

Classroom Processes in The Second Language Classroom: Then And Now

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Abstract

What goes on inside a classroom and whether or not it is appropriate has long been a point of debate. It is dependent directly on the theory of learning prevalent during the times. In turn it impacts the view that practitioners have about the purpose of language learning. This is evident from the transitions that took place over the last century with a shift from the prevalence of the tenets of grammar translation method to the conversational requirements that communicative language teaching propagates. In this article the changes in teachers' classroom behaviour have been described with reference to the various theories of learning over the years.

Keywords: teacher behaviour, classroom processes, theories of learning, CLT

Introduction

The history of research based on classroom processes can be traced back to the latter half of the previous century. To understand the evolution of these processes, a discussion of the theories of learning which affected the field of education and especially language education is imperative. The present paper will first delineate the various theories which have given rise to the classroom processes in the present context. The next section of the paper will be a discussion of the variables which affect these processes in classrooms today. Finally, the paper will conclude with a list of possible solutions for improving the quality of the variables within the classroom.

Theories of Learning

One of the first theories of learning which had a direct effect on language education was behaviourism. Theories which fall under this category are based on stimulus response

conditioning. The learner in this case is completely dependent on an outside source for information. Behavioural theories focus on environmental factors like reinforcement, feedback, and practice; learning is conceptualized as something occurring from the outside and affecting the learners. For instance, operant conditioning which refers to the concept of rote learning, the acquisition of physical and mental skills, and the development of productive classroom behaviours has a direct influence on language acquisition. The focus of these processes is the performing of set tasks rather than the development of the cognitive abilities of learners. Examples of language teaching techniques which follow this tradition include the grammar translation method, and the direct method of language pedagogy.

Thereafter, around the 1960s language learning was no longer limited to the classroom. Any situation which was conducive to the acquisition of language became the real time classroom. This idea of social learning theory as was propagated by Albert Bandura and R.H. Walters during 1963. The theory further developed into the socio-cognitive theory of learning in the 1980s. As a move away from the behavioural theories, the socio-cognitive theories focused on the cognitive aspects of language learning. Learning was no longer considered a simple act of stimulus and response. It was redefined as a complex information processing procedure. Thus, learning was considered to be a process that occurred from the inside out as opposed to the tenets of behaviourism. The works of John Flavell and his notion of the metacognitive strategies stands further testimony to the principles of socio-cognitive theories. Metacognition refers to the “relatively stable information human thinkers have about their own cognitive processes” (Wenden, 1998, pp. 516). This led to the emergence of self-regulated learning in the field of language education.

Traditionally learning was seen to occur to individuals but, within a community of practitioners. This community was afforded in the sphere of the classroom. Learning was considered to be a process of transference of knowledge as is evident from the precepts of behaviourism. But in the present day context, this notion has undergone a change: learning in general and language learning in particular are not isolated instances of this transference; neither are they limited to it. Learning is now recognized as a collaborative, dynamic process that orchestrates itself differently in different learners. Even if the input is the same, invariably the intake and

subsequent output varies across learners. This is in direct opposition to the factory model of education which was a direct outcome of the industrial revolution. Contrary to the factory model, modern day language learning has seen a steady reverting to the theoretical principles propagated by Henry Thoreau and John Dewey. The focus has therefore, shifted from the teacher to the learner; from the end product to the process involved in attaining the end results. This in turn brings us to the question at hand- the process variables that form a part of the classroom dynamics.

A model for the study of classroom teaching

Chaudron, in his book *Second Language Classrooms: Research on teaching and learning* (1988), refers to the classroom teaching model designed by Michael J. Dunkin and Bruce J. Biddle (1974). This model comprises four variables: presage variables, context variables, process variables and product variables. The presage variable includes all the teacher formative experiences like social class, age and gender of the teacher. This affects the teacher training experiences that the teacher is most likely to have gathered while attending the various teacher training courses. Further, this has an influence on the teaching skills, motivation and personality traits of the teacher. Context variables include pupil formative experiences. Ethnic factors like school, community, student population, and materials available also affect the learning process. The other traits that influence the learning process are similar to the teacher experiences. The presage variables along with the context variables feed into what is known as the process variables of the teaching-learning process. This is played out within the four walls of the classroom. The teacher and pupil behaviour in turn lead to observable changes in the learning patterns exhibited by the pupils. The final outcome of these processes leads us to the product variables. This is observable in both the immediate and long term pupil growths. The immediate changes may include an awareness of the subject matter being taught. In turn this leads to a change in the attitude towards the subject- finally culminating in the development of the other skills. The long term changes that are enumerated under the product variables include being more involved with the subject matter and taking it up for further perusal at later stages of the learners' education.

Processes which affect classroom interaction

According to the model adhered to by Chaudron (1988, pp.3), the classroom teaching processes can be understood by a perusal of four factors that have a direct effect on the learning outcomes exhibited by language learners. These include learning from instruction, teacher talk, learner behaviour and interaction in the classroom. Undoubtedly, the situations being described all conform to the classroom as L2 learning context and are discussed in detail below.

