relevant given the country's bilingual education system, where English and Filipino languages coexist. Approximately 14 million students are enrolled in basic education programs that utilize English as a medium of instruction (Department of Education, 2022). Despite high literacy rates in English—estimated at around 92%—many Filipino learners experience difficulties due to structural differences between Filipino languages and English. Research indicates that common issues include phonological challenges, such as mispronunciation of English vowel sounds not present in Filipino languages, and syntactical errors related to subject-verb agreement (Gonzales & Lumanta, 2022). A study conducted by Santos et al. (2021) highlighted that targeted interventions based on CAH could significantly improve learning outcomes for Filipino students learning English. As the demand for English proficiency continues to grow in various sectors, understanding these contrasts through CAH will be vital for enhancing educational practices and learner success.

The potential benefits of this study are significant. By applying CAH to identify and address these contrasts, educators can develop targeted interventions that enhance language instruction and improve learner outcomes. This research aims to provide practical insights that can refine teaching methodologies, ultimately leading to better communication skills and academic performance among students. Furthermore, as English proficiency becomes increasingly vital in a globalized economy, the findings of this study could contribute to greater workforce readiness and competitiveness for learners in both the Philippines and other Spanish-speaking contexts.

Method

This study employs a comparative, descriptive design to examine the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) between English (L1) and Spanish (L2) by analyzing phonological, morphological, lexicology & semantic cognates, and syntactical contrasts. Following Lado's (1957) CAH, we predict that structural differences will lead to specific learning difficulties, confirmed through learner corpus data analysis. This method combines CAH's predictive approach with Error Analysis Theory (Corder, 1967), which suggests that learner errors reveal valuable insights into acquisition patterns. Transfer Theory (Odlin, 1989) further informs the analysis by distinguishing facilitative and interfering elements in language transfer. Using both predictive analysis of linguistic contrasts and empirical error data from

Spanish-speaking learners, this study assesses CAH's effectiveness in identifying error patterns, offering insights to improve language teaching strategies.

Analyses and Discussion

Phonological Contrast

The table below shows the **comparative phonological features** in English (L2) and Spanish (L1), focusing on consonant sounds, vowels, and phonotactic structures. It includes examples, potential difficulties, and common learner errors.

Phonemic Inventories

Phonological Feature	English (L1) Example	Spanish (L2) Example	Potential Difficulty for L2 Learner	Common Learner Error
Consonant Sounds	/θ/ as in "think"	/t/ as in "tener"	English has consonants like /θ/ and /ð/ (voiceless and voiced "th" sounds), which do not exist in Spanish.	Replacing /θ/ with /t/, resulting in "tink" instead of "think."
	/h/ as in "house"	None (no /h/ sound)	English /h/ is absent in Spanish, making it difficult for learners to pronounce correctly.	Omitting /h/ or substituting it with a sound closer to /x/
Vowel Sounds	/ɪ/ as in "bit" and /i:/ as in "beat"	/i/ as in "mi" (only one close front vowel)	English has both short and long vowels that change meaning, unlike Spanish vowels which have consistent length.	Substituting /ɪ/ with /i/, making "bit" sound like "beet"
	Diphthongs like /aɪ/ in "eye"	/ai/ as in "aire"	English has more diphthongs, which can be harder to pronounce or identify for Spanish speakers.	Using single vowels instead of diphthongs, as in "aie" for "eye"

Phonotactic Inventories

Phonological Feature	English (L1) Example	Spanish (L2) Example	Potential Difficulty for L2 Learner	Common Learner Error
Consonant Clusters	/str/ as in "street"	/pl/ as in "plato"	English permits complex clusters at syllable onsets, while Spanish allows simpler clusters.	Omitting consonants in clusters, pronouncing "street" as "estreet"
	/spl/ as in "splendid"	None (complex clusters less common)	Complex clusters are less common in Spanish, so English clusters can be challenging to master.	Inserting a vowel, saying "esplendid" instead of "splendid"
Syllable Structure	CCVCCC in "strengths"	CV.CV as in "casa"	English has complex syllable structures (C for consonant, V for vowel), whereas Spanish syllables are simpler.	Simplifying syllables, e.g., "streng" instead of "strengths"
Stress Patterns	Unpredictable stress, e.g., "record" (noun/verb)	Predictable stress on penultimate syllable	English stress patterns vary, unlike Spanish, where stress is more regular.	Misplacing stress, as in saying "RE-cord" for the verb "record"

These comparisons highlight areas where Spanish-speaking learners may face challenges with English phonology, emphasizing the importance of targeted pronunciation practice.

