

Learning And The Learner: A Critical Overview

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Abstract

Learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organised, specifically human psychological function-Vygotsky(1978,p-90)

The educational system at the UG Level stands walled in by the constraints of a theory based examination system,. paucity of skilled facilitators, skewed teacher –learner ratio and a classroom filled with a variegation of individuals and individualities. Given the limitations of such a context, it becomes a matter of grave conjecture if objectives such as development of communicative competence or outcome based learning become a mere cosmetic enterprise. Superadded to this is the issue of pragmatic encumbrances faced by the teacher in terms of transforming a classroom into a constructive and productive language room-an issue that compounded at the UG level given the extent of differences found within the learning atmosphere and the time bound semester system which gives the teacher little or no time to juggle curricular and pan-curricular activities. Matters get compounded when the content of the text book gets tangentially different from the culture of the average learner .The politics of power subtly and in a very innocuous manner steals its way into the curriculum, level of transaction and the classroom culture-ultimately influencing the quality and level of learning and having a determinable effect on the learners ability of imbibing the skills of social interaction and developing personal communicative competence.

Keywords: Educational constraints ,Communicative competence, classroom culture

Introduction

Each function of a child's cultural development appears twice –once on the social level and later on the individual level ,first between people (inter –psychological) and then inside the child(intra-psychological)(Vygotsky 1978,p-57)

With English rising from the ashes of colonialism into a phoenix of stature and power, the learning of the language takes on a paradigm shift with reference to its social, curricular and psychological overreaches.

No longer is it confined to the academia or the four walls of the classroom .It has now coloured the whole strata of the society in a new found conceptualisation of power-anyone who knows a smattering of the language automatically climbs up the of social hierarchy. With it becoming the de facto language of the pecking order, the teaching and learning is no more confined to mere transaction of textual content nor confined to the level of communicative interaction- it can have far reaching effects on the learner ,both at personal and intrapersonal levels.

Language is a profoundly value –laden and ideologically coloured set of codes whereby people ,including teachers and learners in the classroom ,mediate both relationships among themselves and their perceptions of and actions in the real world (Bernstein, 1975, 1990, 1996,;Geo'1992 ,1996:Gumperz1982:Wells,1992,1999:Wertsch,1985,1991)

With perceptions regarding the knowledge of the language taking on colossal and in some cases distorted propositions in terms of its position and importance ,English is no more considered just another language-it has donned the mantle of a power construct. This has lead to the escalation of educational institutions that provide for English education. However the paradox is rather startling-on one hand the number of Public schools have increased ,but the sad fact remains that nearly half of the Indian populace have no access to such schools-given the fact that Education in India has become one of the most lucrative business enterprises which has such an enviable success record that everything from curriculum to teacher –learner intake is weighed on the stake of profit and loss .In such a scenario ,most of the underprivileged who are lucky enough to get to schools have to do with institutions that provide for English only as a content subject –they are given little or no opportunity to use the language, leaving them profoundly defunct in its usage .

The matters get compounded at the UG level wherein not only is the medium of instruction English ,also the classroom becomes an amalgamation of individuals and individualities coming from a variety of backgrounds. In such a context the learning of the language takes

on a entirely overwhelming dimension on the psyche and learning competencies of the learner

Language study is an initiation into a kind of social practice that is at the boundary of two or more cultures (Context And Culture in Language Teaching-Claire Kramersch)

The Indian society has an intricate mesh of gradations interwoven into its social fibre. Be it culture, class, community, economic, gender-every strand is coloured in a brilliant hue of a kaleidoscope of divisions, the colours of which tend to cast their tinge on the social interactions of the individual. The classroom being the microcosm of such a society, it becomes sadly inexorable that the reality of the outside world gets reflected in the academic atmosphere, both at curricular and at the level of classroom pragmatics.

