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Foreign Language Teaching and Learner's Independence

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Abstract:

In this paper it is proposed that the teaching of any foreign language to any person ends when the teacher feels that he taught the person how to be an independent language learner. The instant the language learner feels that he can learn things on his own, he is independent and the teaching ends there. The job of the teacher is not to teach everything in and about the language, but to equip the learner, how to learn everything on his own, without the aid of the teacher. It is like the clichéd but wise suggestion, 'don't provide fish to the hungry, but teach him how to fish.'

Keywords: English, Foreign Language, Language Teaching, Learner's Independence, Mother Tongue, Second Language, Urdu.

The Qualified Foreign Language Teacher

What are the essential things to be taught to a foreign or second language learner? In order to investigate this, first we need to ask the question as to who is qualified to teach a foreign language. For example, if the task is to teach English to a native speaker of Urdu, now, the question is who is qualified to teach?The word 'qualified' here does not mean in any way the acquisition or possession of a university degree that different institutions or schools require to recruit and employ people to teach a language. 'Qualified' here simply means the one who possesses enough knowledge and skills to teach. In this case, does the teacher require knowing Urdu to teach English? Let us imagine a situation wherein the learner does not know English, and the teacher does not know Urdu. Will the teaching in such situation become easy or difficult? Another situation is where the teacher knows the language of the learner? That is, in this case, the teacher knows Urdu. Will this knowledge of Urdu, the mother tongue of the learner, equips and qualifies the teacher more than the one who does not know the mother

tongue of the learner? Seemingly and in reality to a great extent the teacher who knows the language of the learner is more qualified and may be effective in teaching.

Nevertheless, few situations may come up here such as: the temptation to use the mother tongue of the learner more than the foreign language or the target language by the teacher; the learner's vulnerability to speak in his language more than in the foreign language; and the teacher's condoning of the use of the mother tongue by the learner. However, one question which is very pertinent here is whether the interference of the mother tongue really is an impediment to the acquisition of the foreign language?

The idea that if the teacher does not know the mother tongue of the learner, the learner may acquire the language quicklyappears to be based on the condition that in such situation the learner would be compelled to do things directly in the language that he is learning. But in such situation, the desire and interest of the learner matters. And this may be applied to those learners who are very conscious of their needs.

It is worth investigating whether the experiments that are carried out in respect of the 'Direct Method or Natural Method' in the history of language teaching were really successful. If they were then we would not require other methods. But the fact that other methods developed after 'Direct Method' for teaching a foreign language itself is proof enough that this method was not as effective as it was thought to be.

Undoubtedly, the knowledge of the mother tongue of the learner empowers the teacher to convey the concepts with incredible ease. However,if differences in sound system, morphology, syntax etc. of the native language and foreign language are wide, things may get complexified. Yet, the knowledge about the native language and the foreign or target language helps the teacher to command the teaching effectively.

Employment and Learning a Foreign Language

Nevertheless, a case in point is a situation wherein some people who are adults go to a foreign country; at the end of a year or two they start speaking that foreign language with the ease with which they could carry out essential duties of their existence. Many people who go to Middle East, particularly the Urdu speaking community, who do not speak Arabic, return in a year or two with effective speaking skills in Arabic. This is on top of the fact that Arabic appears to be a very difficult language to learn. The reason appears to be very many. But the most obvious reason is the survival and livelihood. This creates an unbelievable verve in people to learn a language. Secondly, People speak a foreign language when they do not have many speakers who share their mother tongue;the needs compel them to speak in the language of their employment. They are forced to carry out all their works, if these involve communication in the foreign language.

However, another observation is as much worth noting; if these people have friends and acquaintances who speak their mother tongue in the foreign country they would not learn that foreign language as quickly as the ones who did not have anybody to speak to, in their mother tongue.

Yet another situation is availability of a common language for the employer and the employee. For exampleEnglish which might be spoken by both employer and employee. Many people who worked in the Middle East for decades did notlearn how to speak Arabic. When they were asked the reason, they said they did not require as they used English in the office and they moved in the company of those whose mother tongue was same as theirs. The general inference is that necessity is one of the greatest factors of learning of any foreign language.

The level of language learning is also of paramount importance. Adult learners can learn as easily as young learners. But it is often assumed, that learning at the young age takes place quicker than learning at the grown-up age. The observation to some extent may be correct, and one of the reasons could be when a child learns a language he does not bother much about committing mistakes, and hence does not feel shy, whereas adult learners are often conscious of their mistakes. They do not want to be laughed at, and they wish to avoid all sorts of embarrassment; apprehensions of these types may create reluctance and hesitancy in them in learningthe foreign language particularly speaking skills. However, there is no dearth in instances wherein adults also acquired foreign language quickly.

The Acquisition and Learning of the Foreign Language

It ought to be noted, in this paper, the terms language acquisition and language learning are used interchangeably. Though, the distinction between language acquisition and language learning has been quite succinctly made by Stephen D Krashen who associates language acquisition with the natural and unconscious or subconscious way of acquiring language as native learners do; and language learning with conscious way of acquiring or getting the language.

