ARE LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACHES THE ANSWER TO SAUDI LANGUAGE CLASSES?

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Abstract

This paper looks at the current language classroom in the Saudi context which tends to be teacher-centred and structured rather than learner-oriented and communicative. It accounts for some of the challenges teachers and learners are likely to encounter. It also views the concept of collaborative learning from a Vygotskyain point of view to act as an alternative approach capable of solving some reported difficulties including communicative aspects. I propose possible modifications to a traditional Saudi class to inspire participation from students based on previous research and the distinctive requirements of the context in question.

Keywords: Vygotskyan Cognitive Theory, Teacher-Centred / Learner-Centred Approaches, Collaborative Learning, Communicative Language Learning

Introduction

Teaching English in Saudi Arabia can be very demanding. The challenging nature of teaching English may come as a result of various cultural and educational factors which

together help shape the Saudi unique context at its current traditional, teacher-centred form. (McKay, 1992, Whitefield and Pollard, 1998, and Gray, 2000) One problematic area capable of jeopardising the success of many modern teaching methods is the prevalence of teacher-centred approaches which subsequently minimise the impact of proven practices such as pair/group work and collaborative learning. In fact, Vygotsky's theory of learning discussed by Zinchenko (1985) which has been scrutinised in almost all subsequent studies in the field including Aljaafreh & Lantolf (1994), Mitchell & Myles (1998), and Lantolf (2000) confirms the efficacy of group work by asserting that language, like cultural knowledge, is gained through social interaction first all learning is seen as first social, then individual; first inter-mental, then intra-mental.

In this essay, I attempt to come up with and justify possible amendments to the traditional Saudi classroom in a way that recognises the merits of a more learner-centred approach. The discussion follows a review of the Saudi context as well as the literature of relevant aspects of the topic including teacher-centred approaches, collaborative learning and group work.

A Critical Evaluation of a Typical Saudi ELT Classroom

Many researchers believe that the Saudi educational system suffers from a number of issues that could potentially affect students' learning. From a socio-cultural point of view, McKay (1992) for instance claims that Saudi educational authorities went to the extreme of producing English materials with no reference to the communities in which English is spoken. The separation between male and female students from the first year of formal education is another aspect discussed by many researchers including McKay (ibid), Gray (2000) and Whitefield & Pollard (1998).

Other issues of administrative nature include the way Saudi educational authorities recruit foreign language teachers and teacher training programmes that do not properly qualify local teachers for the task ahead. (Al-Hazmi, 2003) As a result, Saudi students cannot establish the link between what they learn in language classes and genuine life situations (Syed, 2003) as well as fail to achieve well in language proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL.

The focus here however is on teaching approaches predominant in typical Saudi classrooms, or to be more specific the teacher-centred nature of these approaches. According to Whitefield and Pollard (1998), most teaching styles are pre-communicative, content-focused and, most importantly, teacher-dependant.

Both local culture and available textbooks advocate teaching styles that mainly put the teacher as the only source of knowledge. From a cultural point of view, teachers are usually considered prominent figures who deserve immense respect, fairly enough. Textbooks reflect this respect for teachers and most tasks require teacher intervention at one point or another. Teachers are also the sole assessors of students' performance which is another area of their control. Although traditional approaches in teaching such as audio-lingual and grammar translation might require this level of teacher control, modern language teaching as shall be seen in following sections require a greater level of autonomy from students' point of view as well as more tasks that include pair and group work.

Many practices in the classroom are manifestations of traditional approaches including the seating arrangement. Most classes have a rigid layout where the teacher is in the front, students sitting in fixed rows arrangement which virtually mean that the only person under the spotlight at any given moment is the teacher (Bersamina, 2009; Syed, 2003; Khuwaileh & Shoumali, 2000; Al-Eid, 2000). Although teacher control can work well in overcrowded

classes - where discipline is important and time is limited - more attention should be paid to students themselves as individuals and as in groups. A more balanced approach is definitely more suitable.

