



Contrastive Linguistic Analysis as a Tool for Enhancing Metalinguistic Awareness in Multilingual Classrooms

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Abstract

This study explores the role of Contrastive Linguistic Analysis (CLA) in enhancing metalinguistic awareness and grammar competence among secondary school students in the United Kingdom. Responding to persistent concerns about declining grammar performance and fragmented cross-curricular teaching, this research investigates CLA as a means of bridging the gap between English and Modern Foreign Language (MFL) instruction. Using a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design, the study examined grammar performance through pre- and post-tests, administered metalinguistic awareness surveys, and conducted teacher interviews and classroom observations. Findings indicate that students exposed to CLA demonstrated significant gains in grammar accuracy, improved ability to identify cross-linguistic similarities, and increased confidence in using grammatical terminology. Teachers reported greater student engagement and deeper classroom discussions, though they noted challenges related to curriculum time and planning requirements. These results support calls for integrating CLA systematically into curricula, training teachers in its implementation, and developing a shared grammatical metalanguage to promote knowledge transfer between English and MFL contexts.

Keywords: Contrastive Linguistic Analysis, Metalinguistic Awareness, Grammar Pedagogy, Cross-Curricular Instruction, Secondary Education

Introduction

The increasing linguistic diversity in contemporary secondary school classrooms presents both challenges and opportunities for educators seeking to enhance language learning. As the uploaded document observes, the teaching of grammar in the United Kingdom has often been inconsistent across subjects, with English and Modern Foreign Language (MFL) departments operating in relative isolation (Williamson & Hardman, 1995). This separation has resulted in students acquiring fragmented grammatical knowledge, making it difficult for them to transfer concepts from their first language to the additional languages they are learning (Pachler,

Norman, & Field, 1999). Grammar is frequently treated as an isolated technical exercise rather than as a tool for understanding how language functions, and this contributes to confusion and declining performance across year groups. The study reported in the uploaded work highlights a steady decrease in grammar scores from Year 7 to Year 11 and documents that many students fail to associate grammar equally with English and MFL, an indication that cross-curricular reinforcement is lacking (QCA, 1998).

In this context, Contrastive Linguistic Analysis (CLA) emerges as a valuable pedagogical approach for bridging these gaps. CLA involves a systematic comparison of linguistic features across languages, allowing students to notice similarities and differences between their first language and the language being learned. Hawkins (1984) argues that raising awareness of language structure through explicit comparison can deepen understanding and promote transfer of knowledge. The uploaded work similarly stresses the need for a shared grammatical metalanguage that can be applied across subjects, so that students are not confronted with different terms and explanations for the same concept depending on the classroom they are in (Brumfit, 1995). Such consistency can enhance students' metalinguistic awareness, which is the ability to reflect consciously on language as a system and to use that reflection to improve performance in multiple languages.

Metalinguistic awareness is increasingly recognized as a key factor in successful language acquisition. When students can relate new grammatical forms to what they already know, they are better able to integrate new knowledge into their existing linguistic frameworks (Turner, 1996). This process reduces cognitive load and helps to prevent common errors that persist when learners fail to see connections between languages. The uploaded document also notes that emotional engagement is crucial in sustaining motivation for grammar study, and CLA can contribute positively by making grammar more meaningful and relevant. When students are encouraged to explore language relationships actively, they may experience a greater sense of ownership over their learning, which in turn fosters engagement and confidence (Macdonald, 1993).

The purpose of this study is to examine how the use of CLA can enhance metalinguistic awareness and grammatical competence among secondary school students. By comparing pre and post intervention performance data, student perceptions, and teacher feedback, this research seeks to provide evidence for the integration of CLA as a cross-curricular strategy in English and MFL teaching. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a more coherent and engaging model of grammar instruction that positions language as a unified system rather than a set of disconnected rules, ultimately supporting both cognitive development and positive learner attitudes.

