Understanding Language Teaching: An Educational Perspective

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the prolonged debate on teaching methods, the concept of language teaching as such has remained less developed. It is not only gradually emancipating itself from the 'method debate' through conceptual schemes, empirical studies and classroom observation, a more deliberate interpretation of second language teaching in terms of educational theory is needed. An educational interpretation of language teaching is clearly interdisciplinary; linguistics, sociolinguistics, cultural studies and educational theory.

The model developed by two educational researchers Dunkin and Biddle (1974) for the study of classroom teaching distinguishes four main categories of variables; presage, context, process and product. In their seminal book *The Study of Teaching*, Dunkin and Biddle critically examine classroom teaching in terms of these essential factors/ relationships. Moreover this model identifies two principal actors; the language teacher and the language learner. The teacher like the learner brings to language teaching certain characteristics which have bearing on educational treatment; age, sex, previous education and personal qualities and social context.

This paper would examine the educational dimension of second language teaching with an aim to equip a language teacher with effective tools of ELT.

Keywords: SLT; Educational Treatment; Dunkin & Biddle.

Introduction

The educational researchers, Dunkin and Biddle in their book *The Study of Teaching* (1974) developed a model for language teaching keeping in mind the educational nuances involved in it. This model distinguishes four main categories of variables: presage, context, process and product. The presage variable discusses the characteristics which teachers as individuals or as a group bring to teaching, their own formative experiences, their training, and their personal qualities. The context variable consists of the conditions within which the teacher must operate - community, school, environment, and pupils. The process variable is collective behavior of teacher and pupil in the classroom. The product variable refers to the outcome of teaching-learning process - those changes that come about in pupils as a result of their involvement in classroom activities with teachers and other pupils (Dunkin and Biddle, 1974).

Presage Variable

This model makes a distinction between immediate effects of teaching, which can often be measured by tests, and the less accessible long term effects. It identifies two principal actors in the scheme, the language teacher and the language learner. The teacher, like the learner, brings to language teaching certain characteristics which may have bearing on educational treatment- age, sex, previous education, and personal qualities. Above all, the language teacher brings to it a language background and experience, professional training as a linguist and teacher, previous language teaching experience, and more or less formulated theoretical presuppositions about language, language learning and teaching. The social context which influences the learner and which has bearing on the degree of supportiveness supplied by the language environment affects the teacher as much as the learner and indirectly influences the educational treatment (what the teacher does) of language teaching.

Context Variable

Language teaching is not expressed simply as teacher's classroom behaviour, it includes observable classroom activities, and indeed it is necessary to pay close attention to such observable behaviour rather than talking about teaching in general. The classroom episodes in isolation are like snippets of conversation out of context. The intention of an episode or even a lesson becomes clear only if it is placed into a sequence or context. Classroom teaching episodes are viewed in the context of a curriculum and of activities which reach beyond the particular classroom setting. The teacher as curriculum developer plans the activities, prepares or selects materials, adapts materials to particular uses, divides the total set of materials and the classroom activities into steps and stages. As a classroom practitioner he may organize both in-class and out-of-class events. Beyond the classroom itself, there may be private reading, homework assignments, projects, papers and other practice activities related to classroom language learning. Teachers also arrange student exchanges; invite target language visitors, and plan student travel and other contact experiences with speakers of the second language in its natural environment. In short, language teaching, interpreted in terms of curriculum, is represented as planned action with certain ends in view and means to reach them.

Objectives & Content

Both objectives and content should be identified and distinguished for effective language teaching. The emphasis on a language needs analysis that was advocated in the late seventies (Richterich and Chancerel, 1978/1980 and Munby, 1978) as well as the concept of language for special purposes (Strevens, 1977) are efforts in the same direction. They aim to specify the objectives and the content of the language curriculum. The schemes developed by Valette (1970) for language teaching, the Bloom taxonomies of educational objectives are outstanding pioneering efforts in the development of an educational approach to the analysis of language teaching.

