

Interactional Spaces and Identity Negotiation: Pedagogical Orientation in Multilingual Classes

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Abstract

The paper aims at exploring the pedagogy in a multilingual classroom and multilingual practices. In a multilingual classroom, interpersonal space, or what Vygotsky calls 'zone of proximal development (ZPD)', is now considered crucial for developing multiple literacies in home language/mother tongue among the linguistically diverse students. Associated with interpersonal space in the classroom for interactions is the issue of identity texts and development of critical literacy.

Keywords: Pedagogy, multilingual classroom, interpersonal space, multiple literacies, mother tongue, interpersonal space, identity texts, critical literacy

Introduction

The 21st century marks a shift of paradigm of technological development from the Industrial Age economy to Information Age economy and the increasing demand for English can be seen as one of the factors, pervasive enough to influence education systems, not only around the world but locally as well. Both allude to globalization and the so-called 'World English' or 'Global English' and have a strong bearing not only on the fate of minority languages and the reinforcement of cultural diversity in the education system, but also on the orientation of pedagogy that is concerned with the development of literacy in both English and the home language/mother tongue. Further, along with the shift from an industrial economy to an informational economy there has been cultural appropriation. While the modern communication technologies brought

in by informational economy, on the one hand, 'represent more than just a new vehicle for English imperialism', on the other hand, they also afford opportunities for less-dominant languages 'to carve out virtual space that does not depend on geographical proximity, ... to reinforce the development of home-language literacies [and] critical literacy that would enable students to gain access to alternative perspectives and resist dominant discourses.' (Cummins 2009)

The English language is now increasingly emerging as an important component of the madrasa curriculum along with religious knowledge. Its inclusion in the education system has infused a sense of confidence in acquiring English language skills and consequently in creating more employment opportunities for madrasa students. English is also being associated with upward social and economic mobility. Demand for teaching English language is now being realized by both parents and students and efforts are being made to equip the students coming from madrasa backgrounds with proficiency in English, which, it is hoped, would facilitate their entry into the mainstream of education at the college level. As part of the modernization programme, the Government of India has introduced an initiative of teaching English language at madrasas with a view to improving the future prospects of madrasa graduates. The Bridge Course in Aligarh Muslim University is a one-year programme which offers English to students from madrasas as part of the state-driven modernization programme. The successful completion of this course is recognized as a basis for admission to the mainstream programmes at the university.

The present study aimed at looking at the educational practices the interactional space provided to the learners with regard to their home language in learning their target language. The Academic Expertise Framework proposed by Cummins (2001) is used to look into the interface between the cognitive engagement and the identity investment of the learner. This Framework emphasizes critical literacy and self-regulated learning. Some questions raised here are: What is the nature of interaction of Bridge Course students in the classroom? Does the programme devalue the home language/mother tongue literacy compared to literacy in English? Is the pedagogy sensitive to capturing the expectations of linguistically diverse students? Do the teachers allow interpersonal space in the classroom for interaction with students in their home language?

The paper aims at exploring the pedagogy in a multilingual classroom and multilingual practices. In a multilingual classroom, interpersonal space, or what Vygotsky calls 'zone of proximal development (ZPD)', is now considered crucial for developing multiple literacies in home language/mother tongue among the linguistically diverse students. Associated with interpersonal space in the classroom for interactions is the issue of identity texts and development of critical literacy. The following two sections are concerned with the issues of multiple literacies and identity texts. The next section will situate the study and look into the methodology of the present study, followed by analysis and conclusion.

Multilingual Practices and Multi- or Multiple Literacies

The issues of multilingual practices can be viewed by focusing on the variable ways in which 'linguistic features with identifiable social and cultural associations get clustered together whenever people communicate' (Bloommaert and Rampton 2011, cited in Blackledge and Creese 2014). The various practices of communication have seen the proliferation of a number of related terms to describe multilingual practices, like 'flexible bilingualism', 'codemeshing', 'polylingual languaging', 'metrolingualism', 'translanguaging' (cited in Blackledge and Creese 2014). The term 'language' when prefixed with words like assumes a given reality on the basis of language, culture and identity.

