

Theme Centred Interaction - Towards a Democratic Pedagogy in the English Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article posits Theme Centred Interaction (TCI), a group process originated by Ruth C Cohn, as a democratic pedagogy appropriate for ELT in the Indian context. Initially, the concept of democracy in education, its relevance and purposes are discussed briefly. The values associated with a democratic approach and the roles of the different constituents of the democratic classroom are described. Next, an analysis of the humanistic value base of TCI is done with a view to assess how it can practically support democratic attitude and behaviour in the language classroom. Finally, the structural and methodical elements of a TCI based language session are elucidated showing how the centrality of the student and the dynamic process of learning are held in the fore, not allowing the dominance of the teacher figure, the prescriptions of the syllabus or the demands of the context to subsume them.

Introduction

Extensive research and analysis has gone into the practice of English language teaching and resultant changes in perspectives have influenced its theory and practice over the years. This is true with regard to the approaches to ELT in India too. The paradigm of the teacher as giver and the students as simply takers has become outdated with the modern values of humanism and the introduction of student centred pedagogy. Attempts to restructure the classroom processes into a democratic, student-centred mode are increasingly found in the ELT scene but the language classroom remains predominantly

teacher- centred in approach and lopsided in academic interactions. More from the teacher and less from the students is how teaching – learning happens in the English classrooms at large.

On a closer look, the undemocratic character of the traditional classroom dynamics gets revealed. On the one hand there is the straitjacket of the prescribed syllabus, the teacher's stature as the custodian of knowledge and the uneven sharing of power, space and time in communication. On the other side, the classroom arrangements - from the architecture to the classroom setting, the ergonomics of the classroom furniture and

its formation, to the physical positioning of the teachers and learners – become reflective of the narrow leeway given to the learner compared to that enjoyed by the teacher. An exploration into the extent to which the learners are perceived as whole persons—with body, mind and spirit, into the relative importance assigned to the affective facet of the learners and teachers, and to the reckoning of the differences in the pace and style of learning would throw more light on the restrictive nature of the traditional English language classroom.

Attempts to implement Communicative Language Teaching in the Indian classrooms targeting the development of the communicative competence in the language learners, initiated a shift in perspective, though much of it remains at the conceptual level and less in praxis. Some changes in the pedagogy evinced by the introduction of teaching methods like group work, discussions and student presentations aim better engagement and interaction among the learners. However, the underlying lopsided paradigm of teacher- student relationship remains, with some cosmetic changes at the level of activities and tools.

As envisaged in CLT, the role of the teacher as a facilitator is not often lived in practice and as a result the classroom processes inadvertently promote teacher centrism, competition and related impersonal values: It pays to be smart and those who are slow or search run the risk of being left behind. Authentic interaction and genuine cooperation tend to be suppressed by demands for outdoing and winning. To add,

the teacher looms large in the classroom scene as the superior authority and commandant of the teaching –learning processes.

Democracy and Education

The term ‘democracy’, originally from the Greek *dēmokratia* (*dēmos* ‘the people’ + *-kratia* ‘power’ ‘rule’), indicates that in a democratic system, power rests with the members of the system. In a democratic process power remains with the participants of the process. It operates based on the principle that all members are entitled to a fair and equal treatment in the system and possess the right to take part in making decisions. Democracy means the belief that humanistic culture should prevail. In John Dewey’s words, “Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. . . . This faith may be enacted in statutes, but it is only on paper unless it is put in force in the attitudes which human beings display to one another in all the incidents and relations of daily life. (Dewey, *The Later Works*. 226)

John Dewey’s conceptualisation of the link between education and democracy is significant in that it offers a rationale for a democratic pedagogy in a democracy like India. He speaks about a symbiotic relation between democracy and education. Democracy is seen as a way of life and education is seen as a continuous expansive reconstruction of human experience.(Hansen 11) It is “a mode of conjoint, communicated experience” which can exist only if practice is reconstructed

so that all persons can, in principle, realize their potential as human beings. Conversely, Dewey argues that the very idea of democracy is implied in the core understanding of education as reconstruction, as the continuous growth of all persons. If that process is taking place, democracy itself emerges all the more substantively.