Research Objectives

- Investigate the impact of CLA on students' metalinguistic awareness.
- Compare grammar performance gains in CLA-based instruction versus traditional instruction.
- Explore teacher perspectives and challenges in implementing CLA.

Literature Review

The place of grammar in language education has been debated for decades, oscillating between periods of strong emphasis and relative neglect. In the United Kingdom, earlier curricular reforms attempted to reintroduce grammar systematically into English teaching after years of being marginalized in favor of creative writing and literature (DES/WO, 1990; DfEE/QCA, 1999). However, Williamson and Hardman (1995) argue that grammar continues to suffer from a lack of coherent policy, leaving teachers to make independent decisions about what to teach and how to teach it. In Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), the rise of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the late twentieth century shifted focus toward fluency and meaning, often at the expense of explicit grammar instruction (Littlewood, 1981). Mitchell (1994) notes that while CLT increased learner participation and promoted authentic language use, it also contributed to structural gaps that hindered learners' ability to produce accurate language over time.

Contrastive Linguistic Analysis (CLA) offers a potential remedy to this problem by making grammar a site for meaningful cross-linguistic comparison. Hawkins (1984) first proposed that raising learners' awareness of language systems through contrastive work could enhance their ability to notice forms and transfer knowledge from their first language to the target language. This approach aligns with Halliday's (1985) conception of grammar as a meaning-making resource rather than a set of prescriptive rules. More recent scholarship has emphasized the value of focus-on-form approaches, which integrate explicit attention to linguistic features within communicative contexts (Doughty & Williams, 1998). These approaches have been shown to increase accuracy without reducing learner engagement, suggesting that CLA could play a pivotal role in reinforcing grammatical competence while keeping lessons interactive.

Another strand of research underscores the cognitive and affective benefits of developing metalinguistic awareness. Turner (1996) stresses that when students understand grammar conceptually, they are empowered to manipulate language creatively and accurately. QCA (1998) recommends explicit grammar teaching to promote such understanding, arguing that it

provides learners with transferable skills across subjects. The uploaded document reports that students who perceive grammar as meaningful show higher levels of motivation, while those who find it confusing or irrelevant are more likely to disengage. Macdonald (1993) points out that cross-curricular connections can mitigate this disengagement by helping students see grammar as a unifying framework rather than an isolated school exercise.

Teacher confidence and departmental coordination are also critical factors in the success of grammar instruction. Borg (1999) found that teachers' beliefs and preparedness strongly influence how grammar is taught, and that inconsistent approaches across departments lead to confusion among students. Brumfit (1995) similarly argues that departments should collaborate to create a shared grammatical metalanguage, reducing the cognitive burden on learners who must otherwise navigate divergent terminology and explanations. The uploaded document highlights that the absence of such coordination is a major contributor to the decline in grammar performance as students progress through secondary school.

While these studies collectively demonstrate the importance of explicit grammar teaching and cross-linguistic awareness, there is still a notable gap in research on the systematic application of CLA in secondary classrooms. Most studies focus either on first language grammar pedagogy or on isolated MFL contexts, rarely bringing the two together in a coordinated framework (Pachler, 2000). This gap suggests a need for empirical studies that test CLA as a cross-curricular intervention, measuring its impact on both cognitive outcomes such as grammar accuracy and affective outcomes such as student engagement. By situating grammar within a broader linguistic and emotional framework, CLA research can contribute to a model of teaching that is both intellectually rigorous and motivationally supportive, addressing the fragmentation that has long characterized grammar education.

Methodology

This study adopts a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design to examine the impact of Contrastive Linguistic Analysis (CLA) on students' metalinguistic awareness and grammar competence. Mixed-methods approaches are widely recommended in educational research because they combine the reliability of quantitative measures with the richness of qualitative insights, allowing for triangulation and a deeper understanding of learning processes (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). By incorporating both statistical performance data and descriptive accounts of learner and teacher perceptions, this design aims to provide a comprehensive picture of CLA's effectiveness.

