Community language learning: A focus shift to the learner

By Dhanya Bhaskaran | May 29, 2013

Language is a device for the expression of our self. So it is the ‘human self’ that gets revealed or exposed through language. Hence the undeniable link between language and the human self. If language is for self-expression (which could be for any purpose such as communicating needs, sharing feelings, posting queries or conveying opinions), then teaching and learning of a language has to take into consideration this crucial aspect ‘self’ which is very much involved in the process of communication. In this context, the ‘Humanistic Theories’ of language learning attain special significance.

Humanistic Approach in language learning is one of the latest and most thought provoking methodology which places the learner as the focal point in the language teaching and learning process. Humanism as an educational approach considers language learning as a process which engages the whole person in the learning activity and not just his/ her intellect. It gives ample care for the emotional and psychological wellbeing of the learner.

According to Brumfit (1982), Humanism as a philosophy, dream of an idea world which consists of “autonomous creative and emotionally secure people” and education can and should assist in the creation of such an ideal world.

Community Language Learning / Counseling Language Learning and Humanism

There are four major Humanistic methods in second language learning and teaching, of which CLL (Community Language Learning / Counseling Language Learning) is a major method.

CLL, a language education method was introduced by Charles Curran, derives its primary insight from the Rogerian psychological process of counseling. Curran was a professor of clinical psychology. He was also a Catholic priest. His counseling sessions gave him an insight into the working of the minds of the individuals, especially adults. He understood that a language teacher can easily damage the self-image of a learner, especially an adult learner. In the learning process, the teacher has the absolute linguistic power and authority. If the teacher is not warm, non-critical and supportive, there is always a chance for the learner to feel estranged which may force him/ her to move away from the learning process. Any act that could hurt the self-esteem of the learner could hinder the learning progress. So it is essential to create a supportive environment for learning through ensuring a self-motivated and willful involvement in the learning activity by the learner during which his/ her self-esteem and dignity is boosted to resulting method where in the ‘knower’ (teacher) is the counselor and the learner is his/ her client. The sympathetic and understanding teacher in this method acts as the catalyst who leads his/ her pupils to achieve learner autonomy through enhancing self- motivation of the learner. CLL is a therapeutic approach which mainly focuses on developing speaking ability in the target language.

The mode of operandi

Stage 1: A group of students / clients of 6-12 are seated in a semi-circle to enable eye contact. There may be one or more counselors assigned to the group. The main form of activity is speaking produced by individual members of the group, but the method also may be used for teaching composition writing.

Stage 2: The students utter a sentence or idea in their mother tongue. Knower translates / re-interprets it in the target language. Learner talk is recorded using a recording device.

Stage 3: The learners converse more and more independent and from time to time, seek help from the knower. They listen to the voice on the recorder and make comments on it. Based on their responses, the teacher prepares a transcript with comments, errors marked and suggestions. She hands over the copies of the individual learner.

Stage 4: Learners do self-correction. The teacher settles down with the remedial lessons while the learners move ahead with lessor and lessor teacher intervention in the learning process.

CLL and ESL Classroom in India

India, as it is often perceived as a land of diversities, does not claim an exception in its classrooms either. An average Indian classroom where English is taught as a second language is a melting pot of diversities. If it is a metro/ city (or even a second grade or third grade city for that matter) diversities in the classroom include multilingual, multicultural, multi religious, multi ethnic arena wherein students with multi socio - economic background come and be part of a group under one umbrella which is the educational institution; and main motive that they are under that shade, is education. Fascinatingly enough, the subject and language, English is the only factor which to an extent, is the only unifying or common factor in the Indian classrooms.

In this section of the essay, the researcher is trying to analyze the favorable factors and risks that are involved in adopting CLL methodology in the Indian ESL classroom.
Why CLL in Indian Classrooms?

Translation as a tool is used in the CLL classroom. That is a major advantage of CLL being imported to Indian classrooms for it gives the liberty to use mother tongue while teaching target language. CLL allows the learner in the beginning stage to use mother tongue or L1 to express his / her ideas. This helps to give a confidence in the learner whose ideas are part of his / her self-esteem. The ideas expressed in L1 are translated to L2 or reinterpreted to L2. After the first translation by the teacher, the learners are asked to repeat it. At this stage, the procedure reminds of the pattern practice drill of Behavioristic School. ‘Though, many of the Structuralistic methods have been discarded from the L2 classroom of the modern world, some of its best practices can still be absorbed with necessary modifications’, observes Dr. Annie David (‘Let Us Face the Reality’, ELTIF Journal, Vol. III.3, 2012).

Recording and transcription is an activity which is part of any CLL classroom. Earlier, it was done with the help of a tape recorder. Nowadays, modern devices such as voice recorder, or gadgets with inbuilt voice recording facility, such as mobile phones, can be utilized for this activity. This activity has a twofold aim. First, to listen to the recording and to transcribe them for practice; second, to use it to analyze the linguistic forms. This activity has its roots in the Audio Lingual method, which was once very popular in Second language learning sessions.

Group work is the center of the CLL method. The very term ‘Community’ represents the presence/need of a group in the CLL classroom. In this class, the learners engage in various group tasks, such as small group discussion of a topic, preparing a conversation, preparing summary of a topic for presentation to another group and preparing a story for presentation in front of the class. All these activities ensure maximum learner involvement with less reticence and least inhibition. This type of a classroom has a striking similarity with the Communicative classroom, where in group work and pair work are given at most importance.

Reflection and observation is another characteristic of this Humanistic approach, wherein learners reflect and report on their experiences. These experiences mainly consist of their feeling, emotions and reactions of the class and learning the learning experience. It also includes feelings such as sense of one another, reactions to silence and concern for something to say. A close analysis of this kind of an action in the learning environment forced this researcher to correlate this method with a very popular ancient method of teaching and learning existed in the Vedic India. This kind of a practice ensures learning as a learner centric activity with task analysis; error identification and error correction initiated by the learner himself or herself. The teacher intervention is very minimal at this stage.

Free conversation with other learners and with the teacher, enhances the confidence and self-esteem level of the learners. These types of discussions may include what they have learned or what they have felt during the session. This humanistic approach is highly used in the modern “corporate / behavioral programmes.” For example, in India, ISABS (Indian Society for Applied Behavioral Science) in its training sessions promotes such open conversations and retrospections. Many ‘group dynamics training programs’ or T-Group training programmes resort to this strategy during the sessions.

Indian ESL classrooms are quite complex in nature. A Humanistic approach which focuses on strengthening the inner self of the learner and thus motivating him/her to actively participate in the learning process will definitely bring about a progressive change in the achievement level of the learners.

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