Literature Review

Teacher-Centred Approaches and Vygotskyan Cognitive Theory

A traditional teacher-centred approach neglects students' needs and interests. Students are passive recipients of information. These exercises undermine students' communication which is, according to the Vygotskyan theory, an essential cognitive tool in developing learners' knowledge. (Nunan and Lamb, 1999) The significance of talk is emphasised in second language teaching since it functions as a medium as well as an artefact that both teachers and learners should use.

Hornby (1955) highlights the importance of having the students engaged in communication. Long and Porter (1985) also assert that teacher-led classes limit not only the quantity of learners' talk, but also its quality. Therefore, teachers are required to do their best to get their students involved in various types of talking through communicative activities that can encourage learners to speak with and listen to other learners. In fact, dialogue is an essential component of the Vygotskyan theory as Aljaafareah & Lantlof (1994) mention.

Student-Centred Approach

To make the process more efficient, students must be effectively engaged rather than just receiving or listening to information. This approach reflects the Vygotskyan cognitive theory by ensuring an active role for students. Dam (2000) argues that teachers' role is not just

passing over their knowledge to learners, instead, they should be aware that in teaching-learning environment both teachers and learners are equally responsible for the outcome of this process . As an attempt to mediate the situation between teachers and learners in a totally teacher-directed classroom, there must be a move towards learning-centred environment, since it is, according to her, teacher-directed as well as learner-directed. Moss & Ross-Feldman (2003) refer to this recommendation by asserting that more learning occurs within a dynamic learning environment when the learners are engaged in relevant tasks rather than in traditional teacher-centred classes.

As many Saudi classes are reported to have very little student participation, a more balanced approach that recognises learners as the centre of attention and teachers as less authoritarian could well benefit the educational process in general and the language classroom in particular. Moreover, this shift of attention goes in line with modern teaching approaches that acknowledge the theoretical foundations set forth by Vygotsky which means it has proven itself already in other settings.

Proposed Approach

More Collaborative Learning

Nunan (1992), Kohonen (1992) and Dunworth (2007) argue that the concept of collaborative learning is a reflection of the recent development in second language learning where the focus has shifted away from 'traditional behaviourist' models which conceives teaching as transition of knowledge towards 'experiential' models whereby teaching is seen as transformation of existing or partly understood knowledge, based on the constructivist views of learning. Collaborative learning comes in many different guises including pair/group/teamwork and

working to achieve a shared goal rather than competing with one another. In this sense, collaborative learning perfectly fits the definition of a learner-centred classroom and therefore is relevant to the purpose of this paper. Dornyei (1997) contrasts a collaborative classroom to an individualistic one which compels the students to be competitive against each other since only the best students are rewarded; such a competition may entail what can be called negative interdependence. Donato (2004) argues in favour of collaborative activities since they are widely accepted in most developmental psychology and educational research as consequential to cognitive, social, historical, and affective development hence conforming to Vygotskyan cognitive theory.

Many researchers pointed out the advantages of a collaborative classroom. For example, Long and Porter (1985) believe that a collaborative setting is supportive for those shy or linguistically insecure from the stress in the class. Dornyei (1997) indicates that collaborative learning produces learning gains and student achievement, higher-order thinking, positive attitudes towards learning increased motivation, and better teacher-student and student-student relationships. Working groups, as Sticchi-Damiani (1981) puts it, is an ideal environment for developing strategies needed to communicate in a new language once students acquire that sense of belonging. When the classroom becomes cooperative, there is a great opportunity for the students' positive interdependence to exist, as Johnson et al. (1995: 31) conclude, "when one perceives that one is linked with others in a way so that one cannot succeed unless they do (and vice versa) and/or one must coordinate one's efforts with the efforts of others to complete a task".

Dam (2000) uses the classroom organisation, the lesson structure, the activities taking place and the use of diaries and posters to promote collaborative learning. Teachers have a wide

variety of activities to choose from which help learners achieve a satisfactory communicative performance.

