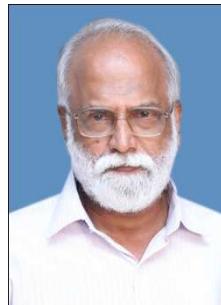




**THE INWARD-OUTWARD CONUNDRUM IN SECOND LANGUAGE  
LEARNING: WHERE PSYCHOLINGUISTICS MEETS THE  
SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY IN THE INDIAN ESL CLASSROOM**



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**ABSTRACT**

Does a fairly good knowledge of applied linguistics improve the professional in a second language teacher? If ready-made methods really worked, why do we still research, theorize and problematize second language learning? These are the two main questions this paper tries to answer in some detail. After surveying the methods of the past, the Vygotskian sociocultural theory has been analysed in some length so as to find whether it might work better in the Indian context. It has been argued in this context, that a teacher who is rather well-informed in the Vygotskian pedagogic theories may function more effectively in the Indian English classrooms.

## RESEARCH PAPER

### **Introduction**

Does history have any relevance to second language teaching?—painfully doubts Diana Musumeci. “Cutting edge research does not require it. Modern theories need not consider it”(2009: 42). She quotes H.H.Stern:”Language teaching theory has a short memory”(Stern, H.H.,(1983;76). One must be careful about the growing ahistoricity in the profession. Still Diana asserts that none of the topics we discuss these days in the context of second language teaching is new; each has been considered some time or other in the past. The question of what is new in theory or latest in research can be validated only if such queries are deeply grounded in history—knowledge of the past. This preamble is likely to justify my quick glance into the past, as outlined below.

### **A method or the method?**

It seems, second language teachers are ‘obsessed with method’. Ask the teachers of a first language or a content subject such as math, what method they follow. They may be baffled, for so long, they have never been bothered about a method or the method. At the most, one may retort ‘inductive’ or ‘deductive’ method, recalling from the contents of the pre-service training or induction programme. There ends the matter. Method is not an issue for them, but, ask a teacher of English as a second language (ESL). These days, you must be prepared to receive a wide range of responses such as constructivist method, cognitive method, communicative language teaching method and any of its recent offshoots. That means we are tied to a method—one or other. During the last five decades, I myself passed through at least half a dozen method-eras. Not just passing through; I religiously and rigorously followed each of them as and when they dawned on me. True! Now, looking back to the past from this vantage point, I find myself an ardent devotee of method after method, if not an addict to method!

In fact, in the mid-1980s, H.H.Stern(1985.p.251) lamented our “century-old obsession”, our “prolonged preoccupation [with methods]that has been increasingly unproductive and misguided”, as we vainly searched for the ultimate method that would serve as the final answer (Brown, H.D. 2002:10).

### **Positioning the problem**

Drawing clues from the statement of H.H.Stern (quoted above), this paper first tries to explicate why our prolonged preoccupation with methods has been unproductive and why our

search for ‘the ultimate method’ has been in vain. Secondly, I will try to go beyond methods into the realm of approaches (Anthony, 1963).

An approach, according to Anthony, was a set of assumptions, dealing with the nature of language, learning and teaching” (Brown, D.H. 2002: 9).

Then, I propose to locate methods as a combination of the application of theories drawn mainly from psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, in a larger frame of defining a second language and an approach to its learning-teaching. Of course, other branches such as neuro-anthropological-clinical-corpus-computational linguistics do play crucial roles in shaping the framework of applied linguistics, but this paper confines to the two main branches namely, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics in the context of second language learning-teaching.

A language primarily operates in two interrelated realms—the human mind and the human society. The operative procedures are not concretely traceable and tangible in the former realm as they are in the latter. A fairly good understanding of the procedures and their product-effects at both realms seem to be essential for being a successful second language teacher. What psychological, cognitive, emotive barriers does the learner encounter when confronted with a strange language in a formal set up like a classroom? What are the meaning-making processes at work behind the curtain? How does the first language affect these processes? These and similar issues which are the properties of psycholinguistics, if judiciously incorporated into the framework of a teaching method, the follower of that method ‘learns the learner’ first, before she proceeds to teach.

Secondly, how does a language operate in a speech community? How does a society function with the help of a language? I think, answers to these two questions may determine the essence of sociolinguistics. Again, as in the former, a second language teacher, who is well-informed in sociolinguistics through its theoretical and practical expositions through a method she follows, is most likely to be a successful teacher.

