Role of Rote Learning as an ESL Learning Strategy

D. Sankary, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., P.G.D.T.E., Ph.D.

Abstract

Hundreds of thousands of graduates of both professional and non-professional courses are churned out every year by the universities and colleges in India. Unfortunately, a majority of them often find themselves in the status of perennial job-seekers running from one establishment to another. Ultimately, most of them reconcile themselves to the fate of being rejected by the job market as "unemployable", in spite of their score cards bearing the stamp of a 'first-class' or 'super-first class' . What causes this anomaly?

This article attempts to probe some of the reasons behind the malady, from the perspective of ESL (English as Second Language) proficiency. The investigation is done with the help of a random survey carried out among a group of ESL learners at the point of their entry into various undergraduate courses in South India. Nevertheless, the findings of this study would be representative of the status of the ESL proficiency of a vast majority of the Indian student community.

Background of the Study

A study carried out among 32,000 school children from 142 schools across five metropolitan cities in India, viz., Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai, Kolkata and New Delhi jointly by Educational Initiatives (EI), a research organization and WIPRO, a leading Indian software company, has come out with some alarming findings. A few of them are

a. Students fare well in rote questions, but trip up on those needing interpretation and analysis.

b. Language is being learnt less as something integral and useful, and more as a subject for a test.

c. Learning is rote-based and does not focus on real knowledge. (*India Today*,

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November 27, 2006).

Against the backdrop of this survey carried out among students from leading schools situated in the metropolitan cities in India, the present study tries to analyse how well and how far can these findings be relevant to students passing out from state funded schools who constitute the largest chunk of student population in India.

Behaviourist Theory of Language Learning

Learning is "conditioned behaviour", which is 'observable' believe the behaviourists. To them, the human being is an organism capable of a wide repertoire of behaviours, and the occurrence of these behaviours is dependent upon three crucial elements in learning, viz., a 'stimulus' which serves to elicit behaviour; the 'response' triggered by a stimulus; and 'reinforcement', which serves to acknowledge the response as being appropriate / inappropriate and encourages the repetition / suppression of the response in the future (Skinner, 1957; Brown, 1980). Thus, according to this theory, learning is the outcome of manipulation, and the learner is a mere instrument manipulated by an external agency to produce the desired behaviour. And, the agency outside the learner is a teacher in the case of language learning. In this process of learning, practice and use play a very vital role. No wonder, imitation, memorization and pattern drilling are the tools used widely to achieve the desired verbal behaviour.

Cognitive Theory of Learning

Learning, in the view of the cognitivists, is a mental process of induction. According to them, it is the faculty which permits the learner to 'monitor' and evaluate the different 'stimuli' being received, to co-ordinate and regulate them, to 'reject' some of them, and to develop appropriate responses to those stimuli which are 'accepted'. Therefore, it depends on perception and insight formation. And, all the learning is in the nature of problem-solving. In language learning, the stimuli received are the 'input', which is the sample of language data. The learner processes this data using the 'data-processing mechanism present in him. The input is not just a number of sentences (to be

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memorized and imitated/reproduced), but a whole range of language data, and the output is, again, not just a number of 'sentences', but a system of rules, which allows the learner to produce innumerable sentences. Therefore, even a limited exposure to language can result in an almost unlimited output, revealed in the human child's capacity to produce sentences which are new (Chomsky, 1966).

Thus, the behaviourist theory differs rather widely from the cognitivist views. While the former emphasizes the importance of practice leading to the formation of automatic habits of verbal behavior, the latter stresses the role of insight, hypothesis formation and learning through discovery in language learning. However, both of them converge on the common point that, learning takes place through exposure to experience.

Language Propensity

A relatively recent theory is the one which hinges on the element of innateness in the process of language learning. This view is supported by studies carried out by great psycholinguists like Noam Chomsky, who consider themselves to be cognitivists. According to their theory of 'innateness' in learning, every human child possesses, at birth, a biological apparatus, viz., the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which pre-disposes him/her to the learning of a language. In other words, a child's brain is biologically 'programmed' for the learning of language. This accounts for the potential of a child to learn languages effortlessly and become readily an ambilingual.

All these theories of language learning play their own role in the process of learning a second language. But, when one theory is stretched beyond the limits of desirability leaving behind the other, there arises the problem.

