

## Interface of Grounded Theory and Ethnomethodology for Exposure-poor ESL Learning Contexts

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### **Abstract**

Of the many challenges faced in instructed second language learning, the most important ones are: (i) the teacher's lack of communicative competence, (ii) the little exposure that learners get to the target language and (iii) rules of 'usage' occupying the space left vacant or unoccupied by language 'use'. Since all these are not only related to one another, but inseparably intertwined, any remedial measure should be planned at a holistic level, addressing all the three outlined above, plus those immediately related to any of them, such as the teacher's pedagogic competence. This article, after studying the Indian ESL classroom instruction in some detail, offers a partial but practical remedy by de-structuring instructional programmes, and de-locating tutors.

**Keywords:** Grounded theory, ethnomethodology, sociocultural theory, instructed language learning, focus on form

### **Introduction**

While working on an informal project namely, 'Empowering Rural India through English Language Education', I used to take a group of postgraduate students to a nearby coastal village school bordering Puducherry (Pondicherry) and Tamil Nadu during weekends. These PG students were from various parts of India, with different mother tongues, all bilinguals sharing English. They were all enthusiastic in their first assignment as tutors. The village children, after shedding their initial inhibition, started to wait for Saturdays to come, because their

new tutors did everything children liked—skit, song, dance, mono-act, drawing, painting, and outdoor activities such as walk and talk, shop visit and so on. The tutors never taught—they simply ‘lived with the students’, and that ‘non-teaching’ aspect was what the learners liked most in the programme.

During the break in the forenoon, the children interacted freely, and informally, with their tutors, while I sat a little away. The children inquired about the personal details of their tutors such as their native place, language, food, festivals, etc. What captured my attention was that the Tamil children preferred to interact with non-Tamil tutors. There could be two reasons for this preference: cognitive and linguistic. First, for the children, there weren’t many questions to ask the Tamil tutors since there was no ‘information gap’ to trigger communication and to sustain it. They share the same language and its culture. Secondly, there is an inherent inhibition in the speaker and listener who share the same language to function in a foreign language. Observations of these sessions later led me to think of the theoretical fabric of ethnomethodology underlying the successful interaction between the two cultures, and its practical potentials in second language instruction.

While exploring more in theory, I chanced to trace a link between and Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) suggestion of the potentials of adult-peer interaction in informal second language acquisition.

This Vygotskian construct later formed the foundation of short-term proficiency programmes organized by a voluntary organization—English Language Teachers’ Interaction Forum (ELTIF)—in a Kerala village, with tutors invited from neighbouring states. This article reports a part of that larger project in which learners and teachers belonged to two speech communities, but successfully ‘coexisted’, with the help of a link language.

### **The Scope of Grounded Theory in Qualitative Research**

The traditional mode of science research is triggered by a hypothesis and then it proceeds through the deductive mode of inquiry. But, in humanities, such a mode frequently fails in tracing the elusive and intrinsic behaviours of the human mind. In such cases, practices in grounded theory are handier for researchers since problematization is possible out of the data naturally available or collected. Moreover, it

follows an inductive method. When researchers feel the inadequacy of the available frameworks, they are free to develop their own framework that does full justice to their inquiry.

The publication of *The Awareness of Dying* in 1965, and *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* two years later, by two American sociologists, B.G. Glaser and A.L. Strauss, laid the foundation of grounded theory that enabled social scientists to liberate themselves from the rigid framework of the conventional hypothetico-deductive research patterns. They found the existing frameworks not at all adequate, since the thoughts and feelings of patients in hospitals who were aware of their imminent death, were beyond any means quantification.

Essentially grounded in data, grounded theory suits better in the investigations of abstract social relations and processes. If we treat language as a social product in evolution (not in culmination), and language learning as a social process (not a person's mental processes), a grounded theory that may have society at its core may work better in defining and delineating most of the intricacies of that social process, if not the whole. It is at this point, the construct of the 'social genesis of second language' proposed by Vygotsky (1978) gets converged into the framework of grounded theory.

While tracing the nature and sources of the anxiety, fear, shyness and lack of interest in learners of a second language across stages--primary to postgraduate, or even above—I too had been looking for a framework that would give me more freedom in investigation. The learners' emotions were similar to the fear and anxiety faced by the patients in their death beds.

### **L.S. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory on Adult-Child Interaction**

The Vygotskian socio-cultural theory, though got entry into pedagogy towards the end of the last century, is yet to gain popularity in curriculum and classroom teaching, may be because of the lasting influence of cognitive psychology which highlighted the key role of the human mind in learning in general. However, cognitivism in psychology, like its corresponding linguistic movement, Transformational Generative Linguistics, failed to give due consideration to the role of society or speech community.

The application of social interactionist views to language teaching has

been discussed surprisingly little. This is all the more surprising when we consider the social nature of language itself. Most books on language learning include a section on psychological schools of thought such as behaviourism, humanism and cognitive psychology. However, the implications for the language teacher of taking a social interactionist perspective have only recently begun to emerge (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 39).

