In Search of a Holistic Approach: Vygotsky Situated in the Rural Indian ESL Contexts

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Abstract

This paper argues that it is high time that the teaching of 'a language of opportunities' got liberated from the rigid and restricted frame of institutionalized instruction with its fossilized curriculum, syllabus, materials, testing and evaluation and so on. Teaching-learning English must be made a democratic process, a social agenda, which leaves apace for societal intervention. It has been suggested here that those who had been marginalized so far as passive stakeholders, namely parents and public, too should be made active participants in the process of second language education, contributing to the process in their own way. The fifteen-year old search for such a holistic approach to ESL education has now reached a point at which a framework of some degree of definitude has been arrived at. This paper outlines (only) the theoretical framework currently being in use on a massive project in Kerala (south India) which aims at 'empowering rural India through English language education'. The interim report of the progress of the project will be appearing as a sequel paper.

Keyword: ESL Education, ESL Teaching, English Language Education, Second language

learning,

Introduction

Where did we go wrong in the context of teaching English as 'a language of opportunities'? An historical inquiry into the past may reveal that 0English language teaching in India passed through two major phases, of course with focus shifts in each phase. The first phase went uninterrupted and unquestioned from Macaulay's Minutes (1835) to the mid-twentieth century. 'Uninterrupted', because the Grammar Translation Method, which had been in use for ages in the case of second language instruction was *the* method and the only method to follow. 'Unquestioned' because the colonizer proposed, the colonized were too weak to oppose, let alone dispose.

In Retrospect

Though the 1950's witnessed two strong opposing forces in language teaching in the West, we felt rather comfortable with 'the road taken'. 1957 saw two epoch-making publications; *Verbal Behaviour* by the Behaviourist psychologist, B.F. Skinner and *Syntactic Structures* by Noam Chomsky who pioneered Mentalism in language pedagogy. But, the Indian classrooms preferred to continue practising Behaviourism because of the 'no-risk factor' inherent in the system. Learning a new language among all the other learning, had conveniently been equated with or modelled on a mouse fetching food by pressing a lever (first, accidentally, and later consciously) and a monkey getting a banana with the help of a stick (again, the same way the mouse managed). Cycling, swimming, dancing etc. too were found good and apt models for language learning! There was no discussion of the role or involvement of human mind in learning a language at all.Teaching a language (of course, not learning a language) was an act so simple and straight forward for the teachers through pattern practice, memorization and rote learning and drill. The good old proverb came with

additional backing: "Practice makes something perfect."

Somehow, withstanding the resistance of the teaching community, slowly a new methodology started getting into the second language classrooms in India by the end of the last century. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Methodology, as the name suggests, focused more on communication rather than on the form of language, and the aural-oral proficiency was prioritized. However, a virtual negation of the formal teaching of grammar was found a handicap in the exposure-poor classrooms, when real communication was aimed at. Without having the knowledge 'about usage', it was found difficult to 'use language'.

Traditionalists accused the new movement of leading learners to 'a neither grammatical nor communicative competence' phase, which was partly true, as well. Then came, the revised version of communication oriented, functional grammar supported, formal grammar embedded and more or less learner centred CLT versions. 'Focus on form' started replacing 'Focus on form*S*', by the beginning of the century.

Throughout these changes, one fact remained interesting to a student of the history of second language instruction—the decisive role of grammar and its instruction. Over a period of more than two thousand years of the history of second language instruction (Kelley,1969) and a comparatively shorter span of the history of teaching English as a second language across the continents (Howatt, 1984), the grammar of the target language still remains elusive to the learner and its role remains mysterious to theorists, researchers and teachers.

Grammar remains still different to different stakeholders.

Research Question

This paper tries to raise one main question: Can the teaching-learning of English be released from the clutches of the strict academic framework made of curriculum, syllabus, prescribed instructional materials, specified methodology, instructed strategies, pre-fabricated

testing and evaluation modes and so on? Instead, can ESL instruction be made more liberal and less restricted to classrooms? Can the pedagogy be turned more socio-cultural in practice?

The rest of this paper outlines a fifteen-year journey in search of a holistic method in which all the stakeholders of ESL instruction were made active participants and practitioners. They are the learners, teachers, teacher educators, parents, educational administrators / managers and the common public. This inquiry has currently arrived at a framework which is holistic in nature.

Hypothesis of the Project

(i) If the conventional teacher training programmes are converted into self-empowerment programmes, (ii) if learners are taught in informal ways which are closer to natural language learning modes, (iii) if parents are made aware of the needs and modes of learning-teaching a new language, and (v) if parents and other elders who usually interact with children are made part of the informal instructional programmes, such a holistic approach to teaching ESL is expected to be more productive in terms of learner output.