Cenoz and Gorter (2015) suggest a significant distinction between 'becoming multilingual' and 'being multilingual', which reflects on translanguaging practices in complex situations. Garcia (2009) uses the term 'translanguaging' to refer to the various practices at different levels. The difference between 'being' and 'becoming' is a shift in the perspective where 'being' focuses on translanguaging, developing multiple identities and 'becoming' focuses on using L1 or translations. Multilingual societies reflect an asymmetrical relationship among the various languages. Multilingual societies are characterized by this unevenness in power relationships among languages. Languages assume roles, which either privilege or subvert them based on the policies and practices. These dominant and subservient practices have caused tremendous injustice and harm to many languages and their speakers. English, in this game of power, occupies a privileged position.

English continues to occupy the most sought after position in South Asia but ‘...it is never viewed as a language of national identity’ (Dasgupta 1993, cited in Mohanty 2010). This leads to a divide between English and other major languages and between the major languages and the other languages. According to Mohanty, ‘...the gaps between language policy and practice in education arise out of the compulsion to assert national and indigenous identities without sacrificing the aspirations for better English’ (2010). The multilingual ethos of India has not been adequately represented and accommodated in the language policy and planning. Heugh et al. suggests that language policy and practice must ‘...develop high levels of academic literacy and communicative skills in languages, which people in a multilingual society need’ (2007). Education needs to focus on achieving proficiency in the languages being taught. The disparity between mother tongue and the other tongues have done considerable damage to proficiency and skill development. Privileging one language over the other while ignoring a number of other languages has led to problems of motivation, anxiety and other socio-cognitive issues among second language speakers. The discriminatory practice in the use of home literacy and school literacy also leads to withdrawal among learners and a sense of underachievement and failure. There is a need to address these issues by devising more inclusive curricula so that learning becomes a cultural resource and a source of motivation for the demotivated learner.

Multiple literacy is also referred to as ‘new’ literacies because, it attempts to include a number of other practices. Multiple literacy is, in fact, an engagement involving two kinds of recognition—‘acknowledgement of the sociocultural diversity of our learners’ worlds, and awareness of the impact of new communication technologies that combine linguistic modes of meaning with visual, gestural, spatial, and audio modes’ (Macken-Horarik and Adoniou 2008). Wide exposure to visual forms, from varied sources, renders multimodality to meaning and enhances the intellectual potential of the learner. The new literacies allow us to use Internet and other ICT in order to locate information, analyse the usefulness of that information and synthesize information. These modes of literacy are important indicators and are viewed as being multimodal and multiple faceted.

The view of multiple literacies as an important indicator in the emergence of literacy practices can be related to James Cummins’ model of language

acquisition. It provides a framework for looking into the ways in which learning takes place among ESL learners. Based on two types of language proficiency, namely BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Learning Proficiency), multiple literacy seeks to view the cognitive development of the ESL learner. Cummins studies the emergence of academic literacy. He states that ESL learners acquire proficiency in BICS but may not show mastery in academic skills. This may, obviously, vary with the different contexts which have been termed as 'context embedded' and 'context reduced' (Cummins, 2009). These two constructs suggest that bilinguals and multilinguals face problems which need to be explored. This brings the distinction between tasks which are 'cognitively demanding and cognitively undemanding' (Cummins, 2009).

The word literacy includes a number of practices which are socially and culturally significant. Multiliteracy needs to be looked at the way in which it is translated into practice. Kalantzis and Cope (2008) view knowledge and meaning not as given but as a design which involves representation and recontextualisation of meaning. This is related to agency and subjectivity. The understanding of language includes, 'intertextuality, hybridity and language as the basis of cultural change' (Kalantzis and Cope, 2008). The different modes of meaning have been identified in terms of linguistic design, visual design, audio design spatial design and multimodal design. The New London Group (1996) proposes that learning should be approached from four different perspectives, which includes situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice. Situated practice includes the learner's experiences and the new learning practices. Overt instruction explains the new learning and the meaningful ways to scaffold the work of the learner. Critical framing is related to the social and cultural contexts. The design is viewed in relation to local and global practices. Transformed practice means learning which involves some transformation or changeover. Cummins' Academic Expertise Framework places emphasis on critical literacy and the sociocultural value system.