One key concept in the socio-cultural theory when adapted to pedagogy is the psychological construct of activity. The term 'activity', when borrowed by pedagogy from the mother discipline psychology, seems to be not thoroughly understood. Activity, which forms the core of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), evolved in the 1920s, as a Marxist-based approach to psychology. Like all other branches of Marxian studies, CHAT too asserts the importance of social interaction in mental development. Any action needs a social context to make it meaningful and purposeful. "This context, typically a purposeful, social system of actions, is called an activity (Kuutti & Engerstrom, 2006, p. 44). Lantolf, a founder-member of the Vygotskian school further explains that activity theory,

...is not merely doing something, it is doing something that is motivated either by a biological need, such as hunger, or a culturally constructed needs ,... and those needs become motives once they become directed at a specific object" (Lantolf, 2000, p. 8).

### **How Sociocultural Theory Suits Better in the Indian ESL Classrooms**

What really is 'learning' a foreign language? From one extreme point of view, it is in the simplest sense, a matter of common sense, since laymen even in their adulthood learn it through 'experiencing' the language—at work, through immigration and emigration. War, partition and forced displacements taught people how to learn a foreign language better than schooling did. From the other extreme, it has been viewed as a conglomeration of complex linguistic, psychological, sociological and cognitive code learning processes, all intertwined. The first perspective totally negates or nullifies any scope of theorization, while the latter adds or drags more and more theoretical angles to it. In the case of Indian ESL instruction, the issue assumes a further dimension because, first it is a global language, secondly, it happens to be a language of opportunities, and thirdly, the language is present everywhere and in

everything in and around the society. Still institutionalized teaching-learning of that language, which the society demands for its children, altogether fails miserably. Why?

### **Can Classrooms be Converted into Speech Communities in Miniature?**

The answer to this self-inquiry can be distilled from the following domains of pedagogy.

(a) A language is best learnt when the learner encounters it in natural situations. Neither a teacher's description of that language in terms of its formal features (e.g. "In English, unlike our mother tongue, *bread* is uncountable.") or a prescription of rules to be followed (e.g., "Don't ask for *two breads* at the baker's; ask for *two loaves of bread*. You may also ask for *four slices of bread* for breakfast.") works effectively in acquiring that concept. But, repeated exposure to the utterance in meaningful contexts naturally leads to the learner in assimilating that rule in abstraction—language is a rule-governed abstraction. Meaning precedes, form follows. Meaning in pedagogical contexts, is elusive as well as, ambiguous, states Rod Ellis.

The term 'focus on meaning' is somewhat ambiguous. It is necessary to distinguish two different senses of this term. The first refers to the idea of semantic meaning (i.e. the meanings of lexical items or of specific grammatical structures). This type of meaning is addressed in the oral-situational approach and in the notional-functional approach. The second sense of focus on meaning relates to pragmatic meaning (i.e. the highly contextualized meanings that arise in acts of communication). To provide opportunities for students to attend to pragmatic meaning, a task-based (or, at least, a task-supported) approach to language teaching is required. It is clearly important that instruction ensures opportunities for learners to focus on both types of meaning but, arguably, it is pragmatic meaning that is crucial to language learning (Ellis, R., 2005, p. 34).

(b) The comprehensibility of the input (Krashen, 1985) cannot be judged exclusively in terms of linguistic terms; but two more aspects of the input are to be considered. They are (i) whether the input matches the next higher level of the learner's present cognitive ability, and (ii) whether the input provided is socio-culturally relevant to the learner's speech community. In the case of the latter, even if the input drawn is from an alien culture, can it be naturally related to the learner's culture by extending it from the target culture to the native culture of the learner?

An instance of this proposition is whether Ernest Hemingway's classic work *The Old Man and the Sea* can be used as comprehensible input, to the learners of tertiary level, brought up in a desert region, far away from oceans.

(c) In the Indian context, learners get exposed to English in varying degrees before and during their formal education. The question is whether classroom instruction tries to relate the learner's linguistically and cognitively 'acquired' knowledge of English to the world outside. In other words, can the pre-school 'use' be fused into the while-school instructed 'usage'. The distinction between usage and use has been illustrated by H.G. Widdowson (1978). Though there had been a reaction against formal instruction of grammar in the context of the wide acceptance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the post-CLT era also witnessed modified versions of form-based instruction working in ESL classrooms. The advantages of instructed language learning with focus on form have been suggested by Rod Ellis, in a comprehensive study.

Instruction can seek to provide an intensive focus on pre-selected linguistic forms (as in a focus-on-forms approach or in a lesson built around a focused task) or it can offer incidental and extensive attention to form (as in a lesson based on an unfocused task) (Ellis, R., 2005, p.35).

(d) The less the quantity and quality of natural, comprehensible input, the more the chances of metalanguage occupying the classroom teaching time and space. This poses one of the major hurdles in communication. Metalinguistic terms flourish in a class where natural communication is minimal or nil. Fear, anxiety, shyness, avoidance and withdrawal symptoms are born out of this non-communicative language functioning.