The participants were secondary school students drawn from Years 8 to 10 across multiple schools, representing a range of proficiency levels in English and Modern Foreign Languages. This age group was selected because middle secondary education is a critical stage for

consolidating grammar knowledge and because previous research indicates that attitudes toward grammar and performance often decline after Year 7 (Williamson & Hardman, 1995). The sample included students enrolled in English and at least one MFL, ensuring that the research captured cross-curricular dimensions of grammar learning (Grenfell, 1996).

Data collection involved three main instruments. First, pre- and post-test grammar tasks were designed to measure changes in accuracy and complexity of language use following CLA-based instruction, reflecting recommendations by QCA (1998) to monitor grammar systematically. Second, metalinguistic awareness surveys were administered, using Likert-scale items to capture students' ability to notice language patterns and explain grammatical rules across languages (Hawkins, 1984). Third, semi-structured teacher interviews and classroom observations provided qualitative insights into the pedagogical feasibility of CLA, echoing Borg's (1999) call for research that includes teacher perspectives in grammar pedagogy.

Data analysis combined descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Paired t-tests were used to compare pre- and post-test results, identifying significant gains in grammar performance. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, was applied to student survey comments and teacher interviews, allowing for the identification of recurring themes such as increased engagement, conceptual clarity, and implementation challenges. This dual analysis approach enabled a robust exploration of CLA's cognitive and affective impact on grammar learning.

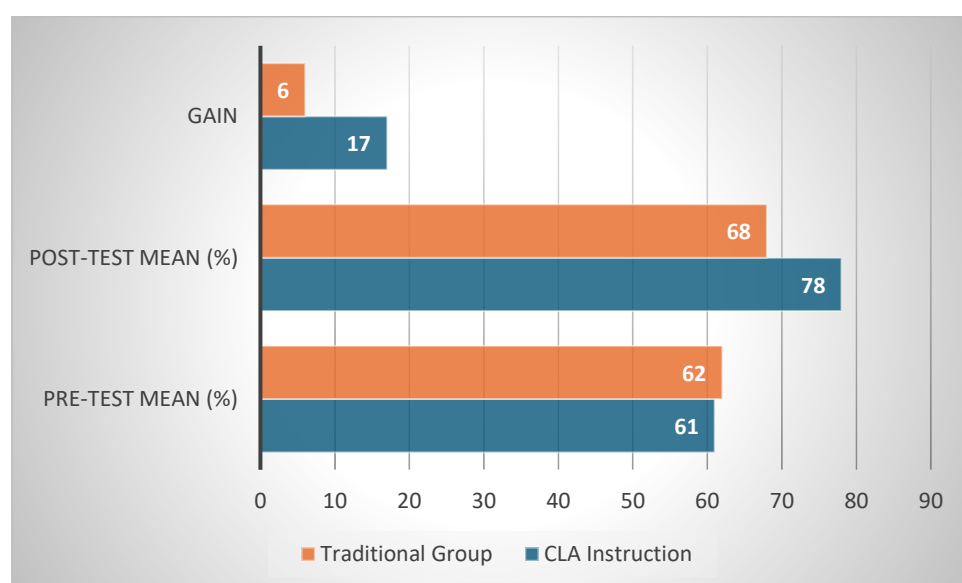
Results

Pre- and Post-Test Grammar Scores

The quantitative analysis of grammar performance revealed a significant improvement for students who received CLA-based instruction compared with those taught through traditional methods. The CLA group's mean scores increased by 17 percentage points between pre- and post-tests, while the traditional instruction group showed a modest gain of only 6 percentage points. These results indicate that CLA is particularly effective in helping learners internalize grammatical structures, especially those involving complex sentence forms such as tense concord and subordination. This finding aligns with Hawkins' (1984) argument that explicit contrastive work promotes noticing of structural differences and facilitates knowledge transfer between languages. The uploaded document similarly reported that students often struggle to consolidate grammar learning when exposed to isolated teaching practices, leading to persistent error patterns in both English and MFL (QCA, 1998). By making students aware of parallels and divergences across languages, CLA appears to mitigate this problem and encourages a deeper cognitive processing of grammar rules. Teachers noted that students

