Redefining the Role of Language in a Classroom Discourse

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Abstract

A paradigm shift in the field of education from traditional ways of teaching to modern methods has almost altered the classroom discourse. Students are now encouraged to be more active and interactive in class. Consequent changes have been witnessed in the role of language from being a tool of instructions to being a medium of expression and a medium of communicating thoughts in the construction of knowledge. Language is central to most of the events and activities that happen in the classroom. Specific purposes which language serves in a classroom relates to explanation of concepts, posing of questions, discussing of ideas on teachers part and understanding and interpreting different layers of meaning, constructing meaning based on different sources of information, composing meaning through logical structuring and networking of concepts into appropriate utterances on the part of students. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to think of any significant school activities that do not involve language in some way. Now students have multiple opportunities to apply their knowledge of languages in a variety of curricular contexts, not just within the traditional language classroom. This change in the role of language can be studied more specifically in light of the concept of 'language across the curriculum(LAC). The present paper examines various principles of the LAC with reference to our education system. It further points out the importance of the approach in classroom discourse, difficulties in its practice and also suggest some measures for its successful observance.

Keywords: Language, Curriculum, Classroom Discourse.

Introduction

A paradigm shift in the field of education from traditional ways of teaching to modern methods has almost altered the classroom discourse. Students are now encouraged to be more active and interactive in class. Consequent changes have been witnessed in the role of language from being a tool of instructions to being a medium of expression and a medium of communicating thoughts in the construction of knowledge. Language is central to most of the events and activities that happen in the classroom. Specific purposes which language serves in a classroom

104

relates to explanation of concepts, posing of questions, discussing of ideas on teachers part and understanding and interpreting different layers of meaning, constructing meaning based on different sources of information, composing meaning through logical structuring and networking of concepts into appropriate utterances on the part of students. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to think of any significant school activities that do not involve language in some way. Now students have multiple opportunities to apply their knowledge of languages in a variety of curricular contexts, not just within the traditional language classroom. This shift in the role of language can be studied more specifically in light of the concept of Language across the curriculum.

"Language across the curriculum"(LAC) has nowadays become a familiar phrase in the academic and pedagogic discourse. It relates to linking different forms and dimensions of language within the school. The idea is captured in the phrase "using language to learn, learning to use language. "The approach integrates language learning with content learning. It acknowledges that language education not only takes place in specific language subjects such as in first language education and in second language education but extends its scope in non-linguistic subjects too. In other words, language plays a crucial role in each and every subject and in all types of learning activities across the whole curriculum.

LAC sees language on a broader spectrum, it no longer considers the scope of language use narrowly as the domain of the first language and confined to the conventional four modes of language viz. listening, speaking, reading writing rather the approach emphasizes that language is more than mere verbal communication skills including non-verbal ways of expressions as well. LAC approach involves the following eight types of activities.

- ➢ **Listening:** comprehending oral input/intake
- ➢ **Speaking**: constructing meaningful utterances
- ➢ **Reading:** understanding written texts
- ➢ **Writing**: producing written texts/discourse
- ➢ **Viewing:** attending to visual signs/information
- ➢ **Shaping:** using visual means of expression
- ➢ **Watching**: attending to the movements
- ➢ **Moving:** using the whole body/person

Importance of the approach in Classroom Discourse

The approach lays emphasis on improving language proficiency in all subjects- as each subject area has both similar language to other areas and its own specific language usage and style- in order to enhance students' learning outcomes. The classroom is an authentic social environment that provides plenty of opportunities for the genuine use of language. The language used by the teacher in the classroom provides exposure to real language use. No matter what the subject area, students assimilate new concepts largely through language, that is when they listen to and talk, read and write about what they are learning and relate this to what they already know.

Extensive research in conventional patterns of classroom discourse generally found relatively consistent patterns in-class teaching. Classroom interaction was dominated by the teacher exercising excessive control over the activities of the students, resulting in restricted use of pupil talk much less than the teacher, for shorter durations and in most cases only in response to teacher prompts. Whole class discourse is typically structured in Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) cycles: teachers *initiate* topics, primarily by asking predictable, closed questions that test pupils' recall of previously transmitted information; pupils *respond* with brief answers; and teachers *evaluate* pupil responses, praising correct answers. This indicates that there are several unstated but powerful rules which seem to control the classroom discourse. Governed by such rules-language policies in classrooms imply students to learn by listening and reading, rather than by speaking or writing, to be quiet unless given the permission to speak, to ask very few questions about the subject, to write down only the words and ideas given to them by the teacher or the textbook. But now in the changed scenario with the shifting of the focus towards interactive teaching-learning process, the role of language in class discourse has gained tremendous momentum. Students from being passive listeners are guided and directed to become active participants in classroom interactions.