Consonant Sounds. English has consonants like /θ/ and /h/ that don't exist in Spanish, causing learners to substitute with familiar sounds, such as /t/ for /θ/ or omitting /h/.

Vowel Sounds. English vowels vary in length and quality, while Spanish vowels are more consistent. Learners may confuse English vowels, pronouncing "bit" as "beet."

Consonant Clusters. English allows more complex clusters (e.g., /str/ in "street"), which can be challenging for Spanish speakers who may simplify clusters by adding vowels or dropping consonants.

Syllable Structure. English syllables can contain multiple consonants at the onset and coda, while Spanish syllables are simpler. Learners may omit sounds to simplify complex syllables.

Stress Patterns. English has variable stress patterns that affect meaning, while Spanish has predictable stress. Spanish-speaking learners may misplace stress in English words.

Morphological Contrast

Here's a table comparing key **Morphological Features** in English (L1) and Spanish (L2) related to verb conjugation, pluralization, possession, and articles. Each row includes examples and identifies potential difficulties and common learner errors.

Morphological Feature	English (L1) Example	Spanish (L2) Example	Potential Difficulty for L2 Learner	Common Learner Error
Verb Conjugation	"I walk" vs. "He walks"	"Yo camino" vs. "Él camina"	English has fewer conjugation forms; learners may struggle with subject-verb agreement in third person .	Using the base form for all subjects (e.g., "He walk").
Pluralization	"Cat" → "Cats"	"Gato" → "Gatos"	English pluralization rules can be irregular; learners may confuse regular and irregular forms.	Incorrectly applying Spanish rules, like adding -s to all nouns (e.g., "childs").
Possession	"Paul's book"	"El libro de Pablo"	The possessive structure differs; English uses 's while Spanish uses a prepositional phrase.	Misplacing possessive forms or using them incorrectly (e.g., "The book of Paul").
Articles	"A cat", "The cat"	"Un gato", "El gato"	English articles are less inflected than Spanish, leading to confusion over when to use them.	Omitting articles entirely or using them inappropriately (e.g., saying "I have cat").

While English and Spanish share some morphological similarities, there are also important differences that can pose challenges for L2 learners. These differences include:

Verb Conjugation. In English, the third person singular requires an -s ending, while Spanish verbs change based on subject pronouns and tense, which can be more complex.

Pluralization. English typically adds -s or -es for pluralization, while Spanish nouns often change their endings based on gender and number.

Possession. English indicates possession with an apostrophe-s, whereas Spanish often uses a prepositional structure that can confuse English speakers.

Articles. Both languages use definite and indefinite articles, but their application differs significantly, leading to potential errors in usage.

Common Errors. Learners often apply their L1 rules when speaking or writing in L2, leading to mistakes that reflect their native language's structure rather than the target language's conventions.

The differences between English morphology and that of various L1s create a landscape fraught with challenges for L2 learners. These challenges manifest in specific error patterns related to grammatical morphemes, morphosyntactic structures, allomorphy, and overall morphological awareness. Addressing these areas through targeted instruction can help mitigate errors and enhance overall language proficiency.

Lexicology & Semantic Cognates Contrast

The second comparative table shows the **Lexicology & Semantic Cognate Features** in English (L1) and Spanish (L2) related to verb conjugation, pluralization, possession, and articles. Each row includes examples and identifies potential difficulties and common learner errors.

Lexicology & Semantic Cognate Features	English (L1)	Spanish (L2)	Potential Difficulty for L2 Learner	Common Learner Error
Verb Conjugation	"I walk" vs. "He walks"	"Yo camino" vs. "Él camina"	English uses -s for third-person singular only, which can be confusing.	Omitting the third person -s ending (e.g., "He walk").
Pluralization	"Cat" → "Cats"	"Gato" → "Gatos"	English has irregular plurals, which differ from Spanish patterns.	Applying Spanish rules universally, e.g., <i>childs</i> instead of <i>children</i> .
Possession	"Paul's book"	"El libro de Pablo"	English uses possessive -'s, while Spanish uses "de" for possession.	Translating word-for-word, e.g., "The book of Paul."
Articles	"A cat", "The cat"	"Un gato", "El gato"	Articles in English do not reflect gender or number, unlike Spanish.	Misusing articles or omitting them entirely, e.g., "I have cat" instead of "I have a cat."

This table provides a structured approach to understanding syntactic differences and the common errors learners might face when navigating between English and Spanish syntactic structures.

Verb Conjugation. English verb conjugation is relatively simple, adding -s for the third person in the present tense, whereas Spanish verbs change based on the subject and tense.