Krashen writes:

> Language acquisition is very similar to the process children use in acquiring first and second languages. It requires meaningful interaction in the target language-- natural communication--in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. Error correction and explicit teaching of rules are not relevant to language acquisition (Brown and Hanlon; Brown, Cazden, and Bellugi), but caretakers and native speakers can modify their utterances addressed to acquirers to help them understand, and these modifications are thought to help the acquisition process (Snow and Ferguson, 1)

> Conscious language learning, on the other hand, is thought to be helped a great deal by error correction and the presentation of explicit rules (Krashen and Seliger). Error correction it is maintained, helps the learner come to the correct mental representation of the linguistic generalization. Whether such feedback has this effect to a significant degree remains an open question (Fanselow; Long). No invariant order of learning is claimed, although syllabi implicitly claim that learners proceed from simple to complex, a sequence that may not be identical to the acquisition sequence (Snow and Ferguson, 2)

The Most Difficult Job

David Crystal in one of his interviews observed that there are two most difficult jobs in the world, first of all, translating and interpreting and secondly, language teaching. The statement of Crystal might be an exaggeration, yet the proximity to truth of this statement cannot be denied. Undoubtedly, language teaching is one of the most difficult of jobs. For, despite all efforts, one cannot guarantee that one can teach the language completely to any person in a given period of time with all the required perfection in listening, speaking, reading and writing. For, it is the matter of realisation in learner, and unless the learner puts in the required effort and performs to the standards required to be called an able speaker, a teacher cannot make any claim.

Nevertheless, the tools of evaluation to check the extent of learning in a given situation are not completely perfect. It is still difficult to assess how much a learner has learnt on his own and how much the teacher has contributed to his learning. The system of feedback that different institutions devise to assess the teaching performance of teachers are pretty much subjective, the feedback often carries the likes and dislikes of the learners, and they just cannot have a tool to measure (unless if such instrument is available to them readily) what they learnt on their own and what they learnt from their teacher.

Going back to the statement of Crystal that language teaching is very difficult, let us attempt an example theoretically, which could be easily visualised and many of us must have also observed. There is a class of learners, whose age, gender and background are almost the same. They are taught a course in language for equal duration of time by the same teacher in the same environment; at the end of the course, when one renders the test, one may find different results for different learners. This experiment must have been done by most of the language teachers and researchers. What is the reason? Why there is so much of difference in learning? Does it mean that the teacher is at fault? Or does it mean the learners have different abilities and competencies? The second questionappears to be very valid, and the answer to it may be 'yes' in most of the cases. This means, then the system of feedback for teacher's language teaching to a great extent fails. Nevertheless, there are exceptions.

Despite the claims, that language can be taught, and with the fact that most of the people around the world claim to teach language, the question remains that whether the learner really learnt anything from the teacher who taught him. The emphasis on the 'learning' highlights the learner-centeredness or centrality of the learner in language acquisition context and setting. However, does this mean that the teacher has become redundant in language learning context? Far from this, it is worth noting that the teacher's role has increased manifold today. Now the teacher is just not the imparter of knowledge about the language, but he is required to ensure that the learner has completely imbibed whatever he has beentaught; now the role of the teacher includes facilitation, guidance, and friendliness.

The Primary Job of the Language Teacher

The above discussion and our teaching experience made us to put forth the view that the primary job of the language teacher is to make the learner independent. He must do

everything so that the learner learns on his own. The teacher should reveal all the tricks to the learners which he acquired either through practice or through personal observation and experience to equip the learners with all the tools of easy and quick acquisition of different language aspects which make the learner an able knower and user of the language.

The learner-centeredness approach of language teaching has indeed paved way to a large number of language learning activities, and a great shift in the attitude of the teachers. However, this learning centeredness is not restricted to language acquisition only. Almost all the subjects whether of science or humanities are treated with the objective of focusing on the learners.

The concept of engaging learners is central to learner-centeredness. The activities whether of language or of any subject are devised bearing in mind how easily and quickly a learner can acquire them. Engagement drives away slackness from talented but lazy learners; and those learners who are already sharp, it makes them more creative (here the teachers are required to heighten their interest lest they may find the activities boring), and it makes the poor learners improve. Learners who are talented but cannot keep their concentration, engagement offers a great cure for them. It improves their concentration, and they may be the real beneficiaries in the end.

Language Learning Activities

James P Lantolf observes:

> Activities, whether in the workplace, classrooms, or other settings, do not always unfold smoothly. What begins as one activity can reshape itself into another activity, in the course of its unfolding. Cobb, for example, in his studies of children learning arithmetic reports a case in which the children began a project on measuring by playing shoestore, which required that they learn how to measure feet with the appropriate template. After a time, the children shifted their attention to measuring other kinds of objects, and quickly lost interest in the shoestore activity. However, in order to measure objects such as chairs, tables, blackboards, and the like, they were not able to use foot templates and had to discover a new set of measuring tools (11).

A language teacher is required to devise as many language activities as he can to sustain the interest of the learners. Effective teaching would possibly be the result of the rendition of these activities.

Conclusion

The learning of foreign or second language is not an easy thing, but if the learners are engaged and their interests are arrested, learning becomes very easy.

The solution to any foreign language learning is 'interest'. The teacher is required to engage the learners and the learners are required to sustaintheir interest. The intensity of the interest often determines the ease of learning, that is, if one has high interest and one maintains it for

quite some time, then one can learn the language very quickly and easily. The sustainability of intensity of interest is crucial to language learning.

(In this paper the expressions 'foreign language' and 'second language' are used interchangeably, despite the distinctions that most experts make in this regard).

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