CLASSROOM INTERACTION: A LADDER TO OVERCOME THE CULTURAL WALLS AMONG ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Communicative-competence and professional skills have been the buzzing terms in the present era of glocal world. However, the sorry-state of ESL learners is same as it was because of the extra emphasis on theoretical/literary contents and traditional approaches of teaching-learning process in classrooms. These patterns are resulting into teacher-centred pedagogy and less interaction between the teacher and the students. This leads to build the small cultural boxes in the classroom itself which become a hurdle to make the learners out-of—the-box thinkers. The desired need is to make the classroom an enormous cultural box by overcoming the walls of small cultural boxes among learners. The root problem is the lack of classroom interaction. Once it is promoted, it can result into equal learning opportunities for all learners irrespective of their cultural backgrounds. The initial part of the paper focuses on the common cultural barriers and other challenges of communication in heterogeneous group of ESL learners in classroom. Further, it will light upon the innovative approaches of dealing with the diverse backgrounds of ESL learners and suggestive ways to promote classroom interaction.

INTRODUCTION

A sensible ability to use English in real practical context has become imperative in the present socio-economic equation that decides the quality of life in the ESL contexts in the Indian subcontinent. English Language Teaching (ELT) is no longer confined to the four basic skills (LSRW) of language learning via a pre-structured set of classroom actvities or having plenty of practice in the simulated classroom activities, group activities or pair work. The skills being inculcated by the trainer in language are not merely limited to linguistic

acumen but they must be essentially linked to the cultural realities of life. It has been personal observation of the researcher that while learning the target language, the students do not face only the lexical, phonological and structral problems but the 'Schemata' cultural references of the use of language are also confronted by them.

ROLE OF CULTURE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION:

In view of this vast and massive presence of culture in the learning situation of a second language, those interested in planning and teaching of a target language must realize that the cultural background aspects are also as important as the linguistic ones. Without this realization, an important factor will be missing and real satisfactory ends will be only illusion. If we accept that the acquisition of a second language is the acquisition of a second culture, we should think of how this second culture is acquired in the presence of the deeply-rooted beliefs and mechanisms of the culture of the mother tongue. However, studying the interlocking of language and culture and its consequences in the acquisition of the skills of translation starts with understanding the nature of culture.

This is noteworthy fact about culture that although each culture develops its own specific ways of expressing itself, yet they share many common universal traits. These common universal traits of culture, therefore, reveal that culture is the way of life based on shared traditions and expectations. They also show that culture is a complex set of learned patterns of behavior and thought which distinguish a group of people. Language, which is the oral as well as the written tool of expressing this way of life, necessarily interacts with all the aspects and patterns of culture. Although different research studies and scholars have differing views about the extent to which language and culture influence each other, yet today, as Emma Watson believes "most researchers acknowledge that both nature and nurture play a role in language acquisition "(2012 ,p.1).The behaviorist B.F. Skinner (1904 – 1990) is one of the prominent exponents of this attitude. This is evident when he writes in his book *Are Theories of Learning Necessary?(1989)* that " language is acquired through principles of conditioning, including association, imitation and reinforcement" (1989, p.145). Skinner, thus, thinks that the learners of a particular language acquire words by associating sounds with objects, actions, and events . They also learn words and syntax by imitating others. Children learn language and acquire its skills through contact and interaction with adults of the same culture rather than instinctively and automatically. They acquire it, therefore, in a social and cultural context.

Culture, in this sense, is a hidden force that provides meaning, direction and mobilization. Creating a positive culture is of a great importance to the success of teaching a foreign language. This requires the growth of behaviors that develop a constructive culture and

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discourage ones that would support a defensive culture. Actually, the learners of a second / foreign language may experience what is called "cultural shock". John Macionis and Linda Gerber define the cultural shock as

> "the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar   way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, or to move between social environments''.(2010, p 54) .

CULTURAL BARRIERS AND LEARNERS:

It is believed that the acquisition of a second language passes through different stages. In the learning phase, the learner sees the differences between the native language and the second one in a romantic light. He/she appears fascinated by the new language, and associates with those who speak. Yet, differences start to appear giving way to unpleasant feelings of frustration and the learner might even regard the second language as strange and offensive to his/her language and culture. Culture, here, changes into a real barrier which creates a real challenge to both the teacher and the learner. This barrier sometimes leads to behavioural and psychological negative effects. It may, in this sense, cause symptoms difficult to overcome like insomnia, classroom drowsiness, unconscious search for distraction and the tendency to leave the class or not to come at all. The learner can also resort to cultural specific body language and signs. He / she might also develop symptoms of loneliness. The cultural shock may create the feeling of helplessness, irritability, anger, stress reaction, a deep sense of hostility towards language and the instructor and boredom .The cultural barrier, in this respect, does not only affect the student's acquisition of language but even his lifestyle and his attitude to the instructor of the new language and accordingly to into or from this language.

The learners of a second language, accordingly, face real difficulties which they cannot overcome. They need the support of other parties, the trainer, in particular. The main interest at this stage should be directed to the goal of encouraging the learners to overcome the effects of cultural barriers, to move them into what may be called an adjustment phase, at which they develop positive psychological and behavioral attitudes towards the target language and begin to accept its cultural aspects. The foreign language, at this phase, is expected to make sense to the learners where their negative reactions and responses are reduced to the minimum. At this time, the learner can be moved to what is called "the mastery phase", where he / she becomes able to participate fully and comfortably in the new host language and its activities. It should not be understood, however, that a total conversion to the new language and its culture takes place. Learners, unquestionably, keep many traits from their original language and their culture such as accents and grammatical constructions. The main

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question, here, is how to restrict the interference of such aspects in the acquisition of the skills of the new language, and to create a state of biculturalism. It is possible even that some learners experience a reverse cultural shock, where they return to the same negative manifestations described above and find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept the new language. The challenge, therefore, is how to motivate the learners to take on parts of the new language while thinking they sacrifice some of the patterns of their original language. It is also how to help them to integrate both languages, and to understand the nature of each language.

