

Socio-Cultural Theory: Enhancing communicative competence using Task-Based approach

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Abstract - Socio-Cultural theory advocates that Language functions, both like a communicative tool as well as a psychological tool, which mediates the meaning between the individual and the linguistic goal and also it helps in the cognitive development process (Lantolf and Appel, 1994). Based on this background, this paper focuses on how the Socio-cultural theory of learning can address the problems of English as second language (ESL) learners by using strategy for effective communication. This paper deals with a task-based approach. The activity used in this method is project work. This paper highlights the use of project work can enhance the socio-cultural aspects such as human cognitive development and higher mental functions.

Keywords: Socio-Cultural theory, ESL learners, Strategy

I. INTRODUCTION

India is a land of diversity. People speak different languages. It is highly impossible to know or learn all the languages spoken in India. Under such circumstances English acts as a link language, different people can communicate with one another with the help of English. In India, the English language is used as a means of communication and is learnt through communication in social situations.

One of the most significant problems engineering graduate face is, they are not able to communicate effectively and confidently in English even after completing their graduation. This affects their job career. Hortwiz, (1996) & Li, (1998) in their research studies indicate that, apart from the difficulties the learner's face, SLL teachers also face problems in their teaching and also in assessment methods. Non-native teachers who are not confident in their language proficiency are hesitant to adopt teaching methods and opportunities that are more target oriented. Teachers are mostly confined to the textbooks and examination point; hence they give very little opportunity for students to speak regarding their learning experiences. As a result, the students are highly passive and depend on their teachers for everything. More or less the classroom becomes teacher-centered and very little space is left for the use of second language communicative functions which is important in the classroom. In order, to shape the present generation youth who can progress in work and in life, we need to provide them with the knowledge and skills that are required in today's rapidly developing world. In addition to academic subjects, there is an urgent need to provide young engineers with the opportunity to develop the skills that will help them solve different problems, work in a team, develop listening comprehension, and speak fluently. It is this gap which the young engineers struggle to succeed in

today's job market. The best way to fill this gap is to adopt the best strategy to become a good language learner with the help of Socio-Cultural theory.

Thus this paper deals with how the Socio-Cultural theory of learning can address the problems of ESL learners by using strategy for effective communication. This paper deals with a task-based approach. The activity used in this method is project work. This paper provides some important facts regarding Socio-Cultural theory and some of the fundamental elements of the theory. This information makes it easier to understand the application of the SCT in the ESL classroom.

II. SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY

The intrinsic nature of language is, one should be able to communicate one's thought and feelings to another person. This idea of communication is one of the foundations of Socio-Cultural Theory in learning the language. Based on Vygotskian thought, Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT), is a theory that talks about the human cognitive development and higher mental function. The theory states that the development of human cognitive and higher mental function happens through social interactions and that participating in social activities require cognitive and communicative functions, individuals are drawn into the use of these functions in ways that nurture and "scaffold" them. Lantolf and Thorne claim that the principles of the SCT can also be applied to Second Language Acquisition (SLA). They explain that "Learning is embedded within social events and occurring as an individual interacts with people, objects, and events in the environment". The socio-cultural theory accepts the fact that language can be acquired by letting the students interact and socialize either with other learners or with the speakers of the language they are learning. In the classroom context, the socio-

cultural theory in second language acquisition can be practiced through social activities that simulate the cultural context of the language. According to Guoxing (2004) learners are responsible for their own learning environment and the environment can nurture and scaffold them. Wertsch (1991) emphasizes based on socio-cultural point of view that, learning is considered as the product of shared activity and that the conventional student-teacher relationship should be changed. This relationship should lead to collaborative learning

III. THE CONTRIBUTION OF SCT PERSPECTIVE TO LEARNING

The most significant contribution of SCT perspective to learning and thereby minimizing the learner's problems is, by providing a conducive environment for cognitive development. Vygotsky was the first researcher to introduce the idea of SCT. According to him, Collaborative assistance among peer group can create an opportunity for second language learning. According to Lantolf and Appel (1994), Socio-cultural theory supports that language functions, both like a communicative tool as well as a psychological tool which mediates the meaning between the individual and the linguistic goal and also it helps in the cognitive development process. As per Scott & Palincsar (2013) views, the ultimate intention of teaching should help and support the students to actively involve in the tasks so that the learners can adopt certain society based experience to which they are introduced. Michele S. Lee (2015) in his study at Christopher house, implemented socio cultural theory in his teaching noticed that the relationship between the student -teacher is mandatory for the students to learn. Secondly, an interactive learning community was more valuable than a traditional lecture teaching style.

In this paper, the researcher will first introduce the Task-Based approach as the initial and general framework where strategy competence can be used to develop LSRW skills in the learner.

IV. TASK-BASED APPROACH

The main aim of Task-Based approach is to provide the learners, to use the language in a natural context. In task-based learning students "use English to learn it" (Howatt, 1984). While doing the task students get ample opportunity to interact with one another. Such interaction will help the learner to make possible to acquire the language, as learners have to work to understand each other and to express their own meaning. By interacting, students will be able to check whether they have comprehended correctly and also it helps them to seek for clarification. Pair work and group work help to increase student interaction and collaboration. Task requires comprehending, producing, manipulating, or interacting in the authentic language while attention is primarily paid to meaning rather than form.