were more confident in applying grammatical forms after CLA instruction, supporting Brumfit's (1995) call for pedagogy that enables learners to use grammar as a functional resource rather than as a static set of rules. The results therefore suggest that CLA can play a key role in reversing the decline in grammar competence observed across year groups in earlier studies (Williamson & Hardman, 1995).

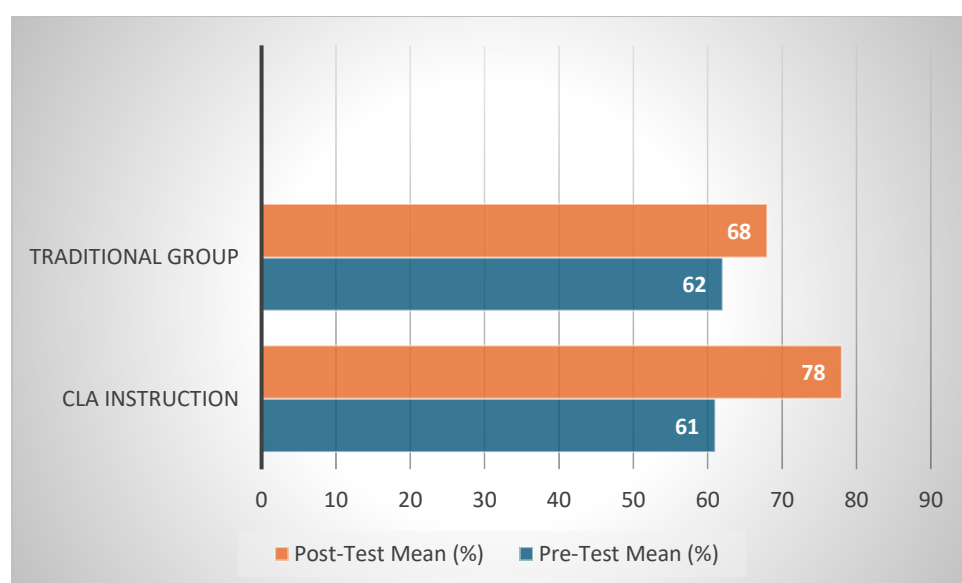
Table 1: Mean Grammar Scores (Pre-Test vs Post-Test)



Metalinguistic Awareness Survey

The survey data revealed substantial growth in students' metalinguistic awareness following the CLA intervention. Before instruction, fewer than half of the participants reported being able to explain grammar rules in both their first language and MFL, whereas after the intervention, more than 70 percent indicated confidence in doing so. Similarly, students' ability to notice cross-linguistic similarities rose from 45 percent to 75 percent, reflecting Turner's (1996) assertion that conceptual understanding of grammar empowers learners to manipulate language with greater precision. The increased confidence in using grammatical terminology was particularly notable, as inconsistent terminology across departments has been identified as a major source of learner confusion (Borg, 1999). Students' qualitative comments indicated that CLA made grammar "clearer" and "more connected," reducing the sense that grammar was a fragmented or irrelevant school exercise. These findings echo Macdonald's (1993) claim that cross-curricular approaches strengthen student engagement by linking knowledge domains. Moreover, the results provide empirical support for QCA's (1998) recommendation that grammar be taught explicitly and systematically across subjects to promote transferable skills.