Identity Texts

Schools are now rethinking the appropriateness to teach and the pedagogy to be adopted. Given the variation and the cultural diversity, there needs to be a rethinking in this direction. A learner's linguistic and cultural

resource can be used to initiate pedagogies which are 'multimodal and multimediased'. The multimodal literacies have been validated by 'identity texts'. (Cummins et al. 2005a, cited in Giampapa 2010). Identity texts suggest the confluence of literacy engagement and affirmation of identity as important indicators in highlighting the underachievement of learners at various levels. Ladson and Billings (1995), while speaking of African American learners states that '... the constant devaluation of their culture both in school and in the larger society leads to a state of neglect of the home learning practices' (cited in Cummins et al. 2015). These lacunae become important indicators for the mismatch between theory and practice. The hierarchy of power relationship has serious consequences in terms of learning and assessment. The term 'identity text' reflects the relationship between identity and power (Cummins, 2004, cited in Cummins, Hu and Montero 2015). The concept which has evolved is 'dual language texts'. This situates home literacy by giving it a privileged position along with the multimodal practices. 'Students invest their identities in the creation of these texts, which can be written, spoken, signed, visual, musical, dramatic or a combination in multimodal form. The identity text then holds a mirror up to the students in which their identities are reflected in a positive light' (Cummins and Early 2011, cited in Cummins and Montero, 2015). These identity texts showcase the gradual development of the learner in terms of the cognitive and linguistic development and become a resource for redefining and resituating literacy.

The need to look into the linguistic, social and cultural resource of the learner suggests mainstreaming learners. This inclusive pedagogical approach attempts to draw the latent potentialities and to redefine literacy. Giampapa states that, 'Literacy as conceptualised within current educational curricula and pedagogical practices needs to be reconceptualised to encompass the multilingual, multiliterate practices that linguistic minority students bring into the classroom' (2010). Further, scholars have '... problematised the very notion of literacy as a discrete set of skills, reframing literacy as a set of socially and culturally constituted practices enacted across and within social and institutional spaces' (Giampapa, 2010).

Identity texts are strong indicators of the effectiveness of the various educational practices, its impact on the learners and on the formation of identities. The 'devaluing' of the culture, as pointed out by Ladson

and Billings (1995), has an impact on literacy practices and on their identity as second language learners. The New London Group (1996) views multiliterary pedagogical framework in terms of transmission, social constructivism and transformation. Cummins' Academic Expertise Framework emphasizes the instructional practices and attempts to look at the position of languages other than those of the medium of instruction.

About the Study

This study attempts to look at the Bridge Course students at Aligarh Muslim University. The Bridge Course is part of the Government of India's scheme introduced with the objective of bringing madrasa graduates to the mainstream of education in higher learning.

The methodology used was qualitative and feedback was elicited in the form of questions given to a total number of fifteen (15) Bridge Course students. The study used a qualitative analysis of written response. A feedback form and qualitative data analysis revealed many aspects which have been discussed with reference to Cummins' Academic Expertise Framework. The Bridge Course learners selected in this study were proficient in the use of their home language, which in most of the cases is Urdu and the other language which is Arabic. There are also some learners with Bengali and Malayalam as their mother tongue. The students enrolled in this course are invested and motivated on account of the benefits which the course seems to offer. The feedback was elicited through the use of questionnaires and direct communication. The respondents were given the choice to write in Urdu, and most of them chose to respond in Urdu. However, learners with Bengali, Malayalam and some varieties of Hindi background, though very few, were given the choice to write in English. There were some respondents who attempted to write in English, but they were not able to articulate their responses well, when compared to the other writers who wrote in Urdu.

Since the identity texts highlight the importance of identity negotiation and societal power relations in understanding the nature of classroom interactions, the questions used in this study were constructed to explore the interpersonal spaces provided to the Bridge Course students in the classrooms that support the development of literacy in both English and the home language/mother tongue. These questions specifically aimed at obtaining information concerning:

- a. Space provided in the classroom for narrating personal experiences.
- b. Opportunity given in the classroom to reflect on social and sensitive issues like environment and gender.
- c. Use of home language in the classroom.
- d. Importance of home language in learning English.

Analysis

The first question related to the space provided in the classroom for narrating personal experiences. The majority of respondents held the view that opportunities must be given in the classroom for interaction and personal narration.

- a. 'Neither were the students given any space to narrate personal experiences in the classroom nor was any opportunity provided towards making classrooms an interactive place.'
- b. 'Different subjects are given time slots in the classrooms and not much time is left for student feedback.'
- c. 'Relating personal experiences in the classroom is necessary as this will have an impact on the learning process.'