### **Revisiting history**

Now, let us quickly glance through the fundamentals of the methods we have been following over a century or so and find out how serious each method has been in amalgamating the psycho-social existence and functioning of each method. Perhaps this inquiry may lead to the reasons of Stern’s desperate statements quoted above—why we got obsessed with methods, why our inquiry had been increasingly unproductive and why the ‘the method’ still remains a mirage to the average teacher of ESL.

Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) which had its origins in antiquity and of which the thick foliage spreads cool shade above the roofs of quite a few second language classrooms

even today, neither bothered about the inner conflicts of the learner nor did it observe later how the school leaver functioned in a non-native speech community, whose language he tried to mug up years ago. GTM focused on the product—the match between the translated version of the literary text and its original and the grammatical accuracy of the target language. Learner was never a matter of concern.

Francois Gouin (1831-1896), a French tutor of Latin who studied German in his own unique way by observing a two year old trying to master a new language developed a method which was quite ahead of his time—Series method, the first break away from GTM. A series of sentences, interconnected, in a progression was used as the language chunk to be assimilated by the new learner. Subconscious assimilation of the grammar rules was expected to take place. Though Gouin realized the merit and importance of the spoken idiom over the written language, he failed to provide an acceptable theoretical framework; he was not much aware of the larger space of the speech community.

Berlitz's Direct Method (DM) followed which the Indian classrooms widely adopted since the 1960s. The teacher communicated with the student through miming and gesturing. Grammar was not the essential goal because students were later able to discover grammatical rules on their own. In the formal set up, though communication took place within the smaller circles of classrooms, no Indian classrooms claimed to send successful learner to the larger speech community. Psychological and cognitive involvement of the learner was not seriously discussed by the proponents of DM.

Originated in Britain in the 1950s and later accepted by the colonies, Oral Situational Approach introduced and practised new language points situationally.

The theory of language underlying Situational Language Teaching can be characterized as a type of British structuralism. Speech was regarded as the basis of language, and *structure was viewed as being at the heart of speaking ability*(Richards and Rogers: 1986:35. Emphasis added).

The artificiality is outwardly visible in the part of the quote emphasized. It was oral language, still not communication, since structure is the heart of the matter. Language skills are aimed at; but, they are approached through structure.

World War II forced the American universities to equip the US army with a different kind of language learning system which later got developed into Audiolingual method. What was found successful with the army fighting in alien lands was tried out in the second language classrooms, after the war, i.e., in the 1950s. Perhaps, for the first time, real life communication became the full agenda of a second language methodology, pushing formal

grammar instruction to the back seat. Socio-cultural factors were considered, but the psychological and cognitive aspects went neglected—as usual, when something is done ‘on war footage’!

The decline of Audilingualism as a methodology was marked by the widespread acceptance of Noam Chomsky’s theories of the nature of language and the nature of language acquisition in the 1960s. For the first time in the history of language learning, the predominant role of human mind was recognized. Simultaneously, the very nature of language as a set of habits, as proposed by the Behaviourist school, also was totally rejected by Chomsky. These two developments—redefining the nature of language and placing the human mind as the leading force in the processes of language learning—together culminated in the formation of Mentalism in language instruction. Notional-Functional syllabuses of the 1970s and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology gained popularity all over the world.

CLT became successful in exposure-rich classrooms and in the hands of well-informed teachers who were able to converse fluently in the target language. Getting rid of the teaching of formal grammar enthused a section of teachers who wanted a change; but traditionalists pointed out the superficiality of the projected fluency, sans grammatical accuracy. Though the roles of human psyche and socio-cultural factors got enough space in theorizing CLT, inadequate exposure for learners and teachers’ incompetence in communicating in the target language forced the proponents to rethink on the hard line CLT. The result was bringing back grammar instruction to the class, though in various disguises such as ‘focus on form’ (Long, M; and P. Robinson. 1998).

The offshoots of CLT namely, Community Language Learning, Total Physical Response, Suggestopedia etc. may be celebrated for their novelty; but none of them fits into the average Indian classrooms, for varying reasons. In the Indian ESL context, they are to remain as show pieces or topics for arm chair research.

### **Why Sociocultural Theory?**

As a theory of language learning, especially a new language, which considers the pscho-cognitive dimensions of prenatal and postnatal development and the role of sociocultural factors which determine the degree of the mastery of that language, Lev Vygotsky’s( 1896-1934) sociocultural theory answers many of the questions raised by teachers who struggle to teach a foreign language in an exposure-poor environment, as is the case of English in India. The rationale for the statement made above follows in some detail.

