Using Language in the Community for Enhancing Communication Skills

Shefali Ray

ELT Consultant

Language is something that distinguishes humans from animals and all humans are biologically programmed to gain knowledge with language as the catalyst. Nativists such as Noam Chomsky proposed that all humans have a language acquisition device which contains knowledge of the grammatical rules common to all languages (Shaffer, Wood, & Willoughby, 2002, pp.391-394). Language acquisition is therefore a subconscious process and the person is not consciously aware of the grammatical rules of the language he or she is acquiring. The focus is on understanding the language one encounters, or enabling one's audience to understand what one means. An individual receives 'comprehensible input' from the environment, which is easy to interpret due to the accompanying contextual and non-linguistic cues and also because it is in a 'low stress' situation. The language that we acquire, be it in the form of new vocabulary or new expressions, is therefore always a little beyond the language that we already know.

According to Piaget, a child's language learning capabilities and cognition depend on his/her level of maturation, but this alone does not lead to learning. Interaction with the environment, being in the company of older people who are more fluent in the language, and being driven by an innate desire to communicate, share and be accepted in the adult world, all contribute to a child's language development. The social angle of learning, more specifically collaborative learning, that Vygotsky called the zone of proximal development, wherein the learner learns new skills or concepts in the company of better informed, better trained or better equipped persons, is very true of language learning. The Interactionist also argued that 'children are born with a powerful brain that matures slowly and predisposes them to acquire new understandings that they are motivated to share with others'(Bates, 1993; Tomasello, 1995, as cited in Shaffer, et al., 2002, p.362).

From the above context, it can be noted that the adults who surround the child may not use perfect grammar in their speech. There may be errors, repetitions and omissions in their language; they might even use pidgin language deliberately, for the very young. Their language may have a reduced syntax, no seemingly fixed word order and individual variations in expressions, but these are accompanied by many non-verbal cues such as the situation, objects, people, gestures or emotions. The child thus retains whatever is emotionally dynamic or memorable, and tries to work out the syntax on his/her own through a varied and repeated exposure to a particular 'piece/form of the language'.

If children are able to acquire a fairly perfect/workable syntax of a language through exposure to pidgin, baby talk, and idiosyncratic use of language by the surrounding adults, then there must be something more than mere exposure to language that comes into play. It is the context, the situation, the need, the objects in question or alternately their symbols

(visual cues) and the emotional or social relevance that aid this acquisition of language.

The environment is replete with language, its symbols as well as graphic symbols that are often explicit and occasionally implicit. To begin with, the very act of living is directed by language in the form of instructions, directions, daily talk, signs and symbols, warnings, explanations, public notices, posters, name plates, sign boards, advertisements, hoardings, tags and what not. In addition to that, there are people from different walks of life using the language in their professional, social or idiosyncratic ways.

Thus, if understanding signs and symbols are essential to language acquisition, then the learner needs to be equipped with visual literacy, which allows a person to 'decode non-print messages and bears many similarities to forms of verbal communication' (Rose, 1982). Non-verbal messages such as modes of dress, body language, billboards, road signs and other environmental signals send silent but clear visual messages.

Say, for example, if a sign displays the message 'Restricted Area', we assume that the area in question must be an army area with sections cordoned off with barbed wire, or traffic inhibitors such as barriers. Similarly, if a sign has a horn with a slash across it, there must be a school or a hospital nearby. Houses with large nice lawns may indicate an affluent neighbourhood. The symbols of a man and woman indicate that there is a public utility such as a washroom or a toilet nearby. Often, these symbols are accompanied by text as well, hence the familiarity with the language.

A well-developed visual sense is an asset in verbal communication. A child who can read visual clues effectively has the making of a good reader of verbal clues as well. Both these types of clues stimulate oral or written expression. Emergent literacy also suggests that a child needs to learn that the object and its symbol, whether written in words or in drawing or etching, are all interchangeable as far as meaning is concerned. Once the child becomes aware of this principle, he/she launches on a language learning spree, absorbing all that he/she can see, hear, or feel, constantly translating it into meaning.

Let us look at the following progression suggested by Karel Rose (1982).

We look.

We see.

We think about what we see.

We talk about what we see.

We write about what we see.

The more we are able to see, the more we may want to talk or write about it.

Teachers can help students to see more perceptively, and hence increase the reservoir of knowledge on which their expressions are based. Every youngster can be helped to see more effectively. The more visual clues a person is able to see, the better he/she is able to participate and communicate. It is just like a 'scientist reading the findings on a slide, or a detective reading the body language of a suspect' or a politician reading the mood of the public. This of course does not mean that visually impaired people cannot become proficient readers; in fact, with modern technology, many people with visual impairment become as good or even better readers than 'normal' people.

Visual literacy can be nurtured by taking the learners out in the neighbourhood, noting

public and private places, and observing the details of the messages that various symbols or notices seem to convey. Say, for example, the words 'restricted entry', *'pravesh nishedh' or 'Illi lorry pravesha nishedha'* (Lorries are not allowed to enter here, in Kannada) can be quickly recognized and acquired from an observation of the situation, i.e. a narrow lane, a low overbridge, an abandoned building, an operation theatre, a dangerous zone, an army area, a place full of inflammable material (smoking is forbidden), a school, a hospital or a college which screams '*mobile ka prayog nishedh'* from every second wall.

Another example, 'Parking at owner's risk' clearly means that the management cannot be held responsible in case of a car theft. It also means that one must lock one's car properly as no one will guard it.