The learner and language acquisition

Education is a liberating force, and in our age it is also a democratising force, cutting across the barriers of caste and class, smoothing out inequalities imposed by birth and other circumstances-Indira Gandhi

The true essence of education today has got diluted in the present society. Communicative competency in English is now equated to being educated and the echo of such a hypothesis finds reverberations in the echelons of power within the society. Communication is a two way process and requires not only the context but also a blend of various productive and receptive cognitive skills. In this perspective, it becomes imperative that the learners initiate the process of imbibing these discrete skills and the facilitators provide for a healthy platform for the teaching learning process. However the average classroom at the tertiary level follows a teacher centric approach with the cycle of "Teacher reading-paraphrasing-note -giving (Dr. Bhaskaran Nair) providing for little or no assistance in furthering these objectives. And the sad fact remains that such a praxis holds good not only in the literature but also in the language teaching spaces.

Least of all we should think of the educational processes as one-sided, and ascribe all activity without exception to the environment, making nothing of the activity of the student himself, of the activity of his teacher and of everything that must come into contact with education. On the contrary, in education there is nothing passive or active. Even lifeless objects, when they are brought into the educational arena, when they are assigned an educational role,

acquire a sense of purpose and become effective participants in this process (Vygotsky, L.S 1997 : 52. Italics in the original.)

For any classroom activity to be productive or for any educational objectives to be realised ,it becomes imperative that the learners acquire a sense of purpose or become active participants .However in reality classrooms at the UG level in an average Indian context are peopled by scholars ,the majority of whom belong to the non-creamy layer that is students who were not able to make the cut and get themselves enrolled in elite courses like Engineering or Medicine .While many of them are fluent in the spoken version they lack the necessary finesse when it comes to competency in the other skills especially reading and writing .These students take English as another” fun” subject and tend to relate to it with a great amount of levity. The other clique prefer to shy away from it since they are acutely aware of their lack of fluency –both of them create hurdles in the teaching –learning domain. the discipline context ,class control ,completion of the syllabus on time ,

Even though a learner may have the natural inclination to take control over their learning, the development of true learning requires systematic support(Benson 2001,p-75).This support comes in various arrangements like peer support, teacher personality ,pedagogical practices ,evaluations and expectations ,learner autonomy etc. The fact remains that unless these factors blend into a commonsensical aggregate ,the final educational objectives would never transform into concrete outcomes.

Classroom Pragmatics

An unstructured observation of a classroom at the tertiary level reveals the presence of groups having common cultural and linguistic competencies. The members of the group tend to thrive in closed networks. The matters get compounded when the learners come from vernacular medium backgrounds. This again creates impediments to the acquiring the skills of SLA since cooperative learning contributes to improved intergroup and interpersonal relationships in a multicultural situation (Halliday).however when students do not network ,it can cause hardships in the way of imbibing communication competence Learners in an integrated educational settings working towards the same goals must communicate effectively with one another ,understand the advantages associated with positive group dynamics and recognize that differences are a form of enrichment rather than deficits(H.Lee manning and Robert Lucking) But the reality of the classrooms suggest something that is exactly the opposite .The level of socialization is quite low amongst the different peer groups

. Since the learning of any language and especially a second language requires a wide area of opportunities for practice, Moreover the learning of the language gets hindered by the the first language or the mother tongue influence .Research clearly indicates that unless the student feels and thinks in the target language ,his acquisition of it would be incomplete.(Learner will acquire the target language to the degree they acculturate to the target language group-Robert .C.Gardner ,University of Ontario)

Curricular Limitations

Another issue that plagues the learners is the content of the curriculum. In an exam oriented system ,the text book becomes the Bible Apple (1992) argues that textbooks are really a form of cultural politics. “They involve the very connections between culture and differential power”. Most of the institutions follow a centralised syllabus the contents of which has no relation to either the culture or the interest of the learners. Moreover The structure of the educational system in India leans heavily towards the Behaviorist theory of B.F.Skinner (1930) which tends to look at language learning as a mechanical process, taking focus away from the mental and cognitive development and reducing it to mere repetition, memorization and controlled drilling reinforcement which can be either be negative or positive (Dolati Romano- overview of the three core theories of second language acquisition and criticism).In such a context, the prime objective of developing communicative competence among the learners takes a backseat and mere scoring of marks in the semester end exam takes on paramount importance.It is indeed a matter of grave deliberation that most of graduates whose marks cards reflect very high scores are pathetically lagging in productive communicative output –thus adding up to the numbers of “unemployable “adults. Language learners who have been taught to capitalize on the advantages of the receptive approach to language learning are more likely to ber inclined to continue their study alone...(Gary and Gary ,1981) .The ulterior objective of any educational system steers towards learner autonomy and in case of SLA, the classroom teaching should include room for practice .