- a. **Learning from instruction:** Chaudron conforms to Krashen's input hypothesis ($i+1$) as the most important principle in the acquisition of second language. Although, input is limited in this context, Long's argument (cited in Chaudron, 1988) holds true when he states that in the L2 classroom, language is treated as an object. This helps to emphasize it as learners' attention is directed to this instructional language used by the teacher. Language learning therefore, takes place in bits and pieces in the form of acquisition of words and fundamental units of grammar. Thereafter, learners learn to discern their meanings and apply them in the appropriate context, leading to production of the language. This means of language acquisition follows the tenets of behaviourism since learners are provided with a viable model of the target language. It involves the two pronged process of recognition and comprehension of the target language model available to the learners.
- b. **Teacher talk:** Another factor which plays a major role in the acquisition of language – or the lack of it in the L2 classroom is the amount of teacher talk happening in it. Years ago in the 1950s Tickoo found that in a class of forty minutes, at least twenty- nine minutes are taken up by the teacher talking- be it for soliciting, responding, reacting or structuring moves. Whether or not such an expansive amount of teacher talk helps or hinders the language learning process has still remained a point of debate among ELT practitioners.
- c. **Learner behaviour:** The behaviour/ attitude of the learner to the language also plays a very important role in the acquisition of the target language. These include the strategies that individual learners use as a coping mechanism both while interacting with other learners and while trying to discern the language by themselves. Learner behaviour is also gauged in terms of the learning environment, learner initiative, and proactive attitude towards the language along with the content being introduced. According to Chaudron,

research states that learning happens best when learners are in the driver's seat of their language learning process.

- d. **Interaction in the classroom:** Long (cited in Chaudron, 1998, pp. 9) states that non-native speakers can best acquire the speech patterns of native speakers when the latter indulge in what Long refers to as “modified interaction”. This means that the language which a native speaker uses while interacting with a non-native speaker, is consciously maintained at a lower level of complexity than what native speakers would use among themselves. This benefits the L2 learners in acquiring the target language with greater ease. It is especially true in the language classroom where the move of the teacher to use simpler language is looked upon as a motivating factor for the learner to make use of. This in turn works as a scaffolding mechanism. The concept of scaffolding consequently has led to the notion of “interactive features of the classroom behaviours” (ibid, pp. 10). These include moves like turn taking, questioning and answering, negotiation of meaning and feedback. It is safe to infer here, that communicative language teaching has its origin in this principle.

Classroom interaction in the present context: Communicative Language Teaching

Most of the methods used for language pedagogy focus on the ability to communicate in the target language. At the same time, achieving this is not easy: although students could produce the language in the class, using it outside the classroom was difficult. Therefore, only mastery of the linguistic structure is inadequate for carrying on conversations. Being able to talk as per the requirements of the situation, in the social context takes precedence in the order of importance (which is also of a higher difficulty level). This came to be known as communicative competence (Hymes, 1971). Communicative competence is defined as the ability of “knowing when and how to say what to whom” (Larsen- Freeman, 2007, pp.121). This gave rise to the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) during the 1970s and 80s. CLT makes use of the principles of the communicative approach wherein the emphasis lies on the communicative competence of learners in the target language. A few basic principles of CLT are presented below:

1. It emphasises on the use of authentic language wherever possible. Since the use of authentic language is central to this teaching principle, it follows that students should be given exposure to authentic speech in the target language as well.
2. It is important that the language learner be able to understand the meaning and intent of the speaker.
3. The target language becomes the medium of instruction and is no longer limited to being a subject, and therefore it is not content specific.
4. Mastery learning is not considered important. Rather, being able to apply the acquired knowledge appropriately is necessary.
5. Language use should transcend to the suprasentential level where the ability to use connected speech is ingrained in the learner.
6. The amount of teacher talk is reduced considerably. The classroom should be learner centric as opposed to the traditional teacher centric setup. Thus, the teacher is relegated to the sidelines in classroom interactions. She merely acts as a facilitator in the language learning process. Activities that generate student talk are given more importance. These in turn should exhibit a communicative intent.
7. Errors are tolerated as they are seen as a natural outcome of the language learning process.

The four issues of classroom instruction also find a bearing under the CLT approach. As discussed earlier, learning from instruction is an important source for the target language input. Although CLT propagates a learner-centric classroom where the teacher acts as a mediator of language learning, her L2 speech can act as a model for the learners to ape from. Her position here is similar to that of the native speaker- albeit with subtle linguistic differences that are imperative. This directly takes us to the notion of teacher talk in the classroom: on one hand, the teacher can work as a model for the novice language learner; on the other, maintaining balance is essential as well. Otherwise, the risk of excessive teacher talk poses a serious problem. The attitude of the learner towards the subject matter and the target language holds equal importance. How learners interact with each other is equally significant for them to benefit the most from a language learning programme. Therefore, if a CLT based course is designed to suit the needs of the learners for interaction even outside the classroom, best results can be obtained. Finally, this

brings us to the concept of interaction in the classroom. As opposed to the view propagated by Chaudron, in the Indian context, there are seldom any native speaking teachers found in the classrooms. Therefore, all in-class interactions are a simplified version of the teacher's target language. This is beneficial for the L2 learner since it reduces both cognitive and linguistic load. At the same time, the understanding of the learners is scaffolded as a result of the feedback that they receive from the teachers.

Thus, it is evident that all the variables which Chaudron puts forth do not hold equal importance in the Indian context. One such example is of the CBSE curriculum prevalent in the country. The textbooks followed by this board of education have been designed keeping in mind the tenets of CLT. An analysis of the activities suggests that the focus has shifted from the teacher to the learner. A few of the books also follow a skills based segmentation of the post reading activities. This is useful since it helps by focusing individually on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It helps to generate communication among students as part of the classroom processes. Consequently, the process variables pointed out by Chaudron can be incorporated within the classroom scenario: in reality though whether or not such a scope arises is a point of debate for a different time. Nevertheless, it is safe to infer that most of the variables have an effect in the classroom teaching and learning to differing degrees.

Conclusion

If a trajectory of the changes that have occurred over the years in the classroom teaching context can be drawn, a very interesting notion is observed. Barring the grammar translation method, where the focus of language was on comprehension rather than production, language has primarily been considered an important mode of communication. So, in order to conform to the principles of CLT, apart from the source text, the pedagogy of language teaching itself should undergo a sea-change. This is possible only at the level of teacher training which will thereafter permeate down to the level of the target language learners.

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