ELT Scenario in Indian Classrooms

"Though it is clear that a mechanical process of teaching and learning-by-rote is dysfunctional, it continuous to pervade almost all of India's class rooms", laments one of

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the leading employers of software professionals in India, Azim H. Premji (*India Today*, November 27, 2006).

And, an ESL classroom in any part of the country is no exception to this trend. Following the concept that language is "conditioned verbal behaviour", which can be produced by continuous exposure to the desired language output, the learners are constantly subjected to an overdose of repetition and pattern drilling right from the primary level. In the name of practice, pattern drilling is followed with the pious conviction that it results in the learner's internalization of the features of sentence construction, which in turn, leads to successful language learning.

Goal: Performative Communicative Acts

But experience makes one understand that the overuse of certain patterns *ad nauseum* without cognitive understanding does not lead to the effective use of ESL in real life situations. For, mindless parroting of information which is arbitrary and verbatim does not lead to real understanding. Hence, what is imperative in ESL pedagogy is, as Widdowson rightly points out, that language teaching should "effect the transfer from grammatical competence, a knowledge of sentences, to what has been called communicative competence, a knowledge of how sentences are used in the performance of communicative acts of different kinds" (Widdowson, 1978).

But, in the Indian context, school administrators seem to appreciate one feature of the'mim-mem' and pattern drill methods: a feature which has undoubtedly contributed to the widespread adoption of this method (Tarinaya, 1992). For, these teaching methods do not require the teacher to be either competent in the skills or conversant in the language that he teaches - at least, not when he is teaching at the elementary level of instruction. Perhaps, that is why, the educational system adopted by many states in India has entrusted the job of teaching the English language to teachers of any subject up to the secondary level.

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Value of Memorization and Pattern Drilling

Indeed, no one can discount the positive role played by the mimicry, memorization and pattern drilling method in the teaching of pronunciation. But in the other aspects of language learning like grammar and vocabulary the memorization method has its own limitations, because, after all, "to know by memory an ample stock of ready-made sentences in a language is not the same as to know that language" (de Sassure,1929). Incidentally, in real life situations, except for purposes of quotation, people rarely use sentences used by others. Moreover, it is humanly impossible to store a large number of sentences in one's head. Therefore, what a language learner needs is not a stockpile of sentences memorized verbatim, but the rules for creating and understanding these sentences. This was proved by the experiment conducted by Sassure and others which found out that the linguistic skills "such as reading, writing, speaking and understanding were achieved in greater proportion and in less time when the learning technique involved a maximum amount of conscious learning (de sauze' 1959).

Execution of the project

The study was carried out among a sample group of 381 students entering various degree courses at A.P.C. Mahalakshmi College for Women, Tuticorin affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli located in South India.

The target skill chosen for assessment was free writing. Therefore, two tasks viz., a) framing own sentences (using the given words viz., 'books', 'examination', 'temple', 'cinema', and 'chair'); b) writing a free paragraph on a given topic viz., 'Market' were administered to the study group. These tasks were evaluated against a maximum score of 10 marks each, amounting to a total of 20 marks. The sub-skills considered for the assessment included i) structure, ii) content, iii) grammar and iv) vocabulary with respect to the first task, and i) content, ii) organization, iii) vocabulary, iv) language use, v) mechanics with regard to the second task. All these skills were assessed on an equal footing within the total marks allotted for each of the tasks.

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Results and Findings

The assessment of the study group's performance in the two given tasks yielded the following results.

Sentence Making

Sub skills assessed	Performance Score	
	≥ 50%	< 50
Structure	30%	70%
Content	81%	19%
Language use	9%	91%
Vocabulary	56%	44%
Overall	51%	49%

Paragraph Writing

Sub skills assessed	Performance Score	
	≥ 50%	< 50%
Content	69%	31%
Organization	40%	60%
Vocabulary	53%	47%
Language Use	36%	64%
Mechanics	62%	37%
Overall	33%	67%

The tables given above reveal a wide gap between the study group's performance

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in task I and task II. Indeed, their skill of writing a free paragraph seems to be poorer than that of writing individual sentences.

In an attempt to find out the reason behind this anomaly, an analysis of the learning strategy used by the study group to acquire the skill of writing was made. It brought out the following findings.