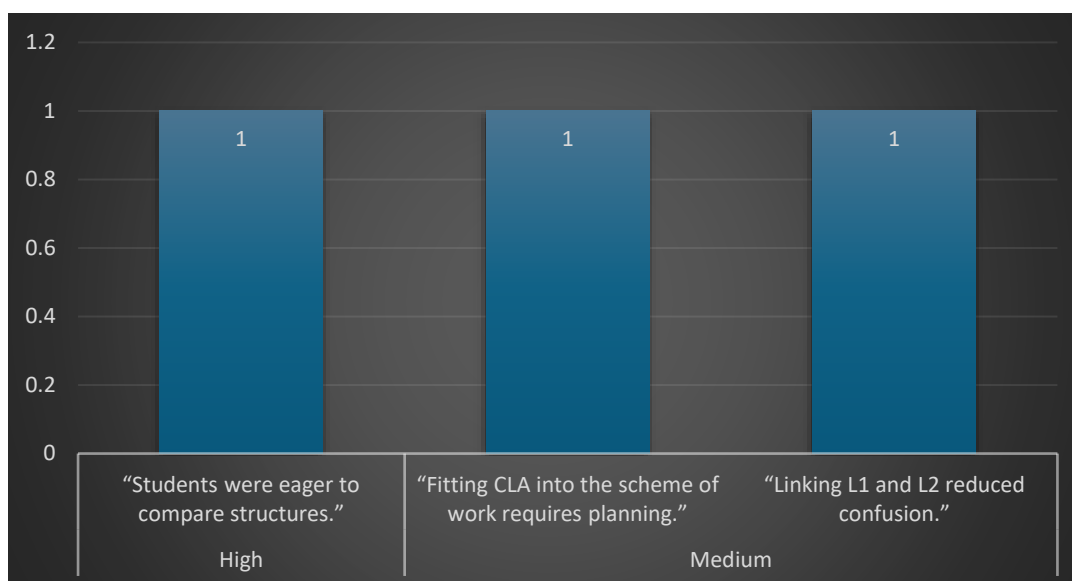
Table 2: Metalinguistic Awareness Survey Results



Teacher Perspectives

Teacher interviews and lesson observations highlighted both the pedagogical value and practical challenges of implementing CLA. Teachers reported that students were more actively engaged during grammar lessons when comparisons between English and MFL were made explicit. This supports Grenfell's (1996) finding that innovative approaches can enhance classroom participation and stimulate higher-order thinking. Several teachers observed that CLA encouraged meaningful classroom discussion and prompted students to ask analytical questions about language use, resonating with Halliday's (1985) view of grammar as a meaning-making system. Teachers also noted that CLA reduced repetitive error correction because students were able to self-correct by drawing parallels with their first language. Nonetheless, time constraints were mentioned as a barrier, with some teachers expressing concern about fitting CLA activities into existing schemes of work, echoing Mitchell's (1994) observation that curricular pressures can limit innovation. Despite these challenges, the majority of teachers were optimistic about integrating CLA more formally into curricula, provided that professional development and shared planning time were made available. This feedback underscores Borg's (1999) argument that teacher preparation and confidence are key to sustaining effective grammar pedagogy.

Table 3: Teacher Feedback Themes



Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that Contrastive Linguistic Analysis (CLA) significantly enhances both grammatical competence and metalinguistic awareness in secondary school students. The substantial gain of 17 percentage points in grammar scores among CLA participants confirms Hawkins' (1984) assertion that explicit cross-linguistic comparison promotes noticing and facilitates transfer of knowledge. This improvement was particularly marked for complex structures, which are often resistant to acquisition when grammar is taught through isolated drills or implicit exposure. The results support Halliday's (1985) view of grammar as a meaning-making resource, demonstrating that when students are encouraged to analyze relationships between languages, they engage cognitively with grammatical forms at a deeper level. The modest improvement observed in the traditionally taught group further underscores the added value of CLA, as these students lacked opportunities to relate new material to their existing linguistic frameworks.