Pluralization. English pluralization generally involves adding -s or -es, with exceptions (e.g., *children*, *mice*). Spanish rules are more predictable, usually adding -s or -es without irregular forms.

Possession. English indicates possession by adding -'s, whereas Spanish commonly uses "de" (e.g., *el libro de Pablo*). This can be confusing for learners who translate literally.

Articles. English articles (a, an, the) do not change for gender or number, while Spanish articles (un, una, el, la) adjust based on gender and plurality, creating challenges in choosing the correct article.

Syntactical Contrast

The third table shows the **comparative Syntactic Features** in English (L1) and Spanish (L2) related to word order, verb phrase structure, noun phrases, sentence structure, negation, verb tenses and aspect, subject-verb agreement, and article usage. Each row includes examples and identifies potential difficulties and common learner errors.

Syntactic Feature	English (L1) Example	Spanish (L2) Example	Potential Difficulty for L2 Learner	Common Learner Error
Word Order	Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) The cat chased the mouse.	Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) El gato persiguió al ratón.	Generally similar word order, but Spanish can be more flexible.	Incorrect word order, especially in complex sentences.
Verb Phrase Structure	Verb + (Direct Object) + (Indirect Object) + (Adverbial Phrase) He gave her a book.	Verb + (Indirect Object) + (Direct Object) + (Adverbial Phrase) Él le dio un libro a ella.	Differences in word order, especially with indirect objects.	Incorrect placement of objects or adverbs.
Noun Phrases	Determiner + (Adjective) + Noun The big red house	Determiner + Noun + (Adjective) La casa grande roja	Different word order in noun phrases, especially with adjectives.	Incorrect word order in noun phrases.
Sentence Structure	Simple, compound, and complex sentences The boy who was wearing a blue shirt left.	Simple, compound, and complex sentences El niño que llevaba una camisa azul se fue.	Sentence structure complexity and the use of subordinate clauses.	Incorrect sentence structure, especially in complex sentences.
Negation	Use of "not" or auxiliary verbs I don't like coffee.	Use of "no" or negative particle "no" No me gusta el café.	Placement of negative particles and the use of double negatives.	Incorrect placement of negative particles or overuse of negation.
Verb Tense and Aspect	Present tense: I walk; Past tense: I walked; Progressive aspect: I am walking	Presente: Yo camino; Pretérito perfecto simple: Yo caminé; Gerundio: Estoy caminando	Complex verb tenses and aspects, especially the subjunctive mood.	Incorrect use of verb tenses and aspects.
Subject-Verb Agreement	The cat runs; The cats run.	El gato corre; Los gatos corren.	Subject-verb agreement, especially with irregular verbs.	Incorrect subject-verb agreement.
Article Usage	The book, a book	El libro, un libro	Use of definite and indefinite articles, gender agreement.	Incorrect use of articles or gender agreement.

While English and Spanish share some syntactic similarities, there are also important differences that can pose challenges for L2 learners. Understanding these syntactic differences is crucial for L2 learners to achieve accurate and fluent language production. These differences include:

Word order. While both languages primarily follow an SVO word order, Spanish can have more flexibility in word order, especially in certain constructions.

Noun phrase structure. The placement of adjectives within noun phrases can differ between the two languages.

Sentence structure. While both languages use simple, compound, and complex sentences, the structure of these sentences can vary, particularly in terms of subordinate clauses and relative clauses.

Negation. The placement and use of negative particles can differ between the two languages.

Article Usage. Spanish has a more complex article system than English, with different articles for masculine and feminine nouns, singular and plural forms.

Pragmatics

Here's a table comparing key **Pragmatic Features** in English (L1) and Spanish (L2) related to directness vs. indirectness, polite markers, formal vs. informal register, turn-taking, and non-verbal communication. Each row includes examples and identifies potential difficulties and common learner errors.

Pragmatic Feature	English (L2) Example	Spanish (L1) Example	Potential Difficulty for L2 Learner	Common Learner Error
Directness vs. Indirectness	"Can you close the window, please?"	"¿Podrías cerrar la ventana, por favor?"	Directness in English can be perceived as rude in Spanish.	Using overly direct language in Spanish
Politeness Markers	"Please," "Thank you," "Could you..."	"Por favor," "Gracias," "Podría..."	The use of appropriate politeness markers and honorifics.	Omitting politeness markers or using them inappropriately
Formal vs. Informal Register	"Hey, what's up?" vs. "Good morning, sir/madam"	"Hola, ¿qué tal?" vs. "Buenos días, señor/señora"	Switching between formal and informal registers.	Using informal language in formal situations or vice versa
Turn-taking	Pauses, eye contact, vocal cues	Pauses, eye contact, vocal cues	Understanding and following turn-taking conventions in conversations.	Interrupting or talking over others
Non-verbal Communication	Gestures, body language, facial expressions	Gestures, body language, facial expressions	Interpreting non-verbal cues and using them appropriately.	Misinterpreting non-verbal cues or using them inappropriately

By understanding these pragmatic differences, L2 learners of Spanish can improve their intercultural communication skills and avoid misunderstandings.