### **The Framework of Ethnomethodology for Informal Second Language Learning**

It is in the context of the four propositions outlined above, this paper seeks the support of ethnomethodology for providing space for more of informal interaction as opposed to formal instruction. As outlined in the introductory paragraph, ELTIF has been experimenting with the potentials of ethnomethodology for a decade or more; the results have been quite productive, hence, encouraging too.

It has been customary in scientific research for the researcher to alienate himself or herself from research, so that objective validation can be

expected. But, how far the adoption of this research method was possible in social sciences still remains a matter of dispute. Ethnomethodological investigation, therefore remained a mode of application rather than inquiry in disciplines like anthropology. The researcher-turned participant's own understandings and interpretations play a crucial role in ethnomethodology, and these understandings are based on everyday activities, including language. This mode is in antithesis to the researcher in alienation, trying to impose the analysts' preconceptions on the interpretation of an event.

Ethnomethodology is more of a descriptive nature, than of an investigation. While we look for a specific object or fact in an investigative study, ethnomethodology does not possess, any such fixed point or hypothesis, to begin with. The result is of less important than studying the procedures of something in progress, the ways something evolves, develops and culminates.

### **Ethnomethodology at Work in ESL Contexts**

How does an ethnomethodological study work in an ESL context? As pointed out at the beginning of this article, an experimental study has been in progress for more than a decade in which certain research questions were formulated from the perspective of grounded theory. One among them was how intercultural interaction would work better than intra-cultural communication in respect of English as a link language. A series of short proficiency programmes were arranged for village school children in Kerala, to which teachers from neighbouring states were invited as tutors. Quite a few informal meetings between Malayalam-speaking school children with speakers of other Indian languages such as Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Hindi were arranged periodically. All the children from Kerala and most of the tutors from the neighbouring states were products of regional language medium schools. It has been observed that intimacy between the learners and tutors was always on the increase, and the urge to communicate was getting stronger every time. The symptoms of shyness, fear, hesitation, withdrawal and fear displayed overtly in the beginning seemed to vanish gradually and their mutual relation grew into a sort of personal bondage. As there was no means of communication other than the smattering of English in their possession (and progression, too) that repertoire was fruitfully employed in knowing each other.

What was more interesting was that the tutors who used to lament on their learners' poor performance back in their hometowns, started undergoing some sort of a reflexion on their performance and admitted that they had never functioned in their classes, exclusively through English, as they were functioning in the changed cultural context. As a result, they started realizing that the same amount of exposure through teacher talk could be provided to their learners back in their schools. Lamentation on the poor learner performance gave way to self-reflection leading to better professional competence.

### **Where Ethnomethodology and Vygotskyan Framework Interface**

The three major factors that went into the making of the project called Empowering Rural India Through English Language Education (ERIELE) are: (i) Learners were taught by tutors whose mother tongue was another language, hence English served as a link language. Thus, English functioned not just the medium of the entire teaching-learning processes but the medium of communication too. (ii) Not only during the class hours, but during the major part of the day-to-day life too, the tutors were living with the learners and learning many things about the host community and its culture from the children. (iii) Parents were part of the programme as observers and service providers, hence they too contributed to the evolution of the curriculum through suggestions and discussions.

### **How a Link Language Functions in Academic Contexts**

Usually, what happens in the class of a sincere and better-informed teacher is that the entire interaction based on the academic part (paraphrase and illustration of the content of the text) may be exclusively in the target language. But when it comes to the remaining 'academic management part' such as giving instruction about assignments, announcements of tests, messages to be shared with parents and so on, they naturally happen to be in the local language fearing that the crucial information may go un-grasped by the children. But, here since there was no scope for relying on their mother tongue, learners seemed to be more careful in listening to their tutors. The same was the case with the tutors—they were more aware of that version of the language which shares the features of motherese, caretaker's speech or child-directed speech (CDS). Back in their classes in their own places, this CDS was rarely tried, since



it was natural for them to revert to their mother tongue for academic-administrative purposes. As a result, border lines between academic and non-academic contexts got blurred, and the medium of instruction merged into medium of interaction. In summary, learning got fused into living; cultures penetrated through language, as a result, acculturation became the norm rather than the aim.

### **Signposts for ESL Instruction**

Two kernel issues were addressed simultaneously, and the results of both were highly positive. The first was how to get rid of the negative attitude such as fear, inhibition and avoidance inherent in the minds of the disadvantaged and rural learners, towards learning English language. Secondly, how to help teachers develop self-confidence by bringing them to an alien culture and enable them to function freely for fulfilling their academic requirements and personal needs. The time the tutors and learners lived together for a whole week--more than three-fourths of a day, on an average-- generated in both of them, a sense of mutual faith and trust which resulted in free and intimate interaction.

### **Conclusion**

What keeps ESL instruction in India stagnant is the wide gap between university departments-based research and theorization on the one side and conventional school-based teaching sans teacher's communicative competence, on the other. As long as the medium of regional language is at hand, neither teachers nor learners feel the need for communicating in a forced language. Perhaps intercultural interaction, though for brief spells every now and then is likely to improve classroom practices and performance, which in turn are likely to lead to research and theorization by taking into consideration the local environment and indigenously developed strategies and materials.

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