Similarly, a message placed near the lift 'Do not use in case of fire', accompanied by the picture of fire next to a 'Fire exit' (stairs nearby) gives the meaning of 'in case of'.

All libraries have the sign 'Keep silent' or '*Kripaya shant rahe*' along with a poster or a sign. The learner understands that this is a request 'Kripaya' to be silent, as people come to a library to read books. The word '*kripaya*' recurs in places where people need to stand in a queue, keep off the grass, close the water tap after use, or in a holy place for keeping their shoes at the designated place.

A learner attempting to learn Tamil in order to integrate with the Tamil-speaking community will very soon use visual and contextual clues to understand what the word '*venum*' means, when at a tuckshop he/she hears the words '*Mama yenna irruku? (What do you have, Uncle?) Mama onnu coke venum/Randa vada venum/*' (Uncle, I want a coke/two vadas).

If someone says '*Jaasti kaasu venum*' while talking about a project, celebration or purchase, the learner will be able to understand that it means that this requires a lot of money (*kaasu*). Similarly, if the learner encounters the sentence '*Classroomle/Verandahle football bilayadatengo' (Don't play football in the classroom or verandah),* the very context will help the learner to guess what '*bilayadatengo*' means. Here, the learner is using logical thinking and reasoning to construct the meaning.

This can be gainfully used in the classroom in the form of role play and the words '*venum*' or '*...........le*' (meaning 'in the'*)* and '*bilayadatengo*' or '*bilayadate*' (can play) can be used in other contexts as well. Learners can be given cards which carry the symbols or pictures of various places on one side, and pictures of various activities on the other. They can then use sentences accordingly.

The learner can also figure out not only the syntax and vocabulary, but also its appropriate use in a certain context. Through experience, the learner infers that when asking someone to take out or show something like a ticket, a passbook, a map or an identity card in Tamil, one uses '*kaami*' for persons of one's age or younger, and the word '*kaamingo*' for those one wishes to show respect to. In the same way, the learner concludes that the word '*poo*' is used in an informal context, and can denote petals, buds or fully bloomed flowers. On the other hand, the word '*malar*' is a formal or literary word which the teacher uses in the class, and can only be used for a fully bloomed flower.

There is a word very commonly used in day to day Kannada, '*gallatta*', which may connote a quarrel, a protest, a huge hue and cry, a lot of feverish activity and the noise of children bringing the house down with their screams and shouts. Then there are Bengali

words such as '*daarun*', '*faatiye diyeche*' used as an expression of 'great', or 'awesome', which can be used in a variety of situations from dresses, games, victory at the polls, a successful project, or a good performance. These subtle nuances of language are thus picked up by the learner through greater interaction with people, visits to various places, and by using visual literacy skills and logical thinking. The learner learns to use the formal expressions while writing and the informal versions during day to day interactions.

In the same way, the learner acquires the use of the formal expression 'grahan' meaning 'to take', from his experiences in the world. Expressions such as '*Sthaan grahan karen*' or '*Thoda jal/bhojan grahan karen*', help him distinguish this from colloquial use.

If one compared the public notices or instructions in English to those in the regional languages, one would notice that the English notices often abound in negatives like 'don't or do not'(Do not pluck flowers./ Do not litter./ Do not enter./ Do not make a noise./ Do not touch, etc.). The regional notices on the other hand, are largely positive:

1. '*Joote yahan* rakhen' (Keep your shoes here, in place of, do not take shoes inside/ '*Kripaya shanti rakhen*' (Please do not make a noise)(Hindi).

2. *Eiye dware pravesh karun* (Please enter here, in place of, do not enter by the other door/ *Shabhdahnae vyabohar karun*(Please handle carefully) (Bengali).

3. *Saaman dustbinla podu* (Put the litter in the dustbin, in place of, 'Do not litter')

Imperatives such as the above, that the learner encounters in and around the environment can help him/her to understand the meaning from the context, and gradually also internalize the word order. These can also be practised by the teacher by providing pictures of different places such as parks, religious places, schools, museums. The learners will have to think of the instructions the public would need and construct sentences accordingly.

Thus, if we provide a rich corpus of visual experiences, the language art skills can be fostered.

The aggressive world of advertisement

Children today, are the target of aggressive marketing as they spend a lot of time watching television and also coerce their parents into buying things. They are easily influenced by the aggressive marketing of products which look good on television but are not half as good in reality. There are authoritative voices telling people what to buy and how to think, talk, walk, dress, work, or play. (Rose, 1982)

Similarly, there are posters of various kinds – related to politics, health awareness, announcing events, festivals and sales, etc. The language used in each of these contexts is different. It is usually catchy, with a slogan or two, and an appealing (perhaps even misleading) visual that aims at influencing the public. People are hence often used as receptors of non-print material. The advertisements, television or posters can have an impact on the thinking and learning processes of the children. It is thus important to educate them to receive the onslaught of such material critically and analytically. This would help their intellectual and emotional growth.

Students can bring such posters to class, and critical discussions can be organized wherein the learners analyse the following:

· The purpose stated in the content

· The real purpose behind the poster

· Creative use of language

- Exaggeration, if any (expletives used)
- Role or significance of the visual (is it misleading?)
- Who would be the likely target group?
- What is the behaviour expected from the reader of the poster?
- Who will benefit?
- Vocabulary learnt
- Words comprehended using visual or contextual clues

A whole page advertisement of Security systems says:

> **Secure your world**
>
> With Micro Intelligent Surveillance System (Pictures of CCTV camera, security systems, etc.)
>
> · Live recording
> · Online monitoring
> · CCTV Surveillance
> · Biometric Access Control