

8.

USHERING THE MARGINALIZED INTO THE MAINSTREAM THROUGH TASK BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

Chumki Biswas, Ph.D. in English
University of Mumbai

Abstract - India as a developing nation has many problems to grapple with. One that prevails throughout history is the disquieting state of the Marginalized lot. Despite many legislative, economic and social reforms, the marginalized groups still remain at the fringes. One of the main reasons for this, is their lack of proficiency in English, which holds them back from competing with the privileged, in this globalized era. This paper explores the possibilities and future prospects that can open up for the marginalized, once they acquire sufficient proficiency in English through Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT). It expounds upon the rationale upon which TBLT has grown and how the marginalized, given their impoverished backgrounds, can benefit substantially from this method of language teaching.

Key Words: Marginalized, Communicative competence, Language proficiency, Task Based Language Teaching, Tasks, Learner-centric, Real-world targets

I. Introduction

The word 'Marginalized' refers to the common human tendency where people whom we perceive to be undesirable or without useful function, are excluded, i.e., marginalized. 'To be marginalized is to be placed in the margins, and thus excluded from the privilege and power found at the center' defines the Encyclopedia of Public Health. Of course, the forms of marginalization may vary - generally linked to the level of development of society, both culturally and economically, especially economically. It is a generally accepted fact that Third World and developing countries have more marginalized groups than the First World countries. India being no exception, has its own set of marginalized people who have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them. Therein, starts a vicious circle where their lack of education and socio-cultural status prevent them from participating into mainstream activities which leads to further isolation (Saxena, 2014).

Despite various overtures in terms of legislative and social reforms, the gap between the marginalized and the privileged mainstream has still not been bridged. Perhaps the answer lies in the empowerment of the marginalized through an increased proficiency in the English language. English language proficiency in a rapidly globalizing India is an essential resource that opens doors to higher education, university entrance, world of professional employment, immigration and overall better standards living. In short, India's language of power is English. So, becoming empowered becomes difficult unless one can manage transactional and communicative functions in English. Needless to say, the most marginalized groups consisting of schedule castes, tribes, women, disabled people, children and sexual minorities are the ones most deprived of English language proficiency, relegating them mostly to grossly under-paid and menial jobs.

II. Need for a Different Approach for the Marginalized

Research shows that while the middle and upper middle class seek to harness the advantages of a global education, proficiency in English and attending university, the marginalized groups measure success purely in terms of attaining literacy or primary education. The marginalized groups still lack the essential financial as well as cultural capital required for future educational success. In contrast, the middle class find ways to act as intermediaries to assist in their children's education by dealing with the school bureaucracy and helping with their children's homework. So, even in the absence of financial capital where they are not able to send their children to exclusive schools, the middle class is able to subsidize their lack of financial capital with a relatively high degree of cultural capital (Ganguly-Sacrase & Sacrase, 2012). Since the marginalized groups start education with a serious disadvantage, and sometimes quite late in life, the way their education has to be tackled needs to be slightly different from the ones currently followed in the academic institutions.

Another point to be noted at this juncture is that school exerts a tremendous influence on a learner's personality, especially child learners. The schools firstly represent a break from the security of home. Secondly, learners come face to face with the differences between standard and non-standard English speakers, which in itself can either be a positive challenge or it can cannonball into formidable difficulties for the learners (Edwards, 1976). The marginalized learners find themselves at an even greater disadvantage since they experience a discontinuity between home and school, which precludes them from participating in the school's social and academic life. Entering a world of experience in which abilities, knowledge and the very language acquired at home are usually deemed irrelevant and thus excluded, the learner goes through a harrowing identity crisis and further sense of isolation (Thanasoulas, 2001).

III. A Paradigm Shift from Traditional to Task Based Language Teaching

Keeping in mind that the marginalized come from impoverished social and economic backgrounds, with inadequate social skills and many a time a late start in schooling, it becomes apparent that they find it difficult to keep up with the other learners and hence the need for a different approach to teaching English to these learners. This is where the Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) can help bridge the gap between the marginalized and the mainstream learners. TBLT is an off-shoot of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which believes that language is a vehicle or instrument of communication. CLT differs from the earlier approaches and methods in the sense that it views language as more than a set of grammatical, lexical and phonological rules. CLT focuses more on the functions of language than the form of language.

The reason behind the wide acceptance and popularity of Communicative Language Teaching is that it affords the scope of varied interpretation and allows practitioners from different educational traditions to identify with it in different ways. One of its North American proponents, Sauvignon, quotes Montaigne who wrote, "Without methods, without books, without grammar or rules, without a whip and without tears, I had learnt a Latin as proper as that of my schoolmaster" (Sauvignon, 1983). This anti-structural view of language learning is generally referred to as "learning by doing" or "the experience approach". This idea of direct rather than delayed practice of communicative acts is central to CLT. Another dimension to CLT is that it is learner-centred and experience-based.