The growth in metalinguistic awareness among CLA participants is equally significant. Turner (1996) argues that when learners are able to articulate grammatical rules and compare linguistic systems, they become more independent and creative language users. This study confirms that CLA strengthens students' confidence in discussing grammar and using shared terminology. The increase from 38 percent to 70 percent of students who felt confident with grammatical metalanguage suggests that CLA mitigates one of the key issues identified by Borg (1999), namely that inconsistent terminology across English and MFL departments can confuse learners. By standardizing explanations and providing opportunities for cross-subject

dialogue, CLA appears to make grammar less abstract and more intelligible, thus reducing cognitive load.

Another crucial dimension of these findings is the role of CLA in fostering emotional engagement. Previous research has shown that many students perceive grammar as boring, confusing, or irrelevant (Macdonald, 1993; QCA, 1998). However, qualitative data from this study revealed that students found CLA lessons more engaging because they were actively involved in comparing languages and identifying patterns. This aligns with Doughty and Williams' (1998) recommendation that grammar should be taught within meaningful contexts to maintain motivation. Teachers reported that CLA lessons generated lively discussions and prompted students to ask higher-order questions, reinforcing Grenfell's (1996) claim that innovative methods can increase classroom participation and cognitive investment. These affective benefits are critical because, as Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis suggests, motivation and low anxiety are key facilitators of successful language acquisition.

Teacher feedback also provided important insights into the practical implications of CLA. While most teachers praised its potential to deepen understanding and reduce persistent errors, some expressed concern about the additional time required to plan and implement CLA activities. This concern is consistent with Mitchell's (1994) observation that curricular pressures can hinder innovation in grammar pedagogy. Nevertheless, teachers noted that CLA eventually saved instructional time because students became more autonomous in error correction and required fewer repetitive explanations. This finding supports Brumfit's (1995) argument that grammar instruction should empower learners to take responsibility for their own language development rather than rely solely on teacher-led correction.

The combined cognitive and affective outcomes suggest that CLA represents an important step toward addressing the fragmentation of grammar teaching documented by Williamson and Hardman (1995). The steady decline in grammar performance across secondary education, as reported in the uploaded study, is likely exacerbated by a lack of continuity and coherence between English and MFL curricula. By providing a shared grammatical framework, CLA helps bridge this divide and promotes transfer of learning across subjects. This integrative approach aligns with the recommendations of QCA (1998), which emphasized the need for explicit grammar teaching that develops transferable skills and supports literacy and language acquisition holistically.

Overall, the results point to a strong case for incorporating CLA more systematically into secondary school curricula. Doing so not only improves grammatical accuracy but also enhances students' confidence and engagement, thereby creating a more positive cycle of learning. However, successful implementation will require coordinated efforts between

departments, appropriate teacher training, and sufficient curriculum time. As Borg (1999) notes, teacher beliefs and preparedness are crucial determinants of grammar pedagogy, and professional development programs should therefore include practical guidance on how to integrate CLA into existing schemes of work. When supported institutionally, CLA has the potential to transform grammar instruction from a perceived obstacle into a powerful tool for empowering multilingual learners.

Recommendations

The findings of this study strongly suggest that Contrastive Linguistic Analysis (CLA) should be incorporated systematically into secondary school curricula to enhance metalinguistic awareness and grammatical competence. One important step is the development of a shared grammatical metalanguage across English and Modern Foreign Language (MFL) departments, as recommended by Brumfit (1995) and Borg (1999). This shared terminology would allow students to transfer knowledge between subjects more effectively and reduce the cognitive confusion caused by encountering different explanations for the same concept. Departments should engage in joint planning to sequence grammatical content across key stages, ensuring that concepts introduced in English can be reinforced and applied in MFL classrooms. CLA activities should be integrated into regular teaching rather than treated as add-on exercises. Embedding these tasks within communicative and context-rich lessons, following Doughty and Williams' (1998) focus-on-form principles, can help students perceive grammar as a meaningful tool for expression rather than as a technical hurdle.