CHALLENGES IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS IN INDIA:

These cultural walls can be destroyed among ESL learners in the language classroom because it is the actual place where a dynamic relationship between language and culture can be flourished. The understanding of cultural interference in language learning requires the application of socio-cultural theories rather than cognitive theories .While cognitive theories challenge behaviorism and rely on the concept of the thinking mind, where learning is a process of active construction of knowledge in the mind, socio-cultural theories maintain that learning happens through social / cultural interaction that mediates the construction of knowledge. Cognitive theories, therefore, highlight thinking as it occurs in the mind of the individual and socio-cultural theories consider the relationship between thinking and the social, cultural, historical and institutional context in which it occurs. James Lantolf and Sterne Thorne, two of the major researchers who have developed a socio- cultural theory in the field of applied linguistics explain socio-cultural theories in their book *Socio- cultural Theory and SecondLanguage Learning*, saying :

> *Socio-cultural theory holds that specifically human forms of mental activity arise in the interaction we enter into with the specific experiences we have with the artifacts produced by our ancestors and by our contemporaries. Rather than dichotomizing the mental and the social, the theory insists on the seamless and didactic. In other words, not only does our mental activity determines the nature of our social world, but this world of human relationships and artefacts also determine to a large extent how we regulate our mental processes.*
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> *(2006 , p.79)*

The desired approach for the trainer is to make the aspirants proficient in target language is "social process". The classroom activity, in this sense, changes into a kind of sociocultural interaction that mediates the construction of knowledge and leads to the student's development of a framework for making sense of language experience that is congruent with

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the cultural system in which the learner and learning are located. The importance of this socio-cultural approach is that it promotes our knowledge, not only of language but also of all patterns of the learning experience. While learning a language, the receivers acquire not only the skills of language, but also ways of interacting, thinking and valuing through the use of this language. Culture of teaching is what follows teachers and becomes subconsciously incarnated in various instances of pedagogical performance. It includes "teachers' understanding of second language learning processes and their beliefs about what constitutes effective instruction."

The first problem regarding culture of teaching in EFL contexts is the focus on grammar translation in the examination system. Learning is driven by the examination, and too much attention is paid to learning for the sake of passing the examination. Under the influence of traditional culture, less attention is paid to creative expression, critical thinking, and problem solving in the education process. Teaching is largely didactic and text bound, with little time allowed for discussion and classroom interaction. The second problem in EFL culture of teaching is teachers' attitude toward communication in classroom. Indian teachers feel that communicative methods were good for teaching those students who planned to go to English-speaking countries to live and study, but not for other students of English. They also believed that their traditional methods such as teaching grammar provided enough knowledge for living and studying in an English-speaking country and suited their students' purposes. Third, communication reluctance in Asian students is the result of upbringing and educational experiences. Because social harmony is one of the key priorities and emphasizes social hierarchy to achieve such harmony, Indian children are taught not to argue with their seniors or express their own feelings in personal ways. It is considered to be rude to challenge teachers with questions in classroom as well as outside class.. Thus, keeping quiet and being attentive during class time has been a tradition accepted by the educational systems in EFL contexts, and so far there has not been a movement to change this.

Another problem is that in EFL Classrooms, Culturally inappropriate materials are used. The first difficulty is about the culturally inappropriate materials which usually result in offensiveness as well as being outside of established socio-pragmatic use. Despite increased awareness of issues of culturally inappropriate content in English materials, culturally inappropriate content is still a problem. Therefore, the topics used in EFL classrooms are one of the difficulties for native speaker teachers.

SUGGESTIVE INNOVATIONS IN ELT:

The first solution to culturally inappropriate materials is that Indian teachers should adapt the course-book so that irrelevant or embarrassing topics are left out, or teachers can choose

reading texts or topics from the local English language newspapers for class discussion. Second, in considering cultural variation in learning, maybe our most important task as Indian teachers is to learn about the particular pedagogy of our students' home cultures and adapt their teaching to the learning styles of their students. Last but not least, culture learning is very important to be successful in teaching English in Asian countries. There are numerous ways for Indian teachers to learn about another culture. They can spend time with members of the other cultures, read about them, ask people who have been there. However, one of the major problems in culture learning is that some teachers do not consider culture learning as a worthwhile thing to do. Most people are ethnocentric and feel that others must learn about their culture rather than that they should learn about other cultures or many also feel that they already know enough. Triandis advised individualists going to a collectivist culture to pay attention attributes more than they do in their own culture, to learn about the ingroups and out groups, to expect sharp differences in behavior when the collectivist interacts with members of such group, e.g., no criticism of high-status people, or learn about learning styles because not everyone learns best the same way.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, it is obvious that each nation has its own culture, which affects learning and teaching process. Therefore, in order to function well in another's culture, educators should seek to understand how difference is produced and eliminated within unequal relations of power because the more they know about cultural differences, the better they are in teaching and the more effective communication between teachers and students become. In teaching English as a foreign language, a balance must be maintained between the objective linguistic cognitive variables and the subjective social / cultural determinants. In the activities and practices of English as a foreign language, the two poles must be kept in view and nothing to be sacrificed .A learner's communication without the socio-cultural aspect remains unintelligible. The question of foreign language learning is not only a matter of acquisition of language, but also of thought and habit. Speech has expressive social and cultural tendencies. It is only through this balance that the learners of English as a foreign language they may find the kinds of learning tasks they are asked to do intrinsically motivating, and feel personally involved in learning activities.

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