Situating Form-focused Instruction and Metalinguistic Knowledge Along with Constructivism in Second Language Pedagogy

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Abstract

First, this article intends to focus on teacher-learning, or to use a recursively structured phrase, 'teaching teachers how to teach learners to teach themselves', rather than on conventional learner-learning. Both involve cognition. In the latter, where the learner learns, cognition is an undercurrent, a subconscious parallel flow to language learning. In the former, however, a knowledge 'about' cognition is essential for both the teacher and the learner, because the focus is on how a teacher can master both the art and science of enabling the learner to teach himself. Secondly, this article tries to bridge the gap between traditional instruction and the progressive notion of construction. The former has been found inadequate in helping the SL learner to master the target language; whereas the latter is not fully feasible with little or no competence in second language for the teacher and the learner, to begin with. Therefore, a fusion of the two to some extent is expected to prove more successful in the case of teaching English as a second language (ESL) in an exposure-poor environment. The sociological construct of 'communities of practice' (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) has been incorporated into the proposal so that the SL classroom can be converted into a community where constructivism is likely to work.

Keywords: Instruction, construction, cognition, metacognition, metalinguistics

Introduction

The ESL teaching community was somewhat baffled when it was caught between the slow flow of traditional teaching and the flash-flood of communicative language teaching (CLT). The latter made an impact on them, but they were still confused with the dichotomy of accuracy and fluency. The initial version of CLT undermined the scope of accuracy taking the lead; almost negated the role of formal instruction, and paid more attention to informal acquisition rather than formal learning. Stephen Krashen's distinction between learning and acquisition, by that time, had gained popularity among teachers. But, in countries including India where exposure to the target language still remained poor, teacher talk failed to provide adequate comprehensible input, and oracy still continued to be subsidiary to literacy in classrooms, a swing back to the old form-focused instruction became inevitable. This article takes this turning point in Indian ESL pedagogy as its springboard.

The term 'pedagogy' has been often used vaguely, as a bundle of techniques, strategies and activities likely to take place in the classroom. Going beyond these concrete manifestations, it is to be realized in terms of

> What kinds of classroom behaviours teachers need to engage in to promote learning –what questions to ask, when and how to correct learners' errors, how to instigate negotiation for meaning, how to introduce learners to attend to form during a communicative task etc. (Ellis, 2008).

The seemingly simple definition of pedagogy quoted above contains three crucial points in the process of second language instruction—first, the objective of the whole process has been identified as promoting learning; secondly, one of the means has been cited as instigating negotiation for meaning, and finally, reminding the teacher and the learner of attending to form while communication is furthered.

Cognition, First Language and Second Language

The age-old debate on the interdependence and interplay between language and cognition took a crucial turn in the third decade of the last century with the hypothesis put forward by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, later popularly known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. For a layman, development occurs correspondingly, on physiological,

psychological, cognitive, linguistic and emotive levels. The language in this context of course, is the mother tongue or L1.

Whatever the degree of dependence between language and cognition, determinism or relativism, the learner does not start functioning from scratch; he has the optimal cognitive potentials and linguistic repertoire to start with. Leaving the 'chicken-egg' debate at this point, let us compare and contrast the meaning-making processes in L1 and L2.

How relevant would it be if the language-thought relation is extended to a second language? Does or can the learning of a second language contribute to the cognitive development of the learner? If so, how and how much? To have a mutual interdependence for linguistic and cognitive growth, there must be a certain amount of second language in functional terms or as procedural knowledge, not enough in the form of declarative knowledge. How can this gap be bridged through formal instruction? How, again, is the great divide between how to express what we mean in the first language and 'how to mean' (Halliday, 1975) in a second language? In the former, the meaning is already there in the form of a message, and the speaker is looking for how to express the message in words; whereas in the latter, there is neither a message left out unexpressed through the first language, nor is the repertoire of the second language capable of representing any message.

> The essential condition of learning is the systematic link between semantic categories and the semiotic properties of the situation. The child can learn to mean because the linguistic features in some sense relate to features of the environment. But the environment is a social construct. It does not consist of things, or even of processes and relations; it consists of human interaction, from which the things derive their meaning (Halliday, 1975).

Halliday, from a functionalist point of view, highlights the importance of interaction or language in use (not in form) for negotiating with the environment so that meaning can be represented by the speaker and retrieved by the listener. He further states that from the functional point of view, language becomes operational or functional as soon as meaningful expressions are born in the child's mind, and the investigation can begin much earlier than words and structures have evolved to make linguistic representation possible.

But, how is it possible for an inadequate competence in the foreign language to enable the speaker to negotiate meaning?