Experiential learning forms the theoretical foundation for TBLT. The learners learn more and

they grow intellectually when they are engaged in different series of tasks. Nunan (2004) says, "Therefore, the active involvement of the learner is important to this approach and the rubric which captures that active, experiential nature of the process is 'learning by doing'." It is significantly different from the 'transmission' approach to education in which the learner acquires knowledge passively from the teacher. Experiential learning has diverse roots drawn from many disciplines such as social psychology, humanistic education, developmental education and cognitive theory.

TBLT was popularized by N. Prabhu while working in Bangalore. Prabhu (1987) deserves complete credit for originating the Task Based Teaching and Learning, based on the concept that effective learning occurs when students are fully engaged in language tasks, rather than just learning about language. Hymes (1972) proposed that knowing a language involved more than knowing a set of grammatical, lexical, and phonological rules. In order to use the language effectively learners need to develop communicative competence — the ability to use the language they are learning, appropriately, in a given social encounter. Hymes' notion of communicative competence was further elaborated by a number of practice-oriented language educators, most notably by Canale and Swain (1980) who contended that communicative competence comprises grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. TBLT gives the learners a holistic language learning experience where all the above competencies are addressed in the most natural or near natural settings.

IV. The Nature of Tasks

At this point it is important to define the term 'task' and list the key characteristics that differentiate a task from an exercise. There are two basic types of tasks — the real-world or target tasks and pedagogical tasks. Target tasks as the name implies, refer to uses of the language in the world beyond the classroom; pedagogical tasks are those that occur in the classroom. Long (1985) frames his approach to TBLT in terms of target tasks, arguing that a target task is "a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, the examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes.....In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between."

Therefore, simply put, the definition of a pedagogical task is a classroom activity that involves the learners in understanding, manipulating and interacting in their target language while their attention is focused on

transferring meaning rather than manipulating grammatical form. One of the features of task-based learning that often worries teachers is that it seems to have no place for the teaching of grammar. However, it is important to note that the acquisition of grammar is as important in a communicative approach as in any other approach. Prabhu distinguishes very clearly between grammar as a means and grammar as an end. The end of any language teaching endeavour, he feels, is the acquisition of native-like grammar. However, in his system, the means of acquiring this is not training in grammar, but the use of real-life tasks.

V. Advantages of Task Based Teaching for the Marginalized Learners

There is nothing like a single 'Best Teaching Method'. However, empirical research over the years in various linguistic contexts have shown that TBLT is very effective for second language learners of any age and socio-economic background in acquiring language proficiency faster and more effectively. Although all second language learners stand to benefit from TBLT, the marginalized stand to reap the maximum benefits from this method as it provides the kind of scaffolding that can built upon any kind of learner background. So, even against seemingly insurmountable odds like poor schooling, vernacular medium schooling, ineffective social skills, negligible English proficiency, low self-esteem, late start in literacy and limited exposure, the marginalized groups can cover up for the lost time and opportunities if given a helping hand in the form of TBLT.

Many if not all, from the marginalized group face a stumbling block once they reach higher education because of their low proficiency in English. Due to poor communicative English they are under-equipped to clear entrance exams or sit for job recruitment interviews, all of which, are conducted in English. As a result, they fail to acquire good jobs, even though they are well acquainted in their specific vocational or specialized technical fields and are forced to look for other options where basic command over English is not a criteria. It is indeed sad to see the future prospects of the marginalized groups in fields like engineering, finance, law, health care, hospitality industry, sales and marketing, BPOs etc. Even if they manage to somehow struggle through college education, with the help of reservations or aid from other sources, they lose out in the competition when they have to face job interviews or apply for further studies abroad, because here the battle ground is open to all, the privileged and the underprivileged. Therefore, the only currency that can help these marginalized groups make a foray into the mainstream jobs and positions is the currency of

proficiency in English. Keeping these requirements in mind, highlighted below are some of the advantages the marginalized groups can avail themselves of, if taught through TBLT.

TBLT is Learner Centric and Not Teacher Centric

"Experiential learning theory provides the basic philosophical view of learning as part of personal growth. The goal is to enable the learner to become increasingly self-directed and responsible for his or her own learning. This process means a gradual shift of the initiative to the learner, encouraging him or her, to bring in personal contributions and experiences. Instead of the teacher setting the tasks and standards of acceptable performance, the learner is increasingly in-charge of his or her own learning." (Kohonen, 1992). Therefore, the learners are able to adjust the comprehensible input, negotiate meaning and arrive at an acceptable output. This is particularly helpful for the marginalized groups as they feel more in control of what they are learning and become more self-reliant.