3.2 The Transition from Teacher-Centred towards Learner-Centred Classroom

First, asking teachers to adopt new methods admittedly is not as easy task. They must be first convinced with the idea that these totally teacher-dependent students must be given a space to participate and work collaboratively with her/him and each other since knowledge, according to a social-interactive view, is collaboratively constructed. (Little, 1999, and Nunan, 1988) The shift, the teacher has to make can succeed only if there is supportive attitude of programme administrators being made at school level.

Creating a collaborative environment as seen in the previous section may be easier to some extent when the addressed students are beginners, but it may be more difficult to deal with adults who has been treated in that way during all the years of their formal studies, they find it quite challenging to involve in group activities, they are only familiar with responding to their teachers' questions which carry no more than one answer, they refuse to get up or move around when they are asked. So , the teacher should encourage and motivate them to work cooperatively , she/he can get use from the principals that Olsen and Kagan (1992) come up with to motivate learners towards working interdependently which are; structuring the goal , Structuring the rewards, Structuring the student roles, Structuring the materials, and Structuring the rules.

As an attempt to introduce the new environment, she/he better asks the students to help in searching information, planning for lessons and designing the materials. For example, she/he allots certain topics for them to think about and prepare, and when it is the time for discussion

she/he listens to the various thoughts they come up with trying just to rearrange and put them in a more logical perspective. It will be functional to have their feedback, opinions or viewpoints at the end of each session, so they are asked whether they were interested or not and if they view it as a good way for them to learn. Teachers' questions , when carefully produced and formulated , can be considered as an effective way to move the students towards conversation hence get them involved, it is better if she/he can show them that she/he interested in their responses while exchanging information . In fact, teachers' questions have been fully discussed by many linguists such as Stevick (1982), Nunan and Lamb (1996) and others; Stevick (1982).

Teachers also should adapt their mind to accept various responses from the students as the concept of only one right answer must be defunct now, these questions do not necessarily be about only the topics or lessoned discussed, a good teacher can ask her/his students to 'talk about talk and think about thinking'. As Little (1999) puts it, collaborative learning activity is the most obvious way of developing learners' metacognitive capacity, and once it is well developed , it plays a key-role in increasing the contributions they make to social-interactive process, and as learner's powers of reflection ,decision making and independent actions are founded on this capacity, it can be seen then as a good avenue towards autonomy which is badly needed for those students under the authority of teacher-centred approach. Moreover, they are able then to develop their own agenda and goals for learning so as to be fully involved in planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning activities.

Changes to Classroom's Arrangements

It is important for teachers to rearrange the layout of their classrooms to respond to the requirements of the more communicative and collaborative activities. It is recommended that teachers proceed gradually in order to prevent frustration from unsure students. Starting with pair work tasks should be more appropriate than groups. Only when students start to make a noticeable progress should teachers introduce group work. According to Dam (2000), when the classroom is organised in small groups of four to six in which each learner is facing three to five peers and all of them are facing their teacher whose desk is located in the front, this arrangement help students make quick discussions within their group, and as they are all involved they exchange each other's views and tutoring in a supportive manner rather than being threatened to talk in open forum. Through these small groups learners' socialisation can be promoted which in its turn enhances learning development cognitively and linguistically. The primary aim of all these activities at the end is to enable learners to communicate so that their linguistic capacity develops, it is as Little argues , children do not learn language to communicate ,by contrast, their linguistic development advances when they make attempts to communicate.

Conclusion

In order to implement a more collaborative classroom which acknowledges the Vygotskyan social and cognitive theories, a more balanced approach is needed in a context where teacher-centred practices are dominant. The shift in not an easy task but it could be achieved gradually starting with the physical layout of the classroom and through more training programmes and communicative exercises in the classroom. Teachers must always

assess their students' needs and the available resources when adapting learner-centred approaches. However, the efforts should translate in more active classes where students are an active part of the learning process.

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