“Democratic life” constitutes another name for a life of inquiring, communicating, and learning’. “The goal of education is to enable individuals to continue their education. “Democracy as a mode of associated living makes possible this very process of interactive learning and understanding. Education is not a preparation for such a life; education constitutes such a life. According to Dewey, education, democratic life, and human flourishing are all one. (Dewey, *Democracy and Education* 99)

In his reflections on the goal of education, Bertrand Russell speaks about the values embedded in democracy. As Russell puts it, the aim of education is ‘to give a sense of the value of things other than domination’, to help create ‘wise citizens of a free community’ in which both liberty and ‘individual creativeness ‘will flourish.’(251) Thinking on the lines of Dewey and Russell, Noam Chomsky also endorses the democratic idea of education which leads to “... free development of human beings whose values are not accumulation and domination, but independence of mind and action, free association on terms of equality, and cooperation to achieve common goals.” (99)

Democracy in the ELT classroom

The English language classrooms also can be democratic in the sense that the teaching learning processes are underpinned by a value system of democracy and along with the achievement of language specific skills as the primary objective, instilling democratic attitudes and behaviour is also deemed as natural corollary. It is a situation where developing language skillsets becomes inextricably interwoven with the full flowering of the individual. The dignity of the individual, his capacity to think and feel, his freedom to take decisions, the involvement in making decisions about what and how things are done – all these aspects are accounted in the teaching –learning process to ensure the blossoming of human thought, imagination, creativity, and individuality. Language learning is the objective which is accomplished through the enhancement of these qualities, enabling the learner to own his learning. The learner, in principle, becomes self-empowered, self-directed and autonomous and becomes the agent of his own learning. In a democratic classroom, we meet learners who get opportunities to make decisions and therefore become skilled in the decision making process, eventually becoming citizens required for a democratic society.

In recent ELT approaches like Communicative Language Teaching the trend is to move away from a teacher dominated paradigm to student centred and interactive learning approaches. The role of the teacher in this changed perspective is

that of a facilitator and as a guide within the classroom procedures and activities. The learner has to take on the role of an interdependent, interactive negotiator in the process of learning. The learner is not a passive recipient but is expected to actively share the responsibility to achieve the objectives of the learning session. This is a perspective which strengthens personal responsibility for judgment and action, helping to create the attitudes that welcome and support a democratic worldview. However, when the teachers try to adopt this perspective in their classrooms tensions arising from the transformation from teacher-centred learning to learner centred mode are inevitable. A pedagogy based on TCI which is democratic in its outlook and implementation gathers relevance in such an academic context.

Over and above the linguistic aims of the ELT classroom, a democratic pedagogy equips the learner with skills necessary to function as a citizen of a democracy. Given the changes at the global level, toning down hierarchies in to level-playing flat organisational structures in fields like management, a democratic pedagogy for ELT will also help the learners to pick up skills like collaboration and teamwork, negotiation and dialogue which are needed for their career in a multicultural world.

The democratic approach in classroom has its rewards. It creates inclusive learning environments where students feel valued. It strengthens student- teacher relationships and builds an environment of trust. A democratic classroom offers the

possibility involving the learners for collaboratively constructing the curriculum(Brough 358). The classrooms become miniature democratic communities where learning is situated within relevant contexts. The learning needs of the students are elicited through discussion and are integrated into the curriculum. The more involved students are in planning, the more engaged they become in their learning. Sharing decision-making and responsibilities by the teachers form a central ingredient in establishing such a collaborative learning environment.

The role of the teacher in the democratic classroom is one of collaboration and negotiation in the spirit of equality and freedom. The authority of the teacher must not steer the classroom relationships into a situation of domination or permissiveness. “Just as authority cannot exist without freedom, and vice versa, authoritarianism cannot exist without denying freedom, nor license without denying authority” (Freire P.). The authority of the teacher is as the facilitator and guardian of the process of teaching and learning. In the student centred democratic paradigm, collaborative action is fundamental to classroom authority. Authoritarianism and permissiveness only negate its democratic essence (Brubaker 15).

TCI – A democratic Pedagogy for ELT

Theme Centred Interaction (TCI) can be described as a system and a methodology for leading groups. It espouses a democratic approach to group process and

interpersonal communication... As a system TCI has a world-view which is based on humanistic psychology, group dynamics and group therapy. It is also a methodology for promoting human development and for facilitating experiential learning in the spirit of equality and freedom. TCI as an approach to teaching and learning has a value system which promotes democratic attitude and behaviour. It upholds democratic values, fosters democratic behaviour in teachers and students, and offers an experience of democratic living in the classroom. TCI as a pedagogy is quite suited to the Indian situation which is a democracy gradually emerging from its fledgling status and is moving towards ensuring the informed involvement of all its citizens.

