

Are we Reading Enough for our Professional Growth? From Research Insights to Classroom Practices

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ABSTRACT

A true professional should have the right attitude, leadership qualities, good knowledge of her/his subject and be ready to be a continuous learner in this rapidly changing world. In the area of language teaching, unfortunately, it is the researchers and academics who have taken on the role of the professional, while the teacher is a mere implementer of their thoughts and ideas. Mercifully, in the post-method era (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), the role of the teacher and the teaching context has been acknowledged, allowing her/him to reflect, analyse, research and theorize from the classroom. My paper makes a case for a teacher who is aware of the research happening around her/him, and is therefore able to make considered choices of what she/he wants or does not want to use in the classroom. Only when teachers take on such a role, would they be true professionals.

Key words: Professional, continuous learner, post-method era, considered choices

INTRODUCTION

These are really exciting times for all language teachers. The shackles of communicative language teaching (CLT) are being removed, albeit slowly, and we are entering a new world, where newer thoughts prevail, allowing us to deal with and understand the teaching learning situation in more meaningful and creative ways. Fortunately, there is no longer a search for another method to replace CLT. Instead, we are in the post-method era (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), where the concept of “method” as a panacea for the evils of all that the learner did not learn has receded (Hall, 2011). Further, there is a quest not for an alternative

method, but respect for the teacher and the learner in their differential contexts.

Actually several years ago, Prabhu (1990) suggested that any attempt to find a *best* method was illogical given that teachers quite reasonably adapted and combined individual methods to accommodate contextual influences and their own personal beliefs. Also these top-down methods/ideas rammed down the teachers' throats left them feeling inadequate, because their reality was quite different, and neither the grammar drills nor the reading method or CLT alone would work in totality in their context. Pennycook (1989) argued that the traditional view of "method" frustrated teachers, who in the real world were unable to implement it fully and consistently. She further argued that the search for a "best method" maintained unequal power relationships within ELT between academics and researchers on the one hand, and teachers in language classrooms on the other.

This dissatisfaction with method has revolutionized ELT, because for the first time it has privileged the teacher and her/his context and allowed the teacher to theorize from her/his classroom. This in turn has encouraged teacher reflection and helped the teacher to conduct bits of action research to enhance the teaching-learning process. In other words, it has encouraged teachers to be professionals instead of merely following the dictates of researchers and professors in universities.

In fact looking back, now I wonder how we could have been so seduced by the idea of the best method. Perhaps we did not realize that it is primarily concerned with narrow classroom interactional strategies. Further, it ignores the fact that the success or failure of classroom instruction depends to a large extent on the unstated and unstable interaction of multiple factors such as teacher cognition, learner perception, societal needs, cultural contexts, political exigencies, economic imperatives, and institutional constraints, all of which are inextricably interwoven (Hall, 2011). The post-method era is particularly stimulating also because of "The Parameter of Possibility", where the socio-political consciousness of learners is addressed in the classroom as a catalyst for learner autonomy, identity formation and social transformation (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). This is something that the world so desperately needs!

The question that I wish to pose is, that as ordinary teachers, whether at the school or college level, how many of us are still aware of the world beyond CLT; and what's more important, do we really want to know about this world? We seem to be so satisfied with the whole spate of textbooks which use buzz words such as communicative approach, constructivism, critical thinking and of course the smart classroom. However, it is pertinent for us to be aware of the theory behind the

important inputs that we keep getting from different spaces. We have so much to choose from, but in order to make considered choices; we must first enhance our knowledge base and then attempt to see the linkages amongst the disparate ideas. In this paper, I will deal with perhaps two or three insights, which I think will help us to truly engage with the learners in their contexts. I will concentrate on multiple intelligence, critical pedagogy, and neurolinguistic programming (NLP). Using these concepts I also will suggest activities that can be carried out in the classroom.

MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

The term “learner-centred” is used so glibly in most text books, with nothing to show for it in actual practice. However, except for studies conducted by Lukmani (1972), Khanna (1984), Sahgal (1992), and more recently Miranda (2014), Polist (2015), Neyer (2015), hardly any attempt has been made to systematically understand learner factors in second language acquisition. Perhaps we need to go back to these studies to understand what motivates L2 learners, and what are the social psychological features which help them to be good language learners.

