

TEACHER COGNITION AND INTEGRATION OF LANGUAGE SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

The term 'Cognition' relates to the thought-process, the intellect and the cognitive domain of the human mind. Teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who play a central role in shaping classroom events. Teachers' goals, values and beliefs, their teaching experience and their teaching do indeed have a relationship and they are inter-linked. Hence, understanding teacher cognition is central to the process of understanding teaching. Language teacher cognition research draws on a tradition of educational research which stretches back over 40 years. From an initial concern with information-processing, decision-making and teacher effectiveness, the predominant focus today is on understanding teacher knowledge, its growth and use. Language is best acquired in a holistic context where a total text is at the centre of classroom activity. The whole English language programme should encourage the ability to speak effortlessly, listen and understand patiently, read with comprehension and sensitivity, write with confidence, clarity and precision, and learn to respect other languages. As language teachers, we all know that the critical components of emergent literacy include the development of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Communicative competence depends on a balanced fusion of four language skills: understanding when listening, making oneself understood when speaking, understanding meaning when reading, and writing with purpose. The English language teacher must first of all comprehend the fact that all language skills need to be taught in an integrated fashion and that if taught otherwise, they would remain a mere theory. Therefore, the teacher must perceive the concept very clearly that mere skills taught separately in classrooms without any link with one another would not serve the purpose of communication and therefore they need to be taught in unison.

Introduction:

The term 'Cognition' relates to the thought-process, the intellect and the cognitive domain of the human mind. Cognition is essential for all human beings in all walks of life so as to enable a smooth, more effective functioning of life, devoid of friction and communication gaps among individuals. Cognition is all the more inevitable in the teaching process, where

teachers need to primarily think of what they need to teach and what their students' capabilities are. In order to make teaching-learning effective and successful, teachers should, first of all, comprehend what needs to be taught and next, how it has to be taught considering all the factors concerning the subject and the taught. Hence the term 'teacher cognition' has gained tremendous significance in the twentieth century, and of course, the beginning of the twenty- first century. This Article would establish the relevance of Teacher Cognition in Integration of Language Skills in English language teaching classrooms.

Teacher Cognition

Teacher cognition is greatly related to the intellectual, psychological and the emotional domains of the teacher and his teaching process. A sound theoretical knowledge of the term would indeed help the entire teaching community, irrespective of the type of institution where teaching takes place. Teachers must bear in mind that they do not stop with the mere familiarisation and acquisition of the concept, but go ahead applying it in their classrooms at all times. If this is implemented by all teachers, teaching is sure to become not just a futile exercise of knowledge-transfer but would become a fruitful activity where every moment of teaching becomes meaningful, lively and inspirational.

Teachers and Teacher Cognition

Teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who play a central role in shaping classroom events. Understanding teacher cognition is central to the process of understanding teaching. This perspective on teachers and teaching has provided insights into the processes of teacher education and the nature of teachers' instructional practices. It has also helped policy-makers become more sensitive to the key - role teachers and their cognitions play in the implementation of educational innovations.

Language Teacher Cognition Research

Language teacher cognition research draws on a tradition of educational research which stretches back over 40 years. The development of Teacher cognition research deals with changing orientations to both how teaching has been conceptualised and why teachers' mental lives are a valuable research focus. From an initial concern with information-processing, decision-making and teacher effectiveness, the predominant focus today is on understanding teacher knowledge, its growth and use. Teacher cognition research today is aligned closely with work in teacher education. Teacher cognition research has affirmed the active role which teachers play in shaping classroom events and highlighted the complex nature of classroom decision-making.

Teacher Education and Teacher Cognition

Teachers' educational biographies generated by their vast experience as learners influence their initial thinking. Teacher education can promote change and can influence teachers' prior knowledge and beliefs. A concern for the role of teachers' subject-matter knowledge and how this is transformed in the act of teaching remains a key feature of teacher cognition research. The role of teachers' experience has also been highlighted in studies of teacher cognition. Classroom experience has been shown to have a powerful influence on teachers' practical knowledge and hence to shape teachers' actions. Comparisons of expert and novice teachers have also highlighted differences in their cognitions; experienced teachers have more fully developed schemata of teaching on which to base their instructional decisions; they also possess vast amounts of knowledge about typical classrooms and students to the extent that they often know a lot about their students even before they meet them. Such expert knowledge is not available to inexperienced teachers.

Teachers' goals, values and beliefs, their teaching experience and their teaching do indeed have a relationship and they are inter-linked. Contextual factors in the system can exert a powerful influence on what teachers do, thus creating a tension between their beliefs and actual practices. The notion of congruence among teachers' cognitions, students' cognitions and curricular principles is a useful one in analysing the coherence of educational systems.

Teacher Cognition and Classroom Practice in Language Teaching

We know that what teachers do is underpinned and influenced by a range pre-active, interactive and post-active of cognitions which they have. However, we also understand that the relationship between cognition and practice in language teaching is neither linear nor unidirectional. It is not linear because cognitions and practices may not always concur, due to the mediating influence of contextual factors and it is not unidirectional because teachers' cognitions themselves are shaped in response to what happens in the classroom. Language teaching, then, can be seen as a process which is defined by dynamic interactions among cognition, context and experience.