Cultural Differences. Pragmatic features are deeply rooted in cultural norms and expectations.

Politeness and Directness. While English tends to be more direct, Spanish often favors a more indirect and polite approach.

Non-verbal Communication. Non-verbal cues can vary significantly between cultures and can be misinterpreted if not understood.

Turn-taking. Understanding turn-taking conventions is crucial for effective communication.

Conclusion

The phonological, morphological, lexicological, syntactic, and pragmatic contrasts between English and Spanish create a complex landscape of challenges and opportunities for Spanish-speaking learners of English. The data from the analyses demonstrate that phonemic discrepancies, such as the lack of /θ/ and /h/ sounds in Spanish, lead to systematic pronunciation errors, with learners often substituting English phonemes with similar Spanish sounds. This phonological gap reinforces the need for targeted pronunciation instruction that emphasizes these critical sounds to improve English fluency among Spanish speakers. Additionally, the diverse vowel systems—with English having short and long vowels, unlike the more stable Spanish vowels—pose difficulties in distinguishing meanings in English words based on vowel length, highlighting the importance of phonetic practice and vowel discrimination exercises.

The morphological contrasts also show significant learning barriers, particularly in verb conjugation, pluralization, and possession structures. English and Spanish share certain morphological traits, such as subject-verb agreement; however, the lack of gendered plural forms in English, compared to the gendered forms in Spanish, introduces complexities that often lead to learner errors in noun and article agreement. Furthermore, the syntactical structure of English poses challenges for Spanish learners, especially in terms of the flexibility in English sentence formation, where word order can change based on emphasis or context. Spanish speakers, accustomed to relatively rigid syntactic structures, may struggle to adapt to English's variability in word order and may misplace modifiers or misunderstand the nuances of emphasis.

Lexicological and semantic cognate relationships offer both facilitation and interference in language learning. True cognates, such as family (familia) and animal (animal), aid in vocabulary acquisition, yet false cognates—embarazada for "pregnant" instead of "embarrassed"—lead to frequent misunderstandings and require careful instruction to prevent misuse. These cognate issues underscore the importance of cognate awareness in language instruction, with a focus on recognizing and correctly applying both true and false cognates in context.

Pragmatically, the contrastive analysis highlights a profound cultural component that influences language use beyond grammatical correctness. English's directness can be perceived as impolite by Spanish speakers who are more accustomed to indirectness and elaborate politeness markers. This difference is especially relevant in professional and formal settings, where English learners must navigate varying levels of politeness and register that may differ significantly from their own cultural norms. Additionally, non-verbal cues and conversational structures, such as turn-taking and the interpretation of pauses, often vary between the languages and can result in unintentional miscommunications if not addressed in language instruction.

In conclusion, a comprehensive understanding of these contrastive linguistic features between English and Spanish can inform more effective, targeted teaching strategies for Spanish-speaking learners of English. By focusing on these specific phonological, morphological, lexicological, syntactic, and pragmatic contrasts, educators can design instructional methods that not only mitigate common errors but also leverage cognate relationships to facilitate learning. This approach aligns with the principles of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which asserts that the

systematic examination of linguistic differences can predict potential difficulties and inform strategies for successful second language acquisition. As global demand for bilingual proficiency continues to grow, such contrastive insights will be critical in enhancing language learning outcomes and fostering more effective cross-linguistic communication.

Reflecting on this study of English and Spanish through the lens of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis has deepened my understanding of the nuanced challenges faced by language learners. The analysis reveals that phonological differences, such as the absence of certain sounds in Spanish, can systematically hinder accurate English pronunciation, while morphological and syntactic variations underscore the importance of focused instruction to address issues in conjugation, pluralization, and sentence structure. The exploration of lexicological and semantic cognates has highlighted how both true and false cognates serve as double-edged swords—facilitating vocabulary acquisition on one hand, yet often leading to misunderstandings on the other. Most importantly, the study of pragmatic contrasts, like differing levels of directness and non-verbal cues, has shown me that language learning is as much about understanding cultural context as it is about mastering structure. This comprehensive perspective has enriched my approach to language education, reinforcing the importance of targeted, culturally informed teaching methods that enhance both linguistic proficiency and intercultural communication skills.

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