In recent years, one of the variables that has been looked at afresh is intelligence. Gardner (1999), proposed an alternative definition of intelligence based on a radically different view of the mind. He puts forward “...a pluralistic view of the mind, recognizing many different and discrete facets of cognition and acknowledging that people have different cognitive strengths and contrasting cognitive styles” (p.6). In other words, he celebrates the diversity of the learners. He suggests that each person possesses all eight intelligences in different degrees; that intelligences can be developed; and that they work in complex ways. The eight intelligences proposed by Gardner are: Linguistic Intelligence, Logical-Mathematical Intelligence, Spatial Intelligence, Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence, Musical Intelligence, Interpersonal Intelligence, Intra-personal Intelligence and Naturalist Intelligence.

We decided to create an interesting activity for the festival of Holi for Class 6 students to explore how the different intelligences work differently in learning. This activity was carried out in a large classroom of 50 students, managed by a teacher who was sensitive to her learners and wanted every one of her students to participate. The class was divided into several groups according to the preferred intelligence of the students. This helped in creating a positive, anxiety-free atmosphere in the class as the affective-filter was lowered (Krashen, 1982), and language learning was at its optimum.

Students with high linguistic intelligence have an affinity for words and language.

They like to read, write, tell stories and play word games. A group of such students was asked to research and present the different stories related to the festival of Holi, and how this festival is celebrated in various parts of India.

Learners with a higher degree of Spatial Intelligence are often sensitive to colours, shapes, form, space and the relationships that exist between these elements. They like designing, drawing and visualization. Such students were asked to make posters about prevention of misbehaviour by unruly elements during Holi. These posters could be pasted all around school. These learners also enjoy taking photographs, creating videos and slide shows, and could provide such inputs to the linguistic group. Since the Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence learners enjoy movement and actions, and are often skilled in dance, such students were asked to enact the different versions of the Holika story or create a dance drama on the subject.

Learners with musical intelligence are more perceptive to sounds, rhythms, tones and music. They were asked to sing folk songs from their cultures, thereby giving a multilingual hue to the Holi atmosphere. They were also asked to create the background music for the presentation by the linguistic group. Similarly, learners who are adept at playing a musical instrument could be encouraged to give a live performance. Naturalistic Intelligence is extremely important these days. Learners belonging to this group were asked to find out about the process of making colours from natural resources. These colours were subsequently put up for sale in the school. This varied activity involved the whole class and also helped in showcasing the best of each student. Moreover it fulfilled three objectives: celebrating the festival of Holi in class, making each child feel valued and learning a language seamlessly.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy concentrates on another dimension of identity formation of the learner. It is concerned with empowering students, so that they can think and act critically in order to transform their lives and the society around them (Arora, 2012). This approach “looks at the classroom essentially as part of the wider social context and is based on the argument that discrimination and marginalization prevalent in the social systems will be reflected in the education systems” (ibid, p.70). It encourages students to analyse social wrongs such as unequal access to power, privileges and material resources, and attempts to demystify texts that have been shaped ideologically by relations of power. Using this broad framework, we did an activity for the Kerala teachers under the “*Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan*”. It involved a reading of “The Thakur’s Well” by Premchand.

The activity began with the facilitator interacting with the learners in an informal way in order to instil communication expectancy in them so that they were psychologically ready for the activity that would follow. Following this, some cues were given to the learners in the form of a photograph, a visual clipping, a news report, etc., to sensitize the learners about the theme around which the classroom tasks would be woven. The facilitator asked a few analytical questions that elicited individual perceptions and views on whether the participants had come across any instances of casteism in their State, and if they had, how they had tried to combat it. For example:

“Do you feel from time to time that society is unequal? That even basic necessities like water, air, right to live become a privilege of a few? List out five incidents in your life where you felt that somebody was denied equal treatment.”