The question related to providing opportunity in the classroom to reflect on social and sensitive issues elicited the following responses:

- a. 'Time is given to class discussion for discussing various issues.'
- b. 'Literature classes devote more time to discussing issues related to gender and other related issues.'
- c. 'We are given the opportunity to discuss various social issues and we are encouraged to look into this critically so that we go into its depth and learn to analyse things.'
- d. 'There are some subjects like environmental science, general knowledge, history where students are sensitized to reflect upon various issues. This needs to be extended to other subjects as well.'

The third question was related to the use of home language in the classroom. Most of the respondents stated that it was other courses being taught that justified the opportunity to use home language in the classroom.

- a. 'The use of home language was permitted in other courses like Spanish, German, but this practice was not encouraged in the English class.'

- b. 'This opportunity was provided in Linguistics classes, but was not there in other subjects.'
- c. 'Other than English, there are some language courses including Linguistics, where learners get a chance to use their home language, but in English classes very little opportunity is given to use home language.'
- d. 'Although home language helps us understand lectures well, its use in the classroom is not encouraged.'

However, in case of some respondents, it was the linguistic diversity in the class that prevented the use of home language in the classroom.

- a. 'We are discouraged from using the mother tongue in the classroom because the classroom comprises speakers from varied areas who speak different languages. In such cases, the mother tongue or home language becomes a barrier for communication. It may even lead to distancing students from each other. Hence, we are discouraged from using our mother tongue.'
- b. 'I am a speaker of Urdu and the language used in the classroom is mostly English and Urdu and both the languages are important and beneficial for us. However, there are also speakers of other languages like Bengali and some varieties of Hindi but the classroom does not provide an opportunity for these speakers to use their languages in the classroom. Some speakers of these languages feel that using them in the classroom will not be of much use as compared to English.'

The question dealing with the importance of using the home language while learning English was responded to in the following ways:

- a. 'To learn and to understand English, the role of the mother tongue or home language is of importance. To understand English, we need the support of our mother tongue.'
- b. 'Home language has its importance in the initial stages of learning English. One should immerse oneself in the target language and one's thought processes should be directed towards attaining this.'
- c. 'It is necessary to use the home language during the process of learning English. It is only while mediating through the mother tongue that one can better understand English; otherwise, it will be difficult to understand the target language.'

- d. 'Since the mother tongue facilitates learning the target language, it leads to the enhancement of the relevance and status of the mother tongue.'
- e. 'If we do not take recourse to the mother tongue, learning the target language will be impossible.'
- f. 'Mother tongue or home language has relevance for those learners only who have proficiency and mastery in their mother tongue.'
- g. 'It is observed that our native language plays a special role in learning English. We need the help of our home language to learn English. We write English words and their meanings in our native language in the initial stages. It is at the initial stage that the mother tongue plays a role in learning English. We can relate emotionally through our mother tongue.'
- h. 'Mother tongue is important because we can learn the meaning of a word coming from a new language through our mother tongue. In fact, unless you know your language well, you cannot achieve mastery in any other language.'

Conclusion

This article is based on the Academic Expertise Framework on the model proposed by Cummins (2001) where the optimal level of learning is shown in terms of cognitive engagement and identity investment. The positioning of the learner affects their output and negotiation in the classroom. The respondents were unanimous in their belief that English has an impact and hegemony over other languages. The analysis suggests that learners have invested in learning the target language and they are motivated. The multiliteracies pedagogy draws insights from the epistemology of social constructivism. Constructivism has strongly influenced educational practices and has implications for instruction and curriculum development. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory has influenced the constructivist approach and has emphasized the importance of interpersonal, sociocultural and individual factors in learning. The feedback from learners, shows this glaring difference between the underused and underutilized resources in terms of learner cognition. Although they are equipped with knowledge resources, they are deficient in articulating it in the target language. The increase in cultural capital can lead to a number of changes in the epistemology

and pedagogy. A multilingual and multicultural classroom, instead of simply showcasing its variation, needs to use its diverse resources in meaningful ways, which can lead to achieving language literacies, not just English literacy. Multilingualism, should be viewed as a resource to be shared and used. This would lead to legitimizing the minority languages and cultures and in eradicating the imbalance in power structure. One needs to ensure that multilingual practices in the class has an acceptance of the cultural and affective values associated with the home language and the investment in the target language need not be at the cost of downgrading any other language.

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