THE NEGOTIATED ENCULTURATION PROCESS IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM – A STUDY IN ECO LINGUISTICS

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The scope of Eco Linguistics can be expanded by discerning teachers if they can build thick descriptions of unstated assumptions about the classroom culture. The paper posits that one can arrive at a deeper understanding of the small culture in the classroom without any necessary subordination to or containment within large cultures. To be precise, the classroom is researched into as a complex in which the individuals become very much the product of the social Environment. A particular experiment conducted by the presenter of this paper and the co-investigator is highlighted with the clinching argument that such studies in Eco Linguistics expand the perspectival value of the researcher. This paper combines the tradition of critical pedagogy with Eco-linguistic – cultural perspectives.

Keywords: Enculturation, Naturalization, Sedimented thinking, Learning as a stochastic process, Ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

Ecological linguistics has been chosen for an ideological drop for this study because it stands in contrast to structural models which will explain only language occurrences and not their environment. Eco linguistics has its principles transferred from biological ecology to linguistics. The Ecological metaphor was applied to the field of Linguistics by Haugen (1972). The Eco system metaphor has been transported to the context of language learning which is viewed as social learning and learning of a new culture to unravel emergent little events which are not part of the plan of the curriculum in language teaching. This model would explain the events of learning, perceptions of the teacher and learners, the linguistic /ethnographic struggle involved, the complex, indirect relation between the teacher and her learners, and the list is endless. One cannot prescribe procedures for this kind of investigation as this is an investigation into competing cultures. The term culture is expanded with reference to a representative classroom in which bi-lingual learners are being taught English as a Second Language. Enculturation is a process in which an individual gradually imbibes the shared values of the classroom society and participates in its communicative environs and understands the value of utterances. To cut a long story short the two terms Emergence and affordance can be used as two key words in the context of the research.
Leo Van Lier writes,

Emergence presupposes a non-reductive change, from lower level phenomenon to a higher level phenomenon, from individual ants to an ant colony, from a bunch of houses to an organized city from perception to thought, from pointing to language, etc. Non reductive means that the lower level elements (things, behaviours, skills) cannot explain the higher level ones, thus they are qualitatively different, yet the higher level is clearly in some way based on , derived from, or built up from, the lower level( 2004, p 82).

The project team is persuaded that language learning can be explained by a complex process like Emergence. This persuasion was fuelled by sociocultural theories of learning. It is the conviction of the team that good classroom teachers consider only pedagogy and miss out on social theories of learning. Meaning is always negotiated and creating conditions for meaning exchange will enable learners to transfer rules of negotiation in a tacit way from the first language to the second language context. Affordance another key term is explicated by Van Lier thus:

“In sum, then, language affordances, whether natural or cultural direct or indirect, are relations of possibility between language users. They can be acted upon to make further linguistic action possible” (2004, p.95).

Hypotheses

The basic hypothesis of this study was formulated thus in operational terms:

• Identify a group of slow learners who have had limited exposure to language learning
• Plan an intervention with focus on individuals
• Avoid taken for granted assumptions about teaching and learning
• Observe learning and teaching behaviour
• Create conditions for a classroom culture which promotes speech among the participants.
• Develop in the learners a voice unique to their personality
• To provide the group with opportunities for equity and access in education

The Context and participants in the study

The study does not take into consideration gifted learners and learners who are privileged because of their past training in English. Training in English at the School level generally marks high SES (socio Economic status) in the context of study.

The Experiment was conducted in an all-women’s institution in India, between 2007 and 2009. The institution awards undergraduate and post graduate degrees in Science, and Humanities to around 5000 students. The experimental group belonged to First year Bachelor of Arts course and they were 50 in number. The experiment was run for two semesters by two investigators who shared the class time. The official curriculum made it mandatory that the learners sat for two papers in English at the end of each semester. Preparing the learners for their end of the semester summative examination was a real challenge given their prior knowledge in English.
In the college, English is taught as a second language for two years, (four semesters) in all three year degree courses. English is also the medium of instruction in the college. The Experimental group differed from other learners in the college because they were students of Tamil Language and literature (Tamil is the mother tongue of majority of learners in the college) and they did not have the advantage of studying their major subjects in English. The learners’ recognition vocabulary was therefore deficient. Only 30% of the class could recognize the words that were met in the basic Bridge course reading materials at the entry level to the degree course. These learners could not afford studying in English medium schools. Out of the 50 learners only two of them had heard about the two well-known English Language newspapers. Their low SES status gave them only limited exposure to English. The learners’ deprivation at the home front reflected in their own attitude towards their selves. An exploration of our learners SES led us on to the belief that the learners had to share with us details about prolonged sickness in the family, loss of one or both parents, broken homes, the necessity for learners to work as field hands for the sake of money etc. 80% of learners were first generation learners.