With the acceptance of the importance of social interaction in cognitive development, the scene of classroom discourse has altogether changed. Language is extremely important for qualifying learners so that they can function well in not only school but also in academic settings; developing basic thinking and communication skill vital for their personality development and their performance in future life. Vygotsky asserts the primacy of social interaction in human development: "*Every function in the child's cultural development appears*

twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (inner psychological) and then inside the child (intra psychological)... All the higher mental functions originate as actual relations between people. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57)

Thus the approach encourages the use of curricula that promote the right interpersonal skills, cultural sensitivity, and communication and language abilities. It at the same time focuses that language development is the responsibility of all teachers across the school whether teaching languages or any nonlinguistic subject.

Difficulties in Practice

Though the concept of 'Language across Curriculum' has many advantages and is highly appreciated by the academicians it has still to travel long to find its place in the actual education system. Our education system is still not structured on lines that can accommodate the LAC principles. It is hardly practiced in the classroom owing to the pressure it exerts on the faculty and students and the competencies required for its observance.

LAC makes unfamiliar demands on faculty. Our inability to break out of the rigid boundaries of the various subjects to which our teachers are usually accustomed puts a lot of pressure. The long-standing separation of the study and use of languages from the rest of the curriculum makes it difficult for the faculty to adopt the approach. Non-language faculty may fear that the educational purposes of their courses will suffer from the addition of a LAC component. Language faculty may fear that the inculcation of high-level language skills will suffer when LAC puts languages into the service of specialized study outside of the literary, cultural, and linguistic domains. LAC demonstrates how subject boundaries can be made to dissolve but accepting and implementing such strategies exerts pressure of completing the syllabus on time.

Students likewise may have difficulty fitting LAC into their conception of how to structure their education. Even the native speakers lack confidence in their ability to apply intermediate-level language skills to good academic purposes, they see the little potential payoff for taking the LAC plunge. Besides the approach requires the students to be competent in language skills enumerated as under -

Language competencies required for the implementation of the approach are generally classified as under-

a. Understanding/interpreting different layers of meaning i.e. constructing

meaning based on different sources of information

 b. Composing meaning through logical structuring and networking of concepts

into appropriate utterances and texts

c. Interacting in the negotiation and joint construction of subject-specific meaning

d. Production of own texts in a variety of ways by means of reflecting and evaluating own learning process

These skills at times are very difficult for the average students to acquire and thus serve as a problem for the practice of the approach in the education system.

Suggestions to Implement the LAC approach

Here are some suggestions that may assist in the successful observance of the approach. We need to find ways of helping pupils without putting words in their mouths. The teacher should not expect to elicit from them verbatim repetitions of the lesson taught rather he should ensure that pupils engage in a struggle to formulate for themselves their present understanding. Encourage students to use content vocabulary to express their understanding.

Discussion is an essential part of the process of making the students express their understanding of the concept. Many school activities should be carried out by small groups which can use their talk to move towards understanding by means which are not present in the normal teacher-directed classroom. Interacts with students in ways that respect students' preferences for speaking that may be different from the teacher's, such as wait-time, eye contact, turn-taking, or spotlighting. Provide a frequent opportunity for students to interact with each other and the teacher during instructional activities.

Written work demands the teacher's attention and interest more than usual. Prior and exclusive attention to spelling, punctuation, and correctness will assist the students to express easily their feelings and the message itself. The teacher should assist written and oral language development through modeling, eliciting, probing, restating, clarifying, questioning, praising, etc., in purposeful conversation and writing. One of the major functions of language is its use for learning: for trying to put new ideas into words, for testing out one's thinking on other

people, for fitting together new ideas with old ones, and so on, which all need to be done to bring about new understanding. These functions suggest active uses of language by the pupil as opposed to passive reception. Students should be given practice in listening by making some students talk about familiar topics such as home and community and others to responds to students' talk and questions making changes during the conversation. Developing language skills for academic purposes with respect to all subjects both specifically and in general. Reading Comprehension should be promoted as a basis for all other linguistic and cultural skills.

Conclusion

A language policy that severely restricts pupils' language use in the classroom impedes both language development and learning for a great many students. Based on this belief a school language policy should be governed by the notion of broadening teachers' knowledge and skill in language use. By focusing on the teaching and learning of language within a subject, the teacher can improve the students' performance not only in their respective subject but also his performance in general. By giving the students exercises based on four basic competencies of language i.e. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing a teacher can assist the students to learn the subject. Experienced teachers know that it is essential to teach their students how to 'answer' the types of questions they are likely to find in their exams. As it is explicit that one of the major functions of language... is its use for learning: for trying to put new ideas into words, for fitting together new ideas with old ones or creating new frames to incorporate some ideas so as to make understanding possible. These functions suggest active uses of language by the pupil as opposed to passive reception. A 'language policy' is more accurately described, therefore, as a 'language and learning policy' Thus by understanding and working with the LAC concept, teachers across disciplines will thus be improving students learning within their own subject *while also* supporting the efforts of the whole school to improve language proficiency

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