This has resulted in identification of four categories of behaviouarial objectives and four content categories. The behavioral categories are recognized as proficiency (skill in language learning) in the second language, conceptual knowledge which is explicit knowledge about the second language (L2) and knowledge about the corresponding culture (C2), cultivation of affective objectives (values and attitudes related to the language and culture) and transfer (learning a particular language with the purpose of generalizing beyond the language in question). The content categories are broadly conceived as language (particular L2 or varieties of the L2), culture (target culture (C2) or several target cultures (C2s)), communications (activities in the language or suggests content other than the language itself which engages the learner as a participant in communication with speakers of the second language either directly or vicariously), and general language education (content beyond the particular second language and target culture which will enable the learner to go beyond the language given).

Process Variable

The actual circumstances of language teaching require the interpretation of these categories in order to decide which objectives and content categories to give priority to. Thus, language learning in secondary education or at the university level is likely to be relatively evenly spread over different categories. On the other hand, a second language in early childhood education or language teaching in professional education for adults is likely to emphasize communication and proficiency rather than general language education and transfer.

Making a conceptual distinction between ends (content and objectives) and means (instruction-what the teacher does to induce learning) is particularly important in language teaching because the confusion between them has been another constant source of trouble in the debate on teaching methods. Instruction, in the specific sense of curriculum theory, brings us to the areas of most intense controversy in the method debate. We need to abandon the notion of fixed method,

instead, it is analytically more effective, and pedagogically more flexible to operate with the broader concept of teaching strategy under which can be subsumed a large number of specified teaching techniques. There are three broad parameters to decide the concept of instruction.

(a) The intra-lingual / cultural & cross-lingual / cultural dimension concerns the use or non-use of L1 in L2 learning. Techniques which remain entirely within the second language are called intra-lingual or intra-cultural and techniques which use the first language and native culture as a frame of reference are called cross lingual or cross-cultural.

(b) The objective-subjective (analytical-experiential) dimension results from the code-communication dilemma. It refers to the possibility of treating the target language and culture as code and objects of study and mastery or as something to experience subjectively through participation in personal contact and communicative acts. Language learning in the classroom tends to be mainly objective and analytical whereas language learning 'in the street' (Macnamara, 1973) is subjective, participatory and non-analytical. The objective and subjective strategies are legitimate and both are needed in varying measures depending on learners, opportunities for learning, stages of the learning process, and learners' goals.

(c) The explicit-implicit dimension relates to techniques which encourage the learner either to adopt vis-à-vis the new language, a cognitive or reasoning approach (Krashen's Monitor model) or to employ techniques which encourage more intuitive absorption and automaticity (Krashen's acquisition' process). We can say that explicit-implicit techniques are not irreconcilable, but presumably their applicability varies according to learner characteristics, stages of the learning process, and conditions of learning.

Sequence

As far as arranging of the content of language teaching is concerned, no single scheme or simple formula of ordering content can be expected or proposed. Nevertheless, since a language cannot be mastered in a single pedagogical progression, division into stages which meet specified learning conditions are inevitable. Such a division would be based on several content criteria (linguistic, cultural, or communicative).

Product Variable

The product variable in Dunkin and Biddle's model refers to the actual language proficiency attained by learners. Besides proficiency, there are of course other cognitive and affective learning outcomes to bear in mind. Dunkin and Biddle talk of immediate and long-term outcomes. The immediate outcomes are important for feedback to further teaching and learning. Their assessment is diagnostic and formative and can influence continued teaching and learning. The long term outcomes are determined by the individual learner, the teacher and the society. For the individual learner the outcome should be a more or less permanent acquisition of a second language. Where the language has been forgotten through disuse such a more permanent outcome would be indicated by greater ease of relearning at a later stage and the ability to tackle new languages. Long term learning outcomes would also include the more or less permanent attitudes the learner has acquired through language learning. For the individual teacher, the evaluation of his own teaching and of the learning of his pupils provides feedback for further teaching, hopefully making him a more experienced and more competent teacher. More intangibly, but nonetheless important, are the lasting effects of language learning on society: language-learning is expected to infuse into society a second language or bilingual element and improved community relations. Therefore, language teaching can potentially contribute to sociopolitical changes. The important consideration is that, in the long run, the language learning outcome may influence and modify the socio-cultural and sociolinguistic context which forms the background against which the processes of teaching and learning are initiated.

Conclusion

The language teaching model developed by Dunkin & Biddle enables us to view different aspects of language teaching in relation to one another and to obtain a balanced perspective of the teaching component for the threefold purpose of theory development, practical decision making and research.

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