In the context of the experiment there was this necessity to understand the meaning for certain behavioural patterns that emerged with reference to this group of learners when teachers tried to teach them ESL. The progress of learning was slow and the learners expressed their inability to understand teacher talk. There was considerable difficulty among learners to understand the meaning of basic simple words used in the academia. The learners found it difficult to relate spelling and pronunciation. The investigators in the study decided to avoid sedimented thinking which constitutes the discourse of the majority of teachers, and rise above certain generalizations that are exchanged between teachers in the staff common room as reasons for learner silence and slow learning in the class. Some of the generalizations are:

- There is a general deterioration in educational standards all over the country. ESL learning is affected by it.
- There is a general apathy for learning among youngsters because they have other distractions.
- Learners will learn better only when they accept the authority of the teachers. Even as learners do not accept the authority of parents they may not accept the authority of teachers.
- The learners ought to have learnt at least survival level skills in their high school or higher secondary course.
- The text book holds the key to the learning of English and it should be paraphrased or explicated even if the learners are not able to read the lessons.

It was hypothesised that learner and teacher behaviour in the class would be observed as part of classroom culture. Learner communicative behaviour had roughly the following characteristics.

- The learners experienced alienation in the new language environment.
- The self-identity of the learner was threatened when coping strategies failed.
- The learners experienced fear, anxiety and disorientation since all frames of reference were lost.
- The learners tried to achieve ego permeability by trying to link the signifier and the signified.
In this context the teachers acted as interculturalists who intervened by teaching the learners ways of becoming sensitive to the new culture. Two teachers, incidentally the writers of this paper worked as cohorts in the project.

A parallel schema was identified for teacher behaviour.

- The teacher was at a loss to know what steps she should follow to gain access to her learners
- The teacher thought hard to find alternative strategies to sensitize the learner to the new environment
- The teacher examined her own use of language from the point of view of emergent properties of language in society and by analogy in classroom
- The teacher built intervention procedures to enable the learner to perceive the other culture as related to one’s own and different from one’s own
- The teacher strove to establish mutually rewarding relationships in the class through her own regulated behaviour.

The paper argues that the teacher has to challenge her own taken for granted unproblematic knowledge of herself as a teacher and her assumptions about the learning capabilities of her learners. In the interactions that took place between the teacher and the students, between the text and the students, the teacher had to observe the speech and the silence of the students, and codify a pattern, which pattern would dictate the rationale for the procedures to be adopted by the teacher to enhance learning. Though the experiment was conducted in an Indian classroom the findings about learner characteristics, their alienation, fear, anxiety, and the teachers attempt at introducing the new culture do have transnational relevance in contexts of multi ethnic group learning.

What is culture in a classroom? In a classroom with students of differing SES (socio Economic status) cross cultural and linguistic factors influence language learning and teaching. In the second language classroom we are familiar with culture which may refer to differing backgrounds, language habits, perceptions, self-identities, the value system of teachers and learners. Culture here is a creative, heterogeneous, fluid social force. There are then competing cultures in a classroom; these cultures produce differing behavioural patterns. If the teacher considers the students as the other the teacher would miss the complexity of their culture. The teacher who Knows English is then superior, normal, the knower: the learner is inferior, not interested, not motivated etc. The dominant discourse of teachers in the society reiterates that language learning simply does not happen; the students who lack the habit of reading can never read and write; there is a general deterioration in educational standards; therefore it has spread to the learning of languages. These ways of talking about language learning is so naturalized, that teachers conform to them without thinking. Such naturalization simplifies issues in language teaching.

A non - essentialist view of culture would problematize language learning in the classroom. The spread of language learning events under normal circumstances would include curriculum specification, teaching testing and evaluation. One wonders whether this orthodoxy of setting up a chain foregrounding curriculum, teaching testing and evaluation during educational intervention is warranted in view of the multifarious events that take place in a classroom. In the context of Eco- Linguistics we can contest the idea that language learning is a gradual, enculturation. What may be happening in a classroom language learning situation is
emergence, which happens when relatively simple elements combine together to form a higher order system. This view of classroom culture avers that predictability in language learning is very slender. The relationship between teaching and learning is curvilinear. Learning is a stochastic process, it can take place without any overt teaching; the teaching event is not followed by a learning event in all cases. (Leo Van Lier, 1990).

Any educational venture, which does not focus on the latent or fluid environment, will only concentrate on certain enabling conditions in the classroom in a random fashion. Therefore the development of the learner’s voice would be a convenient starting point for the teacher. In a limited period of 30 contact hours per week the presenter of this paper and her colleague mounted an intervention on an experimental basis in which the learning group engaged itself in identifying their different selves and their relationship to language. For conceptual clarity Ericson’s scheme of the ecological self, the interpersonal self, the extended self, the private self, and the conceptual self was held as a reference point. These were related to time and space, mutuality reciprocity, rapport, Inner speech, Private speech, and notions of power.

**METHODOLOGY**

Class room Observation was the mainstay of the methodology planned for the study and in this case it was participant observation as the teachers involved were also part of the cultural group. Keeping records was another important step which helped revisiting the observed phenomenon. Facts were recorded and interpretations were arrived at in discussions with the co-investigator.