Learner Autonomy

Classroom practice in which the development of learner autonomy is an explicit pedagogical goal which can lead to remarkable process often far exceeding that achieved by learners exposed to traditional teacher and textbook centered instruction (Leagon Lauson 2000)

Unfortunately such a precinct in an average undergraduate classroom remains a farfetched reality given the economic and practical constraints .Most of the classes have a strength of 70

odd students and in such a context providing for opportunities to nurture individual learner autonomy remains in most cases a mere pipe dream even for the most diligent of mentors. Paradoxically most of the vendors of the system refuse to entertain independent thinkers and differently opined individuals. The concept of herd thinking rules the roost and the system provides a debilitating sheath against the enterprise of autonomy. Marks obtained by an individual pushes up his stake. And so the end semester pen and paper exams become the decisive parameter for assessing the worth of an individual. Neoteric adjuncts in the educational system like the choice based credit system or the continuous evaluation system remain paper tigers at the present –wonderful in principle but lacking teeth. The crux of the whole venture is that the students who really need a little push remain in the background –it boils down to the adage of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. The students coming from vernacular medium schools or those who belong to the unprivileged class both in terms of finance and in terms of language usage get systematically pushed to the background.

Facilitators and Facilitation

The competence of the facilitator has a huge role to play in SLA, both at the level of developing language proficiency and enhancing personal competency of the learner. Unfortunately many a time the facilitator falls short of the expectations sometimes due to personal incompetence or many a time due to management and system pressure. It takes a great amount of dexterity to juggle classes (18-19 hours per week) most of the time which are overcrowded, completion of syllabus, evaluating scripts within a limited time frame, conducting extracurricular activities, conducting research and publishing papers, bringing in innovation and new teaching practices in the classroom—all this to be completed in a span of 90 working days and at the same time bringing in outstanding results whatever the conditions he works in. All this in spite of regulations laid down by the UGC. Most of the private colleges have teachers who are underpaid and overworked. The personal frustration and the subsequent level of “under motivation” can have an effect on the teaching competency. This coupled with interpersonal relationship and personality traits can negatively impact the transactive faculty of the facilitator which in turn affects the quality of learning. Teaching is not the mere knowledge of the subject—it has a lot to do with communicative competencies and innovative pedagogical practices. Unfortunately teachers training is not considered a prerequisite for a teaching post in an undergraduate

programme. Not only that the number of Faculty Development Programs or refresher courses conducted for teachers remain at the bare minimum owing to both financial and time restraints.

Infrastructural Inadequacy

Most of the colleges lack the basic technological infrastructure which is a prerequisite for effective learning. Education is now the most lucrative business venture and with marks and results becoming the flagship beacon for admissions the focus entirely shifts towards the end semester pen and paper exam. The learner now becomes a stake holder and the concept of holistic education takes on a mere conceptual outlook. The success of any educational venture is determined by the sheer number of admissions and the maximum investment and maximum profit. In such a scene infrastructure and many basic amenities are sacrificed on the altar of profit.

Conclusion

The main objective of any educational enterprise is to foster the values of autonomy and equip the learner with skills to inculcate these values. This need becomes paramount in an L2 classroom given the importance English wields in the real life context. Since learners come from varied backgrounds especially in an UG classroom, the teaching dispensed should compulsorily be learner centric wherein there is an active association between teachers and learners in the process of curriculum design, classroom transaction and the evaluation process. Unless such a pedagogical process is strictly followed, the very objective of education becomes retrogressive and in the worst cases can even lead to undermining the confidence of the learner making it profoundly defunct in life skills.

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