A Critique on Dogme ELT

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ABSTRACT

This article is a qualitative research on the innovative technique brought into the domain of ELT by Scott Thornbury, Dogme in English language teaching. An attempt is made to analyze Dogme ELT in the light of post-method conditions.

Keywords: *ELT, Methods; Dogme ELT; Critique.*

Introduction

In search of a perfect method for English language teaching, a lot of research has been done. According to the two pioneers, Scott Thornbury and Luke Meddings, who came out with the book, 'Teaching Unplugged: Dogme for ELT', Dogme ELT is not a method; it is rather a 'Movement' and 'State of mind'.

The inception

The idea of Dogme ELT by Scott Thornbury dates back even before the article 'A Dogme for EFL' was published in IATEFL issues, March 2000. Growing up as a language teacher, and interested in 'transformative pedagogies', his idea was ignited by Adrian Underhill's article which advocates the notion of abandoning the coursebook while teaching. Agreeing with Underhill, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, who also had moved away from the use of textbooks, Scott came up with an article on how grammar is equated with the power of knowledge (Grammar, Power and Bottled water, 1998), which he claims to be the impetus for the Dogme article.

The critique

English language teaching has grown in different dimensions to enhance effective ways of teaching. Dogme ELT deals with the process of learning through interaction among students. This helps language emerge from learners' intellect. However, a learner with poor socio-cultural exposure finds it hard to interact. This discourages a learner from taking part in the interaction properly. Teacher's focus on each individual's learning process is very different and paying attention to individuals becomes a hard task for a teacher in a large classroom.

Briefly, Dogme ELT can be viewed as a way of teaching English without materials, dependent on the concerns and needs of learners. The downplaying of materials

plays a vital role in the adoption of Dogme in the English language classroom. Though there is nothing sacrosanct about Dogme ELT which could make one consider it a method, there have been discussions for over a decade, which makes us wonder what the scholars were building upon. Considering the fact that Scott Thornbury himself agrees with the arguments of Kumaravadivelu, the need for more socially responsible and transformative pedagogies, Dogme ELT is a fair attempt.

One of the main reasons why Dogme ELT has become so popular is that it claims to focus on learner's actual needs. Learners are considered as the primary resources of teaching. Extracting everything from learners in order to teach them language could be a scaffolding process. For example, a student in a classroom would feel bored if we ask him to take a textbook and turn to a 'random page number'. However, if we ask him about a favourite movie that he saw the previous day, he would be excited. Taking this as a chance, if the teacher builds on the conversation, we are sure that the teacher has taught something new.

Deviating from conventional language teaching, which assumes learners to be able to master the language i.e. accuracy, before they put it in practice i.e. fluency, Dogme ELT, which uses conversation both as process and product, claims accuracy is the result of fluency. Unlike isolated activities and exercises, conversation needs to be coherent. Learners are given a platform to use connected speech and build on the meaning, which is relevant to the topic. In order to achieve this relevance, the teacher helps build the conversation. The concept of scaffolding comes in handy for the interactional support that learners need.

The worst scenario in Dogme ELT is to allow grammar driven materials to rule the teaching and learning process. Worried about such materials in context, Thornbury states that the abundance of teaching materials ends up in treating language as something from outside rather than within. Relating this to the first among the three core tenets of Dogme ELT, with such materials, conversation is not possible. Thus, Dogme ELT captures language as a means for self-expression. Therefore, this rejects any pre-constructed syllabus and helps language learning to happen through social interaction and dialogue.