Assumptions Behind the Project

The project had been intended to be carried out in the villages of Kerala where the parents of school going children are expected to be at least literates in English—their lowest academic background may be Class10, and the highest can be post-graduation or still higher.

These parents, if made aware of their role in educating the child, and if made a direct participant in the instructional programme, can pro-actively intervene in the curriculum.

Why a Socio-Cultural Perspective?

Lev Vygotsky's (1896-1934) theories of education and psychology blend the psychological, cognitive and sociological developments of an individual in such a way that many of the issues which remained vague till then became more concrete and analysis became easier with the help of the framework provided by his theories. A few such theoretical constructs have been outlined below, which together form the foundation of the project mentioned above.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

As a broad theoretical framework, CHAT is

A philosophical and cross-disciplinary framework for studying different kinds of human practices as development processes, with both individual and social levels interlinked at the same time (Kuutti, 1996: 25, as quoted in Lantolf and Thorne, 2006:209)

As stated above, CHAT is not exclusively a theory of education, nor does it directly answer the questions related to second language instruction, with which we are concerned here. But, as a broad framework of interpreting the individual and his multitudes of behaviour by placing them in the larger context of human society, CHAT can be adapted for education in general, and second language instruction, in particular. As a product of Marxian philosophical thinking, activity encompasses all that human beings think, speak and act.The unifying element and fundamental unit of analysis is *activity* itself. 'Activity' …describes a powerful dialectic, rooted in contradictions such s thinking and doing, knowing and performing, individual and society, idealism and materialism, use-value and exchange-value, and internalization and externalization. Learning can be seen as a resolution, often ephemeral, to these tensions that produce changes in the conceptual, social and material conditions of one's everyday life. These changes, in turn, create new conditions (or opportunities for

development) (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006:209).

Second language learning, when treated as an activity, has to be located on the larger canvas of individual-social relation, tension, and conflict so that a resolution may emerge out of the dialectic of contradictions.

The socio-cultural genesis of language

Secondly, Vygotsky traces the origin of one's language in the speech community as opposed to the then prevailing conviction of having the source of one's language within oneself. Vygotsky's theory of the 'sociocultural genesis' (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006) of language was something new to the research community.

Vygotsky categorizes all human mental functions into two—lower and higher order, of course the border line gets blurred. All higher order mental functions, language included, first occur between or among individuals, and then get reverted into the individual's inner self, where the experience gets internalized.

> Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice; first, on the social
>
> level, and later on the individual level; first, between people (inter-psychological) and
>
> then inside the child (intra-psychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention,
>
> to logical memory, and to the formulation of concepts. All the higher functions
>
> originate as actual relations between human individuals (Vygotsky, 1978; 57).

Internalization

The third psychological theory which compelled us to adopt the Vygotskyian frame for the holistic rural ESL programme is the notion of internalization or, as some translators have put it, interiorization. During this outward- inward flow (from interpersonal to intrapersonal), conceptualization takes place related to the outer world. In the case of

language, newer hypotheses get formed regarding the structuring and patterning of units into utterances. Internalization is not just storing within what has been gathered from interpersonal interaction; it is a way of transforming the 'other' into 'self'. What has been the property of the speech community so far (in the case of language), becomes a different individualistic or personal property after the process of internalization, and this personal possession once again is sent back to the society to become more social. The more the person-society-person interaction, the stronger is the intensity of interiorization.

The zone of proximal development Next, Vygotsky puts forward his much discussed theory of the Zone of proximal Development (ZPD), which again offers very clear insights into pedagogy in general, and language pedagogy in particular. ZPD can be identified as the gap between what a learner can perform here and now independently and what the learner's potentials at a given point in future can be, provided he is assisted, helped or guided by better informed peers or more capable adults. "The area of immature but maturing processes makes up the child's zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1998:202).

Vygotsky elaborates by stating:

> The ZPD defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state. These functions could be named 'buds' or 'flowers' of development rather than the 'fruits' of development. The actual developmental level characterizes mental development retrospectively , while the ZPD characterizes the mental development prospectively , …the ZPD permits us to delineate the child's immediate future and has dynamic developmental state , allowing not only for what already has been achieved developmentally but also for what is in the course of making

(Vygotsky, 1978: 86-87).