Revisiting 'Instruction' in the Post-CLT Era

It is in this context the claims made by communicative language teaching (CLT) as a methodology and constructivism as a philosophy be assessed in the L2 situation. CLT drew the components for its theoretical foundation from diverse disciplines such as linguistics, philosophy, psychology, sociology and educational research. In the post-CLT era, the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (NSFLL) in the USA identifies

> ...five different goal areas known as The Five Cs: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. ... Together, the Five Cs reflect a focus on what learners can do with the language. They represent a holistic, communicative approach to language learning, signalling a move away from the pedagogical representation of language ability as consisting of four skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing and components such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation to encourage consideration of the discourse and sociocultural features of language use. Culture is viewed as integral to language (Savignon, 2007).

Of the five elements listed above, communities and cultures are more concrete than communication, comparison and connection. This type of an amalgamation points towards the potentials lying outside the classroom (communities and cultures) from which learning-teaching must draw inspiration and resources on the one side and it also suggests the need for including processes of learning-teaching larger in dimension than those of classroom contexts, such as comparison, connection and finally, communication in the largest possible forms.

What I mean in this context is that CLT need not be realized as its predecessors were assessed, exclusively as a classroom methodology in its restricted sense, since its critiques opened the doors to healthier debates so that cultural comparisons and connections, communication among communities, and intercultural appropriations are made possible in the post-CLT era. Today, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, teachers of second languages are reminded of their greater responsibilities as mediators among cultures and communities.

Let us try to redefine the notion of SL instruction, with special focus on form against the larger canvas presented above.

Form-focused Instruction: The CLT Pendulum Swings Back

Yet another theoretical insight the post-CLT period made us familiar with is that of form-focused instruction. The flash-flood of CLT took teachers by surprise, some welcoming a (any) change and comfortably swimming with the current, some strongly resisting the current, some others cautiously stepping into the water, and still some sceptics on the shores letting things happen as they would. In India, it was in the 1980s, CLY gained popularity, and then came the swinging back of the pendulum within hardly three decades of promoting, practising, predicting and procrastinating. Three decades is not a short period when educational reforms and curricular innovations are taken into account. Curricula, all over the nation, are expected to undergo revision in every three years, though only re-alignments of topics used to be the end results at school level and '*Macbeth*' being replaced by '*Othello*' in the Indian universities; those much celebrated National Educational Policies are no exceptions.

Surveying the field, Nassaji and Fotos (2007) comment that form-focused instruction has become an important issue in the field of second language acquisition (SLA).

> Research suggests that traditional instruction on isolated grammar forms is insufficient to promote their acquisition…, yet precisely purely communicative approaches have been found inadequate for developing high levels of target language accuracy… . Two general solutions have been proposed in the research literature: one is to encourage learners to attend to target forms by *noticing* them in input…, thus assisting them in their processing. The other is to provide learners with opportunities to produce output containing target forms, again enabling learners to *notice* the gap between their current TL ability and the correct use of the target form (p. 37).

The term 'notice' appears twice in the quote above, and it will be elaborated in some detail later. This seems to be the vantage point from where we are currently taking stock of the past and scaling the horizon ahead of us. We are now enabled to rethink about form once we passed a three-decade period in which form was almost totally neglected. It may also be noted in this context, it was a period of form- dominated

instruction in the pre-CLT era, with structural approach (SA) and direct method (DM) guiding us in the classrooms.

How do pre- and post-CLT approaches to form, or to use the rather commonplace term grammar, differ from each other?

> *Form-focused instruction* (FFI) refers to any pedagogical practice aimed at drawing learners' attention to language form. The "form" may consist of phonological (sound), morphosyntactic (word form, word order), lexical, pragmatic, discourse, or orthographical aspects of language. The term owes its origin to a distinction between *focus on forms*, where a set of predetermined features (e.g. articles, verb tenses) is taught and practised, and *focus on form*, where attention to language is integrated into primarily communicative activities (Collins and Ruivivar, 2020: p. 121).

First, in the pre-CLT treatment of form, a set of features were identified as hard spots and they were treated intentionally and emphatically since they were believed to be the mainstay of language, for example tense forms of verbs. Secondly, they were sequenced and graded according to their complexity as in structural approach. This notion of complexity was unilaterally agreed upon by syllabus framers and teachers; no learner was involved. Thirdly, the identification of hard spots and their gradation were done not on the basis of empirical evidence of complexity, but on predetermined characteristic features. Finally, the learner is nowhere in the centre of the picture; he appears in the end, "readymade" to learn.

In the post-CLT version, i.e. form-focused instruction (FFI), not all the hard spots are focused; nor are they sequence or graded. Thirdly, it is the learner who then and there marks which form is to be 'noticed' since they are not predetermined by the teacher, textbook writer or syllabus designer. Finally, the main focus is on communication; and subsidiary attention is paid to form on the way to message or meaning.

Proposing the psychological construct of 'noticing', Schmidt (1990) asserts that "it is those language forms which are attended that are subsequently learnt", and "conscious cognitive effort involving the subjective experience of noticing is a necessary and sufficient condition for the conversion of input into intake in SLA" (Ellis, 2007).