Teaching English as a Skill-based Language

English cannot be taught like other subjects that are content or knowledge-based. It is skill-based. In teaching English as a second language, a good teacher should follow the skills approach. The teacher should help the students to acquire the four language skills namely Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. These four language skills are classified into four categories, Productive and Receptive Skills, Aural-Oral and Graphic- Motor skills. Speaking and Writing are Productive skills, while Listening and Speaking are Receptive skills. Listening and Speaking are Aural-Oral skills while Reading and Writing are Graphic Motor

skills. While engaged in a conversation we have to listen and speak at the same time. One can produce a sound only after hearing it and write a letter only after seeing it. The fact is learning the 'Language Code', means the different systems of the language. When this is internalised, the exercise of one skill will facilitate the learning of the other skill. The Sensory-motor organs are involved in internalising the skills. But it varies from person to person.

Skill-based Approach

Any skill needs practice. It is applicable to language learning too. So the four skills of the English language – LSRW – must be practised constantly to make the learning more personal. The English language teachers should help the learners to learn the skills by giving them pattern practice skills, writing and reading exercises. The communicative approach is gaining momentum in today's classroom teaching. Therefore, a lot of exercises and activities should be planned and practised to develop the communication skills. A teacher of English should follow the skill-based approach. He should keep himself abreast of the latest developments in the field of English Language Teaching and must aim at self-improvement. An in-depth knowledge of the subject is also essential. The concept of classroom management should be followed by the English teachers.

The Four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing

The concept of language skills came into teaching more recently than the others through the audio-lingual method from the 1940s onwards. Language was thought to consist of four main skills: listening to spoken language, speaking, reading written language, and writing. Audio-lingualism itself combined the emphasis on spoken language with the concept of four skills to claim that spoken skills should come before written skills and that 'receptive' skills in which the learner has to produce no language themselves should come before 'productive' skills in which they do. The UK National Curriculum for modern languages recommends 'During key stage 3 pupils begin to understand, speak, read and write atleast one modern foreign language'; that is to say, it mentions the four skills in the usual order. Sometimes the skill sequence applies to the whole course so that students spend weeks or months listening before they speak. Sometimes the sequence is applied within a single classroom lesson; the students always hear a word before they see it written, and hear it or read it before they have to say it or write it.

Integration of Language Skills

The whole language approach adopts a holistic view of language, as against fragmenting it into skills. Children are expected to learn to read and write as naturally as they learn to speak. Literacy skills are developed in the context of whole and authentic literacy events; the whole

language curriculum is permeated with real reading and writing experiences. Moreover, the attempt is to integrate learning within the classroom with the entire life of the child.

Language is not a set of skills. It is not a sum of LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). It is constitutive of us; it is at once an instrument and a product and it is difficult to conceptualise a disjunction between the two at any point. It needs to be seen as a system of unique knowledge. Language is best acquired in a holistic context where a total text is at the centre of classroom activity. The whole English language programme should encourage the ability to speak effortlessly, listen and understand patiently, read with comprehension and sensitivity, write with confidence, clarity and precision, and learn to respect other languages.

As language teachers, we all know that the critical components of emergent literacy include the development of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. All these components need to be made meaningful if students are to become fully literate in a first or even second language. One way that teachers can ensure this is by incorporating a ‘balanced literacy’ approach to their instruction in class. As James Coleman points out, this simply means ensuring that effective components of oral communication, reading strategies and writing experiences are included daily in language classrooms.

Communicative competence depends on a balanced fusion of four language skills: understanding when listening, making oneself understood when speaking, understanding meaning when reading, and writing with purpose. In practical terms, a series of well-planned lesson assures a balanced and integrated package of skills development. Separation of the skills for examination and profiling purposes does not mean that lessons should be parcelled in that way.

The integrating of skills in the language classroom can be defined quite simply as a series of activities or tasks which use any combination of four skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing – in a continuous and related sequence. Listening and note-making, Dictation, Drama and Information gap activities are those that integrate all the skills.

Story boards, Story theatre, Puppet theatre, Discussion web, Book talk, Interviews, Writing to a character are some of the activities which could be organised in the classroom. These activities can be rotated among groups. This ensures that all the students get a chance to participate in each one, but that they are doing different things at different times. Alternatively, the teacher can pick and choose four or five activities which are suitable for the level of the class and the time available. The point is to provide activities that allow the students to practise all the literacy skills which are critical to their language development. Small group interaction, drama and art bring an element of fun to the learning process but, most importantly, by using literature, we are able to integrate and balance all the four essential language experiences that we need to bring to the language classroom.

Conclusion

This paper introduces the concept of teacher cognition, explains and expands on the term, and traces its origin, growth, development and implementation over the past years. As teachers, it is a need for us to comprehend the concept and implement it successfully in our everyday teaching, thereby making teaching-learning process more meaningful and constructive than ever. Any concept can be taught very effectively and can be made to register in the learners' minds, only if the teacher is convinced about it. When the teacher is very clear of the concept, he can extend it to his students all the more clearly and convincingly. The first step is Teacher Cognition followed by the next which is Learner Cognition. Any teaching demands Teacher Cognition to begin with, is followed by the actual teaching in the classrooms with the help of teaching aids, activities and exercises, and ends up in the successful learning of the concept by the students.

Integration of Language Skills is not an exception from this common rule. Language Skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing – L,S,R,W – as we refer in the field of ELT, as we all know are being taught in isolation in classrooms, always or mostly. The teacher must remember the fact that each language skill is inevitably linked with the other skills and that any one particular skill cannot be used independently without the aid of one or more skills. Speaking, for example, goes hand in hand with Listening; similarly, Writing is meant for Reading. Hence, the English language teacher must first of all comprehend the fact that all language skills need to be taught in an integrated fashion and that if taught otherwise, they would remain a mere theory. The teacher must perceive the concept very clearly that mere skills taught separately in classrooms without any link with one another would not serve the purpose of communication and therefore they need to be taught in unison.

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