A task or activity which is meant to further learning, if placed within this space of ZPD is likely to result in an increased motivation, interest and involvement on the part of the learner, hence enhanced learning output. Lantolf and Thorne, two eminent Vygotskyan scholars comment on the widespread application of ZPD:

> The ZPD has captivated educators and psychologists for a number of reasons. One is the notion of assisted performance… Another compelling attribute of the CPD is that in contrast to traditional tests and measures that only indicate the level of development already attained , it is forward looking through its assertion that assisted performance … [which] is often indicative of independent functioning in the future (Lantolf, J.P; and S.L. Thorne, 2006:263).

Scaffolding

Yet another pedagogic construct, which throws light on the child learning and tutoring is scaffolding. This notion is closely related to that of ZPD. Once the ZPD in an individual learner has been identified, the learning activity may be designed in such a way that part of the activity may be done or at least attempted by the learner independently, and later "complete only those elements that are within his range of competence" (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976: 72). The remaining part of the activity is to be completed with the help of more capable peers or better informed adults, the teacher being one among them.

Scaffolding, as a psychological support and cognitive 'bait', functions differently in content subjects and second language classroom. [The main curse on the Indian ESL instruction system seems to the teacher's blatant refusal to treat content subjects and second language differently; they teach both the same way.] In a problem solving activity in a content subject, say Math, what the learner attains with the assistance of scaffolding is a

higher stage in the activity, which is tangible for the learner, an observable behavioural change for an adult, here the teacher. Therefore, the learner is visibly motivated to pursue the problem till the end. The progression here is explicitly linear, whereas, in the case of a

post-scaffolded activity in a second language, the progression is most likely to be recursive. The result may not offer a clearly visible or tangible behavioural change either to the learner or to the adult observer. As a result, in a second language learning situation, scaffolding must be 'erected' in a multi-faceted fashion which combines the elements of natural language learning, instructed learning, focus on forms and focus on form, as well.

What could be the pedagogic functions of scaffolding? In what ways does scaffolding assist the learner? What are the opportunities which scaffolding offers an enthusiastic adult – parent, older peer or teacher—to intervene in the learner's learning process?

These include recruitment of the child's interest in the task, establishing and maintaining an orientation towards task-relevant goals, highlighting critical features of the task that the child might overlook, demonstrating how to achieve goals and helping to control frustration (Wood and Wood, 2009:138-39).

Taking into account the specific features of second language learning, James Wertsch, a pioneering Vygotskyian scholar, describes scaffolding as "a dialogically produced inter-psychological process through which learners *internalize* knowledge they co-construct with more capable peers" (Wertsch, 1979 as quoted in Lantolf and Thorne, 2006: 282).

Collaborative Work

The sixth factor which prompts us to consider the sociocultural theory as the holistic approach to second language instruction is an extension or an application of the concept of scaffolding, namely collaborative learning. The popular misunderstanding of scaffolding as the traditional teacher-initiated 'leading from ahead' has to be clarified in this context. Why

the conventional teacher help does not fall under the psychological-turned pedagogic construct of scaffolding needs to be outlined. First, in scaffolding, nobody leads from ahead; the teacher acts as a shepherd who directs from behind; not leading or guiding from ahead. Secondly, in scaffolding, the peer-adult-teacher intervention occurs mid-way, that is once the learner has accelerated on the activity; not before he ventured into it. Thirdly, the 'other-intervention' is only on request from the learner, explicitly stated or implicitly observed. Fourthly, scaffolding is individualistic; not uniformly distributed among the learners. Fifthly, once an assistance seeker, later he turns to be an assistance provider; and vice versa. Collaborative learning, in this framework does not exist independently; it is an extension of scaffolding. The concept is likely to get interpreted in a rather superficial way, if it is not affiliated to the notion of scaffolding. Vygotsky elaborates:

> We show the child how such a problem must be solved and watch to see if he can do the problem by imitating the demonstration. Or we begin to solve the problem and ask the child to finish it. Or we propose that the child solve the problem that is beyond his mental age by cooperating with another, more developed child, or finally we explain to the child the principles of solving the problem, ask leading questions, analyse the problem for him, etc. (Vygotsky, 1998: 202).

'Collaboration', in this framework, does not simply mean 'give and take'; it means co-constructing, reflecting collectively over the past for altering or correcting the course of future and manipulating the social conditions and environment in such a way that each time, problem solving will be a process of self-educating. Such a futuristic view of (language) education promotes cognitive skills along with nurturing a humanistic approach to career and life.

Conclusion

English being 'the language of opportunities', and even today, as the Mahatma asserted "India lives in her villages", one of the most productive means of empowering rural India remains to be English language education. This project aims at the self-empowerment of the next generation literate youth, especially of the villages. Let the society be in the midst of the instructional process; not in the margin—be it a content subject or a foreign language.

Note: An interim report of the project will be appearing as a sequel to this paper.

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