Integrating New Media Platforms in Language Teaching-Learning Process

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Introduction

The exponential growth in information and communication technology has ushered in a new age of virtuality where the demarcation of real time and space has ceased to exist. Virtual reality is now the new reality, influencing every aspect of our life. Human life is now reconfigured around this wired (networked) society and language classrooms are not outside this space. Through this paper, I would like to propose a complementary role of new-media platforms in language teaching and learning process. This proposal is not in conflict with the basic tenets of communicative language teaching method. In addition, it also tries to emphasize the significance of integrating the learning experiences of virtual space with real time teaching and learning processes. In this paper the term new media has been used to refer to developments and emergence of digital media technology and available media communication platforms post web 2.0.

Virtual Classrooms

The physical classrooms are on the verge of being replaced by more democratic and dynamic virtual spaces of learning. This process has already been initiated and is being appropriated by pervasive digital technology. This idea may be regarded as an arrogant statement and wistful thinking by a digital technology enthusiast; however, it cannot be completely discounted. The pervasive effect of the web 2.0 (internet and subsequent developments of digital media platforms collectively referred to as new media) can be summarized in the following prediction made by Crystal (2004, p. 241) a decade ago as:

> "...the sheer scale of the present Internet, let alone its future telecosmic incarnations, has convinced me that we are on the brink of the biggest language revolution ever. Whereas in the past we have had speech, then writing, and throughout the 20th century debated the relationship between the two, now we are faced with a new medium and one which could be bigger than either of its predecessors."

This prediction by Crystal a decade ago has become a reality now. The emergence of new media tools has proved to be more of a sweeping social phenomenon than a technological one. The process which started as a technological revolution has turned into a sociological development, enveloping every aspect of our life both in the public and private sphere. The structural changes in the new social order in the backdrop of the exponential growth in communication technology are very comprehensibly documented by Manuel Castells in his three monumental volumes known as The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture. He defines a network society as

> "…a society whose social structure is made of networks, powered by microelectronics - based information and communication technology. By social structure, I understand the organizational arrangements of humans

in relations of production, consumption, reproduction, experience, and power expressed in meaningful communication coded by culture (Castells, 1997, p. 3).

Therefore, we are now essentially living in a society which is organized around information, and which may also be referred to as an information society.

Whether we call it an information society or a network society, it can be inferred that we are essentially referring to interconnected societies which organize themselves around information rich networks and language classrooms are located well within it. In this context, I will attempt to underline the complementary role of new media technologies and available platforms, which can be used and capitalized upon in the language teaching-learning process.

Developments in Language Teaching Methods

If we look at the development of the methods in language teaching over almost hundred years, they have changed considerably. These include Grammar Translation method, Direct Method, Audio-Lingual Method, Suggestopedia, The Silent Way, Total Physical Response, with The Natural Approach to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) being the recent practice in the field. All these methods have been practiced and evaluated in terms of their merits and promised outcomes. However, it is still difficult to claim any of these methodologies as to be "the methodology" in language teaching. In fact the limitations and helplessness with these methods have led to the recent development in the field of language teaching-the Postmethod Pedagogy. Postmethod pedagogy claims to go beyond the literal understanding of the concept of method and promises greater autonomy to the teacher and learner. Kumaravadivelu observes that:

...postmethod pedagogy must take into account the pedagogic parameters of particularity, practicality, and possibility. The first relates to the advancement of a context-sensitive pedagogy based on a true understanding of local linguistic, sociocultural, and political particularities. The second seeks to enable and encourage teachers to theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize. And the third emphasizes the importance of larger social, political, educational, and institutional forces that shape identity formation and social transformation" (Kumaravadivelu , 2006, p. 184).

The centrality of the learner in the pedagogy remains common in the two proposals namely, CLT and Postmethod. The term "communicative competence", drawn from Hymes (1972) is in contrast with Chomsky's idea of linguistic competence. This paper draws from these two distinct theoretical developments in the field. Both Chomsky (1965) and Hymes (1972) use the notion of competence however, their theoretical positions are distinct. Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence refers to the tacit knowledge of formal linguistic characteristics (subsumes phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic subsystems), whereas Hymes' position extends beyond and includes in it the sociolinguistic competence. In other words, the actual knowledge and ability of the language user govern successful communication. Hymes' concept of competence is the point of reference in this paper for discussion and locating the role of new media technology in the language teaching pedagogy and methodology. For theoretical grounding, the paper argues in the framework of the CLT, which enjoys popularity among language teachers in general and as practicing methodology in the classrooms in particular.