The TCI was developed in the 1960s by Ruth Cohn. She was born in 1912 in Berlin and had to immigrate in 1933 to the USA. She was part of the humanistic psychology wave and was associated with representatives of the movement like Fritz Perls (gestalt therapy) and Carl Rogers (client-centred psychotherapy). The leading idea of this movement was to strengthen and develop the positive resources of everybody and to promote human respect, joint responsibility, creativity and cooperation. This idea became the guideline for the TCI model. Besides group therapy, she worked in the pedagogical field too.

Humanism, Democracy and TCI

Democracy upholds a belief in the humanistic culture and values. TCI shares

this humanistic outlook, which is expressed in the three axioms. The value – base of TCI is derived largely from humanistic psychology which recognizes that every human being has the potential for life enhancement. This potential is not for the enhancement of his/her life alone, but also for enhancement of other people's and other beings' lives. This process of life – enhancement will happen if the environment is conducive. TCI also recognizes the uniqueness of each individual, which calls for accepting others as they are.

The axioms are established fundamental assumptions which are basic for Theme – Centred Interaction. The value – system of TCI is built on these axioms. In Ruth's conceptualisation, the axioms are holistic in nature and they “form the irreducible prerequisites of TCI as an applicable system and method”. They form both the basis and direction for the daily challenges involved in responsible actions.

The first axiom is the anthropological axiom: The human being is a psycho-biological unity and a part of the universe. For this reason he is autonomous and interdependent at the same time. An individual's sense of autonomy becomes more and more refined when his consciousness of everyone's interdependence expands. The concern in this axiom is “a personal and social identity and competence which is not exhausted within the realm of the personal and social, but transcends both spiritually and existentially”(Cohn 63).

Reverence is due to everything living, and to its growth. Respect for growth necessitates value judgments in decisions. The humane is valuable, the inhumane is threatening to values. Development, growth, and maturity are important goals for all human beings. Any threat to these goals must be stopped. Respect for life and growth, according to this ethical axiom, necessarily demands evaluations and decisions on our part. According to Ruth, if people are not using their ability to love and the capacity to make ethical decisions (which is part of their autonomous and interdependent self), there are no limits to the rule of might, the oppression by few of many, and the exploitation of humans and nature.

The third axiom, which is the pragmatic political axiom, concerns with the innate human freedom and capacity to decide and develop oneself. Free will occurs within conditional internal and outer boundaries; expansion of these boundaries is possible. Our exercise of free will is larger if we are healthy, intelligent, materially secure and spiritually mature, as opposed to our being sick, lacking in good sense or poor or if we are suffering under violence and immaturity (Kuebel 34).

TCI as a pedagogical approach helps the students perceive their inherent freedom and realises that a leeway for expanding this freedom exists. The classroom process gives the learners opportunity to test their boundaries and to experiment on new and different patterns of behaviour and relating. This strengthens their capacity to take

decisions and act. The underlying humanistic values support their efforts to expand freedom and to enhance their abilities as active learners. They take responsibility for their own actions. The classroom attitude and behaviour becomes imbued with the spirit of democracy when this pedagogy is put in to practice.

TCI and the Classroom Process

Two postulates are derived from the TCI axioms. They provide a basis for deciding on how to behave and act in the classroom situation. The first postulate “Be your own Chairperson” requires the learners to be aware of themselves, their internal realities and their environment. Each situation need to be seen as an opportunity for making decisions. The interaction in the classroom, the give and take in the process, has to be according to how they wish to be responsible for themselves and others. Being one’s own chairperson expresses the essence of being an active member of a democratic classroom. It implies the exercise of freedom and self-regulation, being an active learner taking responsibility of learning, setting one’s own learning goals, and doing reflective self-assessment for continued learning and the like.

The postulate ‘disturbances and strong involvements have precedence’ proceeds from the axiomatic stance that man is a ‘psycho-biological unity’ and that reverence is due one’s own and other’s growth. One must be aware of obstacles along the way, one’s own and those of others. If they are not dealt with, growth will be more difficult,

if not impossible. This postulate practically helps in respecting the individual and his/her needs and challenges. Nobody's need is side-lined or discounted, instead is acknowledged as important in the process of learning. In short, based on the axioms, TCI based learning process takes shape through the postulates.

The ELT Session in the TCI way

TCI identifies four fundamental factors in the experience and development of individuals in a learning situation. Effectiveness occurs when these factors are properly balanced in the teaching learning process. The factors are the personal (or "I") factor, the group (or "We") factor, the task (or "It") factor and the environment (or globe) factor.