Lev Vygotsky's, cultural-historical theory of cognitive development is focused on the role of culture in the development of higher mental functions, such as speech and reasoning in children. His theory is sometimes referred to as having a sociocultural perspective, which means the theory emphasizes the importance of society and culture for promoting cognitive development.

At the heart of Vygotsky's theory lies the understanding of human cognition and learning as social and cultural rather than individual phenomena .... Unlike the individualistic theory of learning, the Vygotskian approach emphasizes the importance of sociocultural forces in shaping the situation of a child's development and learning and points to the crucial role played by parents, teachers, peers, and the community in defining the types of interaction occurring between children and their environments"(Kozulin et al.2003:1-2).

Teachers are quite familiar with the practice of students being defined in terms of their age and IQ; but Vygotsky treats them as 'culturally and socially situated' individuals. What is pivotal to the sociocultural theory is the notion of internalization or interiorization. According to Vygotsky, language learning is a social process rather than an individualistic one, as postulated by Chomsky with 'an ideal speaker and listener' placed in a speech context. Language is neither a personal property, nor is it of an innately specified character. On the contrary, all higher order mental functions, language included, occur twice—first between two minds, and then reverted inward to the individual's mind.

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice; first, on the social level, and later on the individual level; first, between people(interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formulation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals (Vygotsky, 1978; 57).

The process of moving from the inter-to the intra-mental domain takes place through internalization or interiorization. This faculty, exclusive to humans, enables the formation of higher mental functions. It is not a transfer of some faculty from one realm to the other, but a dynamic process 'active nurturing transformation of externals into personally meaningful experience"(Frawley, 1997: 95). This self-and other-transforming feature of interiorization enables one to function as an individual person and a social person, simultaneously, and the tool with which this transformation makes happen is language.

Later, after interiorization, the language is once again directed toward the speech community. It is this inward-outward dynamic flow of language which demands 'an other' , a like-minded

person for interaction—a peer, adult, teacher and so on, hence Vygotsky's assertion on the need of the child's interaction with adults and peers.

Two more major postulations of Vygotsky's strengthen the candidature of sociocultural theory as the most suitable one for a second language instructional programme. First, the construct of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and then that of scaffolding.

The zone of proximal development is perhaps one of the most widely discussed and used notions in any field related to education (for a detailed list of disciplines and areas of studies, see Seth Chaiklin, 2003, pp.40). ZPD has been defined as:

The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978:86).

Nowhere in the theorization of education has the role of the teacher (as an adult) been so clearly defined as in the context of ZPD; nor has the role of collaboration with peers been highlighted as an effective means of reaching higher stages of intellectual development, including language development. "What the child is able to do in collaboration today, he will be able to do independently tomorrow" (Vygotsky, 1987: 211).

Once the gap between the child's present stage of independent working and the expected stage where the child may reach through adult guidance, then the question arises how the child can be assisted to reach the higher realms of learning. It is here, the notion of scaffolding becomes relevant. The pedagogic notion of scaffolding is closely related to the ZPD and was developed by other theorists applying Vygotsky's ZPD to educational contexts. Scaffolding is an abstract blueprint for helping the child through which a teacher or more competent peer gives aid to the student in her/his ZPD as necessary. The help or support varies from learner to learner. Scaffolding is not an on-going or permanent support. It will be withdrawn as it becomes unnecessary, much as a scaffold is removed from a structure under construction. "Scaffolding refers to the way the adult guides the child's learning via focused questions and positive interactions." (Balaban, 1995: 52).

### **Vygotsky in the Indian ESL context**

Many factors—historic, linguistic, sociological among the most important ones—need to be considered while trying to locate Vygotsky in the Indian English classrooms. On the one side, we painfully recall the imperialism the language brought with it hardly 250 years ago and the wounds it inflicted on the Indian psyche. (The British still refuse, after one hundred years, to apologize for the massacre of the hundreds of innocents in JalianwalaBagh.) On the other

side, lie the myriads of outlets for individual and social growth ‘the language of opportunities’ throw open ‘as a window on the world’. Once a language of oppression has now become a language of resistance. Learner motivation is higher when compared to the learning of other Indian or foreign languages.(The third language formula is a still born child. The North refuses to learn any South Indian language; Tamil Nadu still says “no” to Hindi.) English continues to be the language of power, perhaps stronger than in the days of colonization.

It is through this thick fog of this myriad of complexities, we perceive a teacher located in an ill-equipped village classroom, who herself is not so competent in conversing in English, being surrounded by a group of village children, rather vaguely motivated. The Vygotskian formulations, if perceived through a proper pedagogic framework, can definitely save both the village teacher and the learners of English.

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