Role of New Media Technology in Language Teaching and Learning

Over the past two decades, the language teaching paradigm has witnessed a huge shift from a controlled and guided classroom setting to a more democratic, flexible and open learning environment with a learner-centric pedagogy and methodology. A comprehensive study carried out by Jackson et al. (2006), brings out some interesting findings. According to him, the students who used the internet more, got higher scores and grades. The finding may be debated over, but the point it makes, remains significant. In this continuation, another study by Chandrasegaran & Kong (2006) demonstrates that discussion forums on the internet substantially enhance the learner's argumentative skills. The data for this study came from 192 online forum postings on 8 different topics from 15-year old students in a secondary school in Singapore. The study concludes: "Students who appear to their teachers to lack argumentation skills may have the problem of bridging the divide between their capabilities in social practices and the demands made on similar capabilities in school writing" (Chandrasegaran & Kong, 2006, p. 379). The implication that may be drawn from the results of this study is that "….students' knowledge of social practices in everyday argument can be harnessed in writing lessons to initiate them into the less familiar discourse practices of the expository essay…" (Chandrasegaran & Kong, 2006, p. 389). Although this study was focused on stance-taking and stance-support among secondary school students, it clearly demonstrates the effect of new media platforms in enhancing argumentative and linguistically challenging structures being acquired skillfully in a natural habitat for second language use. Another study by Ahmad (2012) carried out on English language teaching and integration of media technology, proposes an interesting finding, in which he statistically explores EFL learners' response towards new media technology in general and its impact in improving accentual patterns of individual English words in particular. Ahmad also explores the impact of internet and the teacher's role in improving the writing skills of learners. A number of similar such studies suggest that the extension of physical classroom teaching-learning to a flexible, natural and virtual space for learning the second language has immense potential to produce effective results.

Discussion

Developments in digital technology and the emergence of new media platforms have facilitated access to worldwide network and have created a truly emancipated network society. The members of the society are connected to this network of information through internet and mobile technology. The proposal to extend the physical classroom learning to the virtual space created by digital technology is not a departure from the fundamental tenets of the CLT method. In fact, it complements the process of creating socio-cultural contexts of language use for a variety of purposes. Digitization has transformed the process of socialization. According to a sizeable volume of research on the usage of language forms and patterns in this digitized new media sphere, this phenomenon has been termed as Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). The studies in CMC are essentially centred around politeness, civility, flaming, trolling and other behavioural aspects of communication, and have established the fact that intervention of digital technology has a deep impact on the way we learn, socialize, behave, and respond. In this context, the impact of internet and digital technology on language and its use cannot be undermined.

This virtual space also creates substantial opportunity for experimentation and creativity in the second language beyond controlled and guided curriculum. The availability of new online media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter,

LinkedIn, Blogger, YouTube, Instagram, and Pininterest, etc., can be used and capitalized upon to create a natural habitat for language use extending beyond the confines of a physical classroom. These readily available internet tools, as the studies demonstrate, may act as an important means in the way learners receive and spread information, express their feelings and emotions, and share ideas and experiences. Now, this is the takeaway point in the field of language teaching. CLT essentially assumes learners' engagement with language for a variety of purposes in all phases of learning. The essence of this assumption can be captured in this virtual space which guarantees a more democratic, flexible, and natural setting for language use. The new media platforms can provide the learner with a real socio-cultural environment, where they actually negotiate meaning in a real-life context. The teacher can create an intra group media platform and facilitate language use in a variety of ways such as, group chats, blog postings, group discussion forums, posting opinion and comment trails on an issue, video sharing and registering responses on the discussion forums, etc.

Conclusion

The integration of new media technology in language teaching classrooms will create a natural habitat for using language for a variety of purposes. This integration is a complementary extension of the language teaching classroom with a virtual learning space that provides new avenues for creating a learning environment beyond the physical confines. This can facilitate language use in "ideational, functional and textual functions and developing competence in each" (Berns, 1990 as quoted in Savignon, 2002, p. 6). In this environment, the teachers and learners are equally empowered to take charge of constructing knowledge in the target language.

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