The TCI symbol is an equilateral triangle within the sphere. I, We and It are at the three corners and the sphere touches all of them. "I" represents the individual whose attention is directed towards herself/himself, towards the others in the group and to the task. "We" represents the participants in the group who become a group through their attention to the task and to the interaction in the group. The "task" is the focus of attention of all. The globe is the environment which influences the group and is influenced through the group, i.e. the environment in its immediate and farther consequences.

TCI maintains that the above four factors are essentially equal in value. The group will be a learning group ("effective"), only as long as the dynamic balance among these four

factors is established again and again. However there is never a static equilibrium in group work; balance is possible only as a dynamic process.

In a classroom setting, the individual learners and the teacher (T's) come together to form 'WE' the group which has an identity of its own. IT is the task at hand i.e., what is identified as the topic or learning goal. The topic or the task comes alive in a TCI classroom in the form of 'themes' centred on which interaction happens. The theme in TCI class room is the personalized and localized topic, which attracts the learner and teacher alike into a joint process of enquiry, understanding and discovery.

The Teacher as a TCI Leader

The theme is shaped by the leader and by the learner together in the spirit of a democratically fair process. In an ELT situation, the teacher /leader takes into account the language learning needs of the students/participants and formulates the theme for a session. This theme presented, however, could be modified during the interactive process that happens in the session. The TCI model assumes that the learners not only want to learn, but that they are capable of independent, self-directed action. It allows for all participants to contribute content and provide process materials,... to lead and supervise tasks, to learn and to lead learning" (Legutke 28).

TCI is a value based system which offers the possibility of applying any method or tool for the learning process. Activities like games, role plays, brief presentations, short

inputs, brainstorming, etc. and structures like formations of groups ranging from pair work, and buzz group to total plenary group interaction can be adopted according to the requirements of the session. The inclusive framework of TCI permits the flexible incorporation of techniques and tools taken from various approaches to English Language Teaching. The meaning focused interactions of Communicative Language Teaching and the drilling of structural aspects of language as in Audio-lingual method can likewise be employed within the TCI framework. It is the leader, as the guardian of the process, who proposes the use of relevant methods and tools. Flexibility, openness, spontaneity and prudence are characteristics at the heart of the TCI method. This allows integrations and adaptations from other approaches to be easily absorbed (Gordon 112).

A teacher who leads a class in a TCI manner will be using his chairpersonship; that is to say, he will be aware of his needs as well as the needs of the group. According to TCI, leading includes leading oneself as well as leading the group. A TCI leader is a participant leader. He cannot be a taskmaster. Instead he will reduce himself to the position of the guardian of the group process. In a democratic process the teacher must be the first climber; she is really the guide in that class, even if she does not dictate her authority (Gordon et al.) No one person is the leader all the time; everyone has a turn at learning how to be a leader.

Each person's dignity is respected and an awareness of autonomy and

interdependence is fostered. The TCI leader employs cooperative principles to include weaker and disturbed students into the WE-ness and activities of the class and to reduce anxiety and distrust.

TCI offers a mode of pedagogy which upholds democratic values of freedom and equality. Each person is important, his feelings, ideas and aspirations. He/she deserves respect and care regardless of status, good or bad deeds, religious affiliations, racial descend, gender, wealth of talent or material goods. TCI leader remains democratic in his/her approach and strives to ensure fairness and equity in the classroom processes. The TCI teacher attempts to make spaces for freedom- the structuring of which allows democracy and partnership to develop. The teacher reveals and invites the participants to make use of their own space for freedom. He doesn't enter that space even if the student wants it. But the teacher takes care that no one else enters it either. This is seen as the way to develop a small model of democracy in the classroom avoiding custodianship and fostering partnership (Modesto 55).

In a TCI classroom the teacher is a person responsible for himself as a growing person. Nobody has to have an ideal or perfect image. There is no indulgence in brain feeding or abstinence from giving with joy. There are attempts to outgrow early harmful influences, there is self-reflexivity, admission of failures, achievements, feelings, and vulnerabilities. The participants work towards choosing what to say with selective authenticity.

Conclusion

The educational value of TCI in a democratically orchestrated process is unmistakable. A method based on equality and freedom, independence and interdependence, holistic understanding of the individual, TCI can surpass problems of gender inequity, marginalization of minorities, and competitive relating. In TCI approach to ELT, the centrality of the student and the dynamic process of learning are upheld. The value base of TCI expressed in its axioms and its practical implementation through the postulates and methodological elements helps TCI based ELT classroom to steer away from the dominance of the teacher or the regimentation of the syllabus. Instead, TCI beckons the language teacher and the learner alike to a humanistic ambience of participatory planning, cooperative learning and learner directed process which is democratic in theory and praxis.

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