Engages Learners in Meaningful and Genuine Task Purpose

Language does not exist in vacuum. So a list of vocabulary and isolated sentence patterns and structures hardly equip any learner to engage in real time communication. Language develops in response to the need to understand others and to be understood in return. Therefore, the materials offered to the learners encourage them to focus on meanings in context and interaction (Suntharesan, 2014). When learners are engaged in a meaningful task, they are more interested and gets the opportunity to first negotiate meaning until a clear understanding is reached and also rehearse in class for future use in real communicative circumstances outside the classroom.

Exposes Learners to Real-world Targets

Long and Crookes (1992) argued that pedagogic tasks must be related to real-world target tasks. Tasks like renting an apartment, making an enquiry, filling out a form, taking lecture notes are all real time functions of communication. When students are engaged in the task corresponding to their day-to-day real life experiences, the selected task becomes more authentic. So when learners engage in these kind of real-world target tasks they can associate more with the learning activity and acquire proficiency faster.

Advocates Classroom Interaction and Engagement

Task based activities are mostly paired or group activities. This allows for the learners to engage in communicative situations and learn strategic and

socio-linguistic competence. As it has already been pointed out before, the marginalized groups suffer from a sense of isolation and hence feel less accepted and confident during social interactions. With the help of rigorous classroom interaction, the inhibition faced by these learners will melt away helping them feel more confident and empowered with social etiquettes to face the globalized world.

Helps Active Learning and Integration

It is a well-known fact the learning by doing is more effective than learning by passive observation and reproduction. Since the learners participate in various tasks and activities they get a lot of first hand practice. The management of comprehensive output or real time production of spoken or written discourse is one of the mainstays of TBLT. The sense of being involved and being able to steer communicative activities, imbues the learners with a sense of independence and confidence that cannot be accomplished through passive one-way teacher to student lecture method of teaching.

Helps Move from Reproduction to Creation

Traditional teaching usually encourages reproduction based on models provided by the teacher. However, TBLT advocates it learners to create new ways to use the linguistic competencies. Hence, it helps them to make a move from mere reproduction to creation of communicative discourse. In the long run, the learners get to assimilate initially and later with increased proficiency to integrate, modify or manipulate the discourse functions according to the need of the real world.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that keeping in mind the various disadvantages faced by the marginalized groups of India, a task based approach to teaching them English holds definite promise. It holds out a beacon of hope for the marginalized, where so many other efforts in betterment have shown bleak results. Advocates of TBLT all over the world have reported the positive impact of this method, and though, language teaching is an ongoing field of research, this method has shown its efficacy in most instances. It will help open up newer avenues for the marginalized which so far have been out of their reach, mostly because of their poor proficiency in English. TBLT with its rich content, thanks to numerous research endeavours and a solid grounding in sound language learning theories

should inspire us to adopt it in our classroom to bring about quantitative and sustainable results for all language learners, but most specifically for the marginalized. It is the need of the hour to give a helping hand to the marginalized groups so that they can make a foray into the mainstream arenas.

References:

- Canale, M & Swain, M. 1980. 'Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing'. *Applied Linguistics* 1(1):1-47.
- Edwards, A. D. 1976. *Language in culture and class*. London: Heinemann.
- Ganguly-Sacrase, R & Sacrase, T. 2012. *Cultural Politics in the 'New' India*. In Weis, L & Dolby, N. (eds.). *Social Class and Education: Global Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.
- Hymes, D. 1971. Competence and performance in linguistic theory. In R. Huxley and E. Ingram (eds.) *Language Acquisition: Models and Methods*. London: Academic Press.
- Kohonen, V. 1992. Experiential language learning: second language learning as cooperative learner education. In Nunan, D. (ed.), *Collaborative language learning and teaching*. Cambridge: CUP, 14 - 39.
- Long, M & Crookes, G. 1992. Three approaches to task - based syllabus design. *TESOL Quarterly* 26/1.
- Long, M. 1985. A role for instruction in second language acquisition. In K. Hyltenstam and Pienemann, M (eds.). *Modelling and assessing second language acquisition*. Clevedon Avon : Multilingual Matters.
- Michael Long. *The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1996.
- Nunan, D. 2004. *Task-based language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Prabhu, N. S. 1987. *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sauvignon, S. J. 1972. *Communicative Competence: an Experiment in Foreign Language Teaching*. Philadelphia: Center for Curriculum Development.
- Saxena, D. 2014. The Problems of Marginalized Groups in India. *Academike*. Volume-1, Issue-3. <http://www.lawctopus.com/academike/problems-marginalized-groups-india>
- Suntharesan, V. 2014. Task Based Language Teaching To Promote Communicative Competence. *Language in India*. Volume-14, Article-8. <http://www.languageinindia.com/aug2014/suntharasantaskbasedlearning.pdf>
- Thanasoulas, Dimitrios. 2001. Language and Disadvantage. *ELT newsletter*. Article-70. <http://www.eltnewsletter.com/back/August2001/art702001.htm>