In the trajectories of events in the class an orientation was given to the learners in which they saw themselves as social selves, which line of thinking rests on a convergent mix of theories of the self by Peirce, Bakhtin, Vygotsky and Wittgenstein. The teacher therefore is not the other. The teacher’s self, her mind, her attitude, and motivation is discursively constructed. The exploration in question was what kind of self is to be shaped which can interact with others while using the language? The answer is of course the self which realizes the action potential of language. In the place of the linearly realized text book, action sequences are introduced in the experiment.

A scaffolding environment was provided in which the learners used English to Tamil bilingual Dictionary to link words and expressions from the new language to their mother tongue. A great difficulty that was encountered was that the learners understood the meanings of individual words, whereas they could not understand teacher talk which was continuous. The students expressed their anxiety when they could not understand the instructions given by the teacher. Therefore instructions were given in the learner’s mother tongue, Tamil and later in English. The learners were asked to notice how these instructions run parallel to each other and asked to note similarities and differences. They were also told that the English version may include translations of words and phrases from Tamil; these were not literal translations but translation of meaning. These learners being bi-lingual learners it was artificial to keep out expressions from the mother tongue. The teachers could, in fact, obtain the co-operation of the learners by conducting activities bilingually. Discussions by Suresh Canagaraja (1999) bring out the cultural context wherein the target groups discuss lessons taught in English in their vernacular for better understanding. His book *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching* emphasises the need for negotiating culturally oriented pedagogies.

Initially the students thought that since the text book was withdrawn from the scenario now and then, they had no work. They did not understand that the teacher was a link with the English Language. The teacher wanted Speech to happen but the students talked in their mother tongue.
Dialogue became central to classroom activities. The teacher identified attention deficit disorder and taught the students to concentrate on the spoken word. An exercise regimen with learners focussing initially on atmospheric noise, then their own breathing while sitting up with closed eyes had allegedly improved their concentration on a particular type of noise produced by teacher talk. There was a clear indication that the learners were progressing from a state of being unaware to a state of being alert and responsive. At this initial stage no discrimination was made between the responses in first language and ESL. The teacher talk emerged as the text in class and students listened to the teacher. As the project advanced the teacher became one of the participants in learning.

The students were given grounding in general aboutness of events in their lives. They were given questionnaires to explore their everyday routine, their relationship with their parents, siblings and relatives, their TV watching habits, the contexts in which they read English etc. In another round of events the learners talked about their preferences, their likes and dislikes their view world, their reactions to current political events etc. Distinction between past, present and Future events in certain contexts was discussed. All these exchanges were mostly in the mother tongue with English words and structures interspersed.

After 40 contact hours the learners were able to participate in the dialogues between the teacher and the pupils. Most of the sentences they produced in English were verb less sentences. Nouns and action words were strung together without any regard for Grammar. The spirit of participation was rewarded with words of encouragement by the teachers. This was noted as a significant aspect of learning. The learners understood the concept of relevance and appropriacy in communication.

The students did not experience any fear of failure because they were yet to come across a model learner who had learnt the rudiments of language use successfully.

The unique aspect of the project was the students identified themselves as part of a new culture in which they made use of different strategies, the most important among them was asking for help. In feedback sessions the students reported that only after they interacted with their classmates and the teacher did they understand that learning anything is possible through talk and discussion.

Teacher Behaviour

Teachers of Second language are victims of using and reusing simplistic labels about student and teacher behaviour. Alongside what happened in the classroom in the experiment, the teachers concentrated on sustained self-observation for the project period. The teachers maintained a diary in which they recorded contours of their behaviour. Self-blame and blaming the other intruded in some of the interventions of the teachers. In the T.P (Teacher’s portfolio) there were many naive insignificant observations. The presenter of the paper and the co-investigator were not able to perform certain linguistic tasks successfully.

- Using language with empathy in the context of praising student’s performance
- Confirming and explaining the errors committed by the student with patience.
- Correcting without rejecting what the students have said.
- Desisting from making sarcastic remarks when learners are not able to recall what was taught recently, and repeatedly.
- Resisting the tendency to talk in English continuously instead of using Tamil alongside English
• Resisting the temptation to turn the interactive class into a lecture session on how to speak and learn English

As a result of this exploration, the teachers’ assumption was revised. The teachers were of the opinion that it was enough for the teacher of English to have a good command of vocabulary and the ability to quickly switch over to a number of structures while conducting the lesson. In the changed scenario, when the transmission mode of intervention was not adequate, the teacher’s linguistic abilities must assume new social, psychosocial, and humanistic dimensions.

CONCLUSION

Though this was an experiment conducted as part of a pedagogic intervention the teachers involved deliberately concentrated on the psycho social aspects of learning to incorporate into teaching an interdisciplinary bias. This approach improved the perspective of the teacher and resulted in supporting the low SES students. The students showed strong evidence of having developed a voice. As women in India need to develop a distinct voice and institutionalized education is one of the avenues for this, the project fulfilled its goal in ethnographic terms. This project paved way for mounting other such experiments to ensure equity and access in Education. As it is difficult to codify results of such ethnographic experiments the research is ongoing with necessary changes in controllable aspects of classroom happenings.

REFERENCES

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