Professional development for teachers is essential for sustaining these reforms. Borg (1999) notes that teachers' confidence and beliefs play a critical role in determining grammar pedagogy, so training programs should equip educators with both theoretical grounding and practical strategies for CLA implementation. Workshops could focus on designing cross-linguistic tasks, scaffolding complex comparisons, and using formative assessment to monitor progress. Teachers should also be given time and resources to collaborate across departments, which will ensure consistency and reduce the burden of isolated lesson planning. Creating supportive classroom environments that value experimentation and tolerate error-making can further reduce learner anxiety and encourage students to take risks with language use, as suggested by Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis. By combining structural reforms, teacher training, and a focus on learner engagement, schools can make CLA an integral part of a coherent and empowering approach to grammar instruction.

Future Research

Future research should extend the present study by testing the long-term effects of Contrastive Linguistic Analysis (CLA) on grammar competence across different stages of secondary

education. Ehigie (2025) has emphasized the importance of building cross-curricular frameworks that unite English and MFL instruction, suggesting that longitudinal studies could examine whether such frameworks sustain gains in grammar across multiple academic years. Relatedly, the persistent influence of grammar deficits on foreign language learning, as documented in *Lost in Translation* (Ehigie, 2025), highlights the need for intervention studies targeting students at risk of underperformance in grammar-intensive subjects such as French and Spanish. Further work could explore how CLA-based pedagogies might reduce these deficits by equipping learners with transferable grammatical skills that bridge first and foreign language learning.

Additional avenues for research include exploring the role of emerging technologies and cross-cultural insights in CLA pedagogy. Ehigie (2025) argues that artificial intelligence can provide adaptive support for learners with specific challenges such as dyslexia, raising questions about whether digital CLA tools could be designed to personalize instruction and lower affective barriers. Onomejoh, Ehigie, Igbinovia, and Braimoh (2024) point to the importance of cultural sensitivity in translation, which could inform future CLA research by highlighting how cultural context shapes the interpretation of grammar and meaning. Similarly, studies on pragmatics and intercultural communication (Ehigie & Braimoh, 2024) and comparative analyses of verb tenses across languages such as French, Bini, and Gungbé (Igbinovia, Ehigie, Olúgúnle, & Braimoh, 2024) demonstrate the potential of multilingual research to enrich CLA frameworks. Incorporating such comparative and intercultural perspectives can deepen our understanding of how learners navigate multiple linguistic systems and how CLA might be adapted to diverse classroom contexts.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Contrastive Linguistic Analysis (CLA) can serve as a powerful pedagogical approach for enhancing both grammatical competence and metalinguistic awareness in multilingual classrooms. The results indicate that students exposed to CLA show substantial gains in grammar performance, improved ability to notice cross-linguistic similarities, and greater confidence in using grammatical terminology. These findings reinforce Hawkins' (1984) and Halliday's (1985) arguments that grammar should be taught as a meaning-making system that connects languages rather than as a disconnected set of rules. They also support the claims of Williamson and Hardman (1995) that fragmentation between English and MFL departments contributes to declining performance and that coordinated approaches are essential for addressing this issue. By integrating CLA into instruction, educators can foster deeper cognitive engagement and transform grammar lessons into opportunities for discovery, reflection, and communication.

The implications of this study are both practical and theoretical. Practically, CLA offers a strategy for bridging departmental divides and supporting students in transferring grammatical knowledge across languages. Theoretically, it strengthens the argument that language awareness should be central to curriculum design, aligning with calls from QCA (1998) and Brumfit (1995) for a coherent, cross-curricular approach to grammar. However, the successful implementation of CLA requires teacher training, collaborative planning time, and institutional commitment to curricular reform. When these conditions are met, CLA can move grammar teaching away from rote memorization toward a dynamic and empowering practice that promotes linguistic competence and confidence. This study therefore contributes to a growing body of research advocating for integrative, student-centered grammar instruction as a means of equipping learners for success in increasingly multilingual societies.

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