The additional benefit for this method is that it rejects all external inputs. This leads to transparency between the teacher and the learner. The teacher has to be very open in this case. He cannot turn down things that he does not know. This leads to a healthy conversation where learners and teacher sit down and work on the language learning process. There the teacher becomes the facilitator and manager of the resources than a strict director of the classroom. Teachers who adopt Dogme ELT should possess high creativity, intense practical training and experience in teaching with efficacy. Recent research has found that the interest of learners in different areas will vary according to their cultural development. Motivation is the basic tool for absorbing the interest of students, so lack

of motivation leads to slow down the learning process. Teacher should provide better motivation and get students to participate, and making them learn will be an easy task for a teacher. In today's world, making a student to come forward and speak is cumbersome. Participation is important in Dogme ELT. In most of the Indian schools, children do not have the confidence to come up and speak. This is due to the problem of abstaining from the situation to which they do not have greater access to the target language. The aim of the teacher's skill is first to communicate empathy for the learner's threatened inadequate state and to aid him linguistically. Slowly, the teacher strives to enable him to arrive at his own increasingly independent language adequacy. This process is furthered by the teacher and learners' ability to establish a warm, understanding, and accepting relationship. Consequently, the learner is not thought of as a student but as a client. The native instructors of the language are not considered teachers but are rather trained in counselling skills adapted to their roles as language counsellors. Part of learning a foreign language is developing new understanding about the particular cues to meaning that the new language offers, and they differ from those of our first language. The transferability of knowledge, skills and strategies depend closely on the rapport between the two.

Technology in the context of Dogme ELT gives a platform for a severe censure. In the present scenario where even a small child is techno-friendly, the classroom learning environment may not be equally the same. The amount of time teachers nowadays spend on PowerPoint presentations, collating documents, gathering videos, etc. though fruitful, raises questions of credibility, relevance and usefulness. Not all the learners may find the time for interaction in the classroom. Technical problems in the classroom may shut down the serious process of learning. In addition, considering the fact that it is sceptical about the value of Dogme in low resource contexts or that of large classes, Dominic McCabe addresses this issue in his online forum report of Dogme in the IATEFL issue, 2005.

Most Indian school teachers, who are women, have very stressful lives and have less time to prepare for lessons. Most of the classrooms have more than forty children and some exceeding a hundred. In this context, respecting and catering for the need of each individual is at risk and is difficult as well.

The major drawback is student/parent expectations. Many parents are concerned about the completion of the syllabus if they are given a chance to know about what is going on in the institutions. It is the same with the teachers too where the curriculum focuses on the results i.e., product than what the student actually learns. The worry about completion of syllabus accounts for this.

A clear understanding of the methodology and the movement has its roots in communicative aspects. Its intention of

humanising the classroom with the interactional dialogues would also account for the argument stated above. As Thornbury accepts that there could be similarities to Task based language learning except for the learning philosophy and the methodology. Agreeing with Christensen that Dogme ELT would face many cultural challenges in countries outside Europe, the possibility of adopting Dogme ELT in the Indian context is also at risk.

The origin of Dogme is in Europe where the classroom culture of teacher training is very different from the other parts of the world. The classroom strength is not as much as in any Indian classroom. Therefore, considering this fact, the negligence of materials as a whole, and conversation driven language learning, etc. may seem acceptable but in non-European contexts, such adaptation may not come in handy for language learning because of several reasons like huge classrooms, socio-cultural factors, affective factors, etc.

Conclusion

A better understanding of the learners' necessity and the Dogme pedagogy can vouch for Dogme ELT as a post-method according to the claim of Kumaravadivelu, which empowers the theorisers to empathise with practitioners' classroom, oriented practice than that of the knowledge oriented pedagogies. Admitting the truth that there were more successful methods and approaches before this, like audio-lingualism, communicative approach, natural method etc., which focus on various

aspects of language learning, Dogme ELT too shares the responsibility of creating suitable conditions where learners learn the language meaningfully. Scholars like Pennycook, Nunan and Richards mention that no method is utilised in its purest form, because these are not borne out of actual classroom experience but are artificially transplanted into classroom situations and are far removed from classroom reality. Continuous research attempts show that language learning does not hold on to a particular principle or pedagogy. Dogme ELT claims that there is no particular framework for this to be considered as a method. It is eclectic in its view and the teachers' autonomy can definitely influence Dogme ELT in the light of post-method conditions.

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