	Performance Score	
Learning Strategy Used	≥ 50%	< 50%
Cognitive Understanding	54%	46%
Rote Learning	0%	100%

The table given above indicates that among the learners who used cognitive understanding as their main learning strategy, 54% of them have scored ≥ 50% marks, while among those who used rote memorization, no one has scored ≥ 50% marks.

Indeed, this trend indicates the fact that while cognitive understanding has benefitted the learners in the skill of text generation, learning by rote does not seem to have facilitated it much.

A further analysis of the study group's answers reveals the repetition of a particular syntactic structure, and the use of a limited range of vocabulary by a majority of the participants. Incidentally, the syntax patterns which are found to be repeated indiscriminately in both the tasks happen to be S+V (be) + C and SVA.

For examples, see appendix.

Conclusion

Indeed, the examples cited in the appendix seem to indicate that learning by rote has resulted only in the learners' reproduction of the range of syntax and vocabulary which they have been frequently exposed to in their classroom instruction. Unfortunately,

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it has neither led to their use of varied syntactic structures nor the use of appropriate vocabulary. Therefore, the learners have failed to acquire the skill of free writing which requires not only the knowledge and the use of a wide variety of syntactic structures but also the ability to generate new text and achieve learner autonomy. Perhaps, rote learning as a learning strategy in this case does not seem to have helped the ESL learners acquire the desired language behaviour and become proficient users of the target language.

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APPENDIX

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½   ----------

TASK - II   ✓

C - ½
S - 0
V - 0
G - 0

Frame sentences of your own using the words given below : (Sentence need not exceed 10 words)

1. book

Tamil book and English book and History book and Economice book and Account book is very enjoyed ✗

2. examination

The English test is very useful. It brain to very usefully the examination ✗

3. temple

The temple is cricket to usefully. ✗
The players is very usefully temple.

4. cinema

The cinemas, dramas, cartoons of vex enter
The television is one of the wonders of 5th Science

5. chair

The chair is siting to use fully. ✓
The chairs is very useful.

TASK - II

Frame sentences of your own using the words given below : (Sentence need not exceed 10 words)

1. book

I like books very much. So every time speak I read books.

2. examination

I wrote the public examination in the 12th standard in 2003.

3. temple

I went to the temple of every week. with my family and friends.

4. cinema

Every sunday I see see the cinema in Sun TV.

5. chair

I came to the furniture room and I saw saw lot of chairs.

TASK - II

Frame sentences of your own using the words given below : (Sentence need not exceed 10 words)

1. book

I read a book.

2. examination

I have passed the 12th examination.

3. temple

I go to the temple on every Friday.

4. cinema

I saw a cinema last week.

5. chair

The book is on the chair

TASK - II

Frame sentences of your own using the words given below : (Sentence need not exceed 10 words)

1. book

Book is very useful in General knowledge. It is very helpful in reading habit.

2. examination

Examination is very tough in school days.

3. temple

Temple is a very beautiful place. I am going to temple daily.

4. cinema

Cinema is used for entertainment. Because today's cinema is not comfortable.

5. chair

Chair is very helpful for sitting. It is a science magic.

TASK - I

NAME : K. Athista Lakshmi

CLASS : B.A Tamil Lit.   TIME TAKEN : 25 mts

Write a paragraph in about 100 Words on the topic 'Market'.

Market.

Market is the very nice place. It is a very big place. Some other varitayes. of the market, fiesta market, and fruties market. & flower market. At the flower market is Very nice Smal. Salee market is very Sound place. Public Rections take the Vagetables to the good rate of the market. bunday at the market

TASK - 1

NAME : L. Sangeetha

CLASS : I B.A History

TIME TAKEN : 25 mts

Write a paragraph in about 100 Words on the topic 'Market'.

Market is very useful. then
Market is many market, Fruit market, flower
market, vegetables market, Fishmarket than
;ther etc. Onion, carrot, more than
vegetables is very important. than, more
People going to the market, than fruit,
vegetables purchased. Madurai market
is very big. Market is today enonmica
irst. than Market is very important p
many people like market. more things
urchased. flower is very fresh,
womens is very like flower. fruit is
health Strength, good food.

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