After this, the story was read in class; each student was asked to read out a part of the story. The participants were asked to reflect on the following questions:

1. Jokhu was thirsty. Why did he not drink the water his wife had brought?
2. What was the “harsh truth” Jokhu pointed out to his wife?
3. Why was the Thakur not convicted in a certain case even though he was guilty?
4. What trait of the Thakur’s character does this bring out?
5. Why did Gangi go to the Thakur’s well at night?

This was followed by collaborative reading, where the participants sat in groups and shared their reading experiences, especially in terms of their understanding of the passage and the issues involved in it. This stage was very important as it involved a lot of peer discussion.

When collaborative reading was over, the facilitator asked a few questions related to the passage. These were not meant for checking comprehension. Instead, they were questions of analytical nature and included reflective questions, inferential questions, cause-consequence questions, and so on. These questions helped the participants to assimilate the text by virtue of localizing and personalizing it. Some examples of such questions are given here:

1. Why did the women consider themselves to be slaves? What do you think was the position of women at that point of time? Do you think it is very different now?
2. Gangi faces “double discrimination”. Discuss.
3. What do you think happened to Jokhu after he drank the stinking water?

4. Should everyone in society be treated as equal? What do you do in your life to bring this about?

The best part of the activity was the post-reading session, which involved the construction of different discourses by the participants as well as the facilitator. By virtue of the inputs they had received while reading the story, the participants were in a position to construct diverse discourses. One very interesting and memorable discourse was a short film showed by one of the groups. It was a bleak film on how water scarcity would impact the human race physically and psychologically in the year 2070 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ReVrONNvoQ>). In their presentation, the group admitted that while the film did not apparently seem to immediately gel with the theme of casteism, it did show the consequences of ill-treatment—in this case of nature. We may treat our fellow human beings shabbily and hope to get away with it, but if we go too far in treating our environment badly, we could end up in a very bleak situation, as shown in the film. This film was watched with great interest as well as horror, and while it stretched the topic too far, it did speak of denial of water—in the first instance the upper caste denied the lower caste water; in the second instance the earth denied us water.

NEUROLINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING (NLP)

While Critical Pedagogy is concerned with the learner forming her/his identity by engaging with the social world, NLP is more about learning about ourselves and others, and using this knowledge and understanding to improve our lives and that of others. NLP begins with the question: Why is it that some of us are successful learners while others cannot cope as well? An American Professor of Linguistics by the name of John Grinder and a psychology student named Richard Bandler wanted to find out that “special something” that separated people who excelled from those who did not. They studied the amazing successes of three therapists and found that they all related to their patients in similar ways, held similar belief about themselves and even their language followed similar patterns. This in a sense was the start of NLP. Similarly, teachers seeking ways to reach out to their students may find that a number of NLP techniques could help them to improve communication, establish and maintain rapport and create an anxiety-free atmosphere in the classroom. Based on the idea that we all perceive the world around us in different ways, teachers could get an insight into the “territories” inhabited by their learners (Rosenberg, 2015), much like multiple intelligences.

NLP has continued to develop far beyond the field of psychotherapy where it originated, and has influenced approaches to communication, personal development and teaching-learning. This has led to new insights in education,

management, sales, marketing and ELT. Further, ELT materials using NLP are now getting increasingly popular. Jane Revell's and Susan Norman's books *In Your Hands* (1997) and *Handing Over* (1999) are perhaps pioneering books in this area. In 2005, Baker and Rinvoluceri published a book *Unlocking Self-Expression Through NLP*, which is aimed at intermediate to advanced learners. While there is no simple definition of NLP, it is more about an "attitude to life" which is based on a series of underlying assumptions about how the mind works and how people act and react (Revell & Norman, 1997). "Neuro" refers to the nervous system where our experiences are received and processed through our five senses. "Linguistic" represents the language that we use—both verbal and non-verbal—that shapes and reflects our experience of the world. "Programming" describes training ourselves to think, speak and act in new ways (Winch, 2005).

According to Revell and Norman (1997), the fundamental concept of NLP rests on four main pillars—outcomes, rapport, sensory acuity and flexibility.

Outcomes: NLP is goal-oriented and is based on the belief that if you are clear about what you want, you are more likely to achieve it.