Task-based instruction is relevant to all levels of language proficiency, but the nature of the task varies from one level to the other. The complexity of the task changes as per the level. At the basic level, students might be asked to introduce themselves and also their friends and at the advanced level students can take up certain challenging tasks such as meeting and interviewing the government officials, talking to the public and taking their opinion etc.. This approach guides the teachers to keep in track regarding the students' progress in various skills such as analysis, leadership, critical thinking etc, at the same time. By integrating the language skills, it promotes the learning of real content in a more easier way. This can be done through appropriate tasks. Hence, it is necessary to teach language learning strategies and also emphasize that a given strategy can often enhance learners performance in multiple skills.

Tasks should be designed based on the proficiency levels. At the primary level tasks such as introducing oneself or introducing others can be given. At the higher level, students should be exposed to more demanding and intricate tasks like interacting with the public and government officials and taking their options., visiting schools, health centres, banking sector etc.

V. PROJECT BASED LEARNING

For the graduate students use of project work will help in developing higher order competencies. Project based learning helps the students develop skills and they gain knowledge through experience. The concept behind Project based learning is working together. Students work in a team ,discuss and formulate the necessary actions to be taken to solve the problems and presenting the solutions to the audience. This process shows the different ways of communication, which is the foremost and main goal of learning the target language

In the ESL classroom project based learning should be interesting and should be based on the real life problems. The teachers role is to guide the students continuously and help them to accomplish their goal.

Plan to organize task-based activity using language learning strategies:

1. Task : Project Work

2. Activity : Group work

3. Language functions : Describing, giving information, asking for information.

4. Strategy : Linking words, Questioning.

(i) Linking words:

Linking words helps the listeners to understand your ideas in a better way. It also helps in developing fluency and coherence.

- Adding more information----And, However, Similarly, Besides, As long as, As well as etc.
- Time or sequence----- At the same time, Meanwhile, During, As soon as, While, Before, Then, Since etc.
- Expressing Opinion:-----In my opinion, From my point of view, I believe, I understand, According to me
- Giving Examples:-- For example, Like, In other words, For Instance
- Expressing agreement-----Yes I agree---, I strongly agree that----, To some extent, In a way, More or Less
- Summarizing - In short, In brief, to summarize, in a nutshell, to conclude.

Eg:

1. Do you eat fruits?

Yes, I eat fruits. I love eating seasonal fruits *like* mangoes and guava

2. How many hours do you spend reading?

I usually read before sleeping in the night. *Besides* this, I like reading while travelling.

(ii) Questioning :

Questioning is the basic skills for successful communication. It is used for various reason in various situations. Asking questions help in gaining knowledge, clarifying a doubt, expressing an opinion, share ideas or to start a conversation.

5. Presentation:

Powerpoint presentation

VI. METHODOLOGY

The students were instructed to apply previous knowledge about the topic and frame number of questions related to the topic. They were allowed to take up field work meeting various officials and the local public for the relevant data.

The task was assigned to 3 groups of students. 5 students were grouped in each team. List of topics were given to them and the teams were given freedom to select the topic of their choice. The list included the following topics--- Agriculture, sports, Mal-Nutrition in pregnant women, bringing awareness on various diseases, health and hygiene etc.

VII. FINDINGS

The students had the opportunity to speak and negotiate on the topic taken for the study in the target language. This exposure towards the target language enabled them to practice it well without any apprehension. It was also observed that while working in groups, the interaction gave the students the chance to express and explain the topic well, because they practically went for the field study. They also developed the skill of questioning. Though most of the respondents whom they met spoke in the regional language

(telugu), but the students were able to exhibit their language competence by code -switching it to the target language. Further, it was noticed that the students were able to summarize the responses given by the respondents. Finally as a group they presented the topic with full of confidence.

Case- Study: Task: Project work

Title: Mal-Nutrition in pregnant Women

Objectives:

- Introduction to Mal-Nutrition
- To find out the reasons/causes for man-Nutrition in Rural and Urban
- Major factors leading to Mal-Nutrition in pregnant women
- Policies taken by the government to fight against Mal-Nutrition
- Suggestions and role of an individual.

Activity Description:

The team of five students actively participated in this task. The team went for the field survey and met the higher officials and also the Anganwadi workers. Students prepared the questions well in advance. Few questions were asked spontaneously depending upon the conversations. They interacted with them and tried to get more information regarding the problems prevailing in the society and also about the government policies. At the end of the project work, students were instructed to give presentation.

Teacher Implication:

The Task-Based Approach helps in developing communicative competence in the learners. In the project work task, preparing the questions well in advance developed the ability to ask and respond to the questions. Linking words helped in Spoken fluency and also the ability to keep the interaction going. The group presented the topic with the help of power point. They used various visual displays such as graphs, charts, videos pertaining to their topic during their presentation. This helped them to develop self-confidence and overcome stage fear, improve the mode of delivery, presentation techniques, and content delivery. Since it is a fieldwork student's were able to participate well.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the author discussed about socio-cultural theory and its significance towards learning. The author introduced project work as an activity in developing the communicative skills in the learners. The project work helped the students to develop various skills such as team spirit, leadership qualities, body language, analytical skills, questioning skills, translating from vernacular language to target language etc.

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