The phrase 'conscious cognitive effort' in the quote above and the term 'consciousness' in the title of the article take us back to the 1980s where

'consciousness-raising' (CR) was proposed by Michael Sharwood-Smith (1981) and illustrated later by William Rutherford (1987) and others. It must be noted that they were the heydays of CLT, and still these applied linguists chose the 'road not taken' and pointed out the possible dangers of ignoring grammatical competence or accuracy at the cost of communicative competence and fluency. However, now it is possible to trace a flow between the CR theory of the 1980s and the FFI of the early years of the present century.

Is Metalinguistic Knowledge Irrelevant in SL Instruction?

Within the broad framework of the CR or FFI postulations, the issue of teaching-learning grammar needs to be specifically addressed since grammar remains the core in any language to those who approach it for learning. How much formal grammar, which items in what order, when in the course of formal learning etc. have always troubled SL teachers. How does CLT, after making us aware of the need of aiming at communication for a few decades, treat metalinguistic awareness? CLT does not exclude a focus on metalinguistic awareness or knowledge of rules of syntax, discourse, and social appropriateness (Savignon, 2007).

While the learner is moving towards meaning, and when the teacher invites the learner's attention to a particular form on which he stumbles, what explanation can the teacher provide without the support of metalinguistic terms? Therefore, metalinguistic terminology needs to be kept in reserve, to be used in emergency situations.

Social Constructivism in, and Through the Second Language

Once it is agreed upon the following conclusions drawn so far, we can move to the kernel issue of how teaching can be made more learner-engaged, following the constructivist way.

 (i) The ultimate aim of teaching the target language must be communication in socio-culturally acceptable ways, not just a grammatically acceptable version of the TL.

 (ii) Getting the message across should be the driving force behind communication.

(iii) However, form cannot be ignored. The lower the degree of exposure to an acceptable variety of the TL, the higher the degree of focusing on form.

(iv) The use of metalinguistic terms may be limited to the post-noticing stage in the interlanguage use or during remediation.

It is a truism that children learn better through constructing—concrete objects such as a toy or a picture, abstractions such as using language to represent reality, express oneself and so on. For both, the concrete and the abstract aims cited above, the mother tongue or the first language is at hand, and the child is quite comfortable with using it and getting things done. Then what next in a second or foreign language? How to construct reality or how to mean in a second language?

Social constructivism is possible, only if the learner becomes an integral part of a community—real or imaginary. In an earlier article titled *Individuals in Imagined Communities* (2012), the author has argued the need of converting classrooms into imagined communities wherein the members, the teacher included, can opt for an atmosphere and environment of the classical 'willing suspension of disbelief' for a short while, to begin with, and start functioning exclusively in the target language where individuals' interlanguages link the community. Eventually, this 'affectation' is likely to stay for long, since children are really good at stepping into the shoes of others.

The notion of community of practice (CoP) seems to be yet another alternative in the ESL classrooms so that social constructivism may work better. The sociological construct of communities of practice was first proposed by Wenger and Snyder (2000) in the early years of the current century.

A community of practice has been defined as a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic and who come together to fulfil both individual and group goals. Wenger and Snyder (2000) point out that communities of practice existed since ancient times. Skilled workers such as potters used to form such groups to promote their products. Such practices often resulted in sharing best practices and new knowledge to advance a domain of professional practice. Personal interaction—face-to-face meeting—was the key to operation, and getting and remaining connected was the purpose.

Communities of practice are not professional teams; they differ in their functions. There is no top-down hierarchy; nor subordination among its members. Teams are created; but communities of practices happen naturally by way of human instincts and the desire to coexist. No target

is fixed beforehand; nor any evaluation of performance in the end. Membership is informal and self-chosen; joining and withdrawal, too.

In such a classroom as a community of practices, there is no division of labour; the teacher also learns along with the learners. Diversity prevails at the workplace; and collaboration is at work. For example, at the micro-level, the one who is weak in oral performance, but good at handwriting has a role to play by helping a few with their handwriting. At the macro-level, those who are good at CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) or BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) as Cummins (1979) distinguished, can help each other.

Summary

The proposal made for creating a better learning environment in the Indian exposure-poor ESL situation (inside and outside the classroom) can be summarized as follows.

 (i) Teaching-learning may aim at meaning making and message transmitting as propagated by CLT.

 (ii) But, accuracy cannot be side-lined at the cost of fluency, since the early learnt errors are likely to get fossilized.

(iii) Noticing the deviant forms, comparing them with the correct ones, and modifying the construction take place without seriously hindering the process of meaning making.

(iv) Singled out forms or grammatical or vocabulary items may be treated the functional way, rather than going by form during remediation.

 (v) Remediation (self- or other-initiated) may go hand in hand with the meaning making process, not at the end of a session or unit.

(vi) Principles of the communities of practices may be followed for enabling a smooth transition from instruction to construction, wherein collaboration and diversity of learning experience are the main features of learning.

(vii) Considering the poor exposure available to the teachers, and thereby to the learners as well, it has been recommended to maximize the potential of multimedia, with indigenous contents.

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