Rapport: This is the fundamental concept in NLP, where successful communication implies maximizing similarities and minimizing differences at a conscious as well as sub-conscious level. Communication should attempt to be positive and harmonious, only then one is likely to achieve his or her outcomes.

Sensory Acuity: This suggests being aware of being sensitive to other people at a non-conscious and non-verbal level.

Flexibility: If we change our behaviour, we are more likely to be successful. In fact, we cannot change others, we can only change ourselves.

According to NLP, the world that exists around us is made up of our perceptions and memories. Further, each person has a representational system whereby she/he processes and stores information differently. These representational systems also reveal how people experience the world through their five senses: Visual, Auditory, Kinaesthetic, Olfactory and Gustatory (VAKOG). Most people have a 'preference' for one of the senses which then becomes their preferred learning style. Therefore, it becomes important for teachers to prepare and use materials which appeal to the different learning styles of the students.

Although we all have a preferred learning style, in order to achieve our goals we often have to change our behaviour. Revell and Norman (1997) suggest that we use "new" metaphors to change the way we think and behave. Since metaphors shape the way we think about the world and the way we behave in relation to

it, exploring new metaphors enables us to understand and appreciate things in new ways, and if we change our metaphors, we change the way we think and behave (Revell and Norman, 1997). Using this philosophy, I have suggested some activities that could be tried out with Classes 7 and 8. Not only do these activities encourage communication and creativity, they also build positive feelings and empathy in the learners.

Activity 1

- Ask the students to think of a story from their childhood.
- Get the students to work in pairs. Ask them to narrate the story to their partner and then talk about what they liked about the story the most. It could be the circumstances in which it was read, the story itself, the telling or reading of it, and so on.
- Ask students to discuss the impact the story had on their life—large or small, positive or negative.
- Put the following question to the students and ask them to think about it: “If you could change any parts of the story to make it an even better story and to enhance its positive impact on you and minimize any negative impact, what bits would you change. Partners can suggest ideas too.
- Get the students to write a synopsis of their enhanced story.

Activity 2

- Ask the students to narrate a short anecdote to their partner. The anecdote should not be more than two minutes long and should be related to something that they have experienced.
- Divide the students into pairs. Ask student A to narrate the anecdote to student B. Student B must make note of not only the anecdote itself, but also how it is being narrated.
- Now student B has to sit in student A’s chair and pretend to be student A. Student B has to retell student A’s story back to him/her, matching student A’s voice in terms of speed, tone and pitch.

(adapted from Revell & Norman, 1997)

CONCLUSIONS

I have just touched the tip of the iceberg of language teaching in India. As language professionals, we need to be aware of the research that is happening in

the area of language teaching-learning, especially in a multilingual framework. We must, for instance, be aware of the principles of Constructivism and Critical thinking, and apply them in the teaching learning process. Similarly, ideas from Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) must also be understood and practiced in the classroom.

Again in the multilingual framework of India, the concept of “translanguaging” also needs to be better understood and implemented in the broad education system and in the classrooms. This would privilege the languages of the children, even those who speak minority languages and enable the teachers to use the multilingual resource of the classroom (Agnihotri, 1995). For this, the Critical Age hypothesis should be understood so that learning multiple languages is not considered a burden but something which students can enjoy if viewed in the right way.

We also need to be aware of Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory. According to Vygotsky (1978), social interaction plays an important role in the cognitive development of a child and even precedes cognitive development. Therefore, when it comes to language learning, the authenticity of the environment and the affinity between its participants are essential elements to make the learner feel part of this environment. These elements are not taken into consideration in conventional classrooms.

Finally, one common thread seems to emerge from all the various views that have been touched upon in this article: (i) that the learner is at the centre of the teaching-learning process, whether in terms of understanding the factors that lead to better L2 learning, or in celebrating the multiple intelligences and learning styles, or in interacting with her/his peers in a social context; (ii) the social context is very important both for the learner and the teacher because it gives them both an opportunity to look critically at society; (iii) the multilingual context is a boon as it allows teachers to use the multilingual resource of the classroom; (iv) any teaching-learning of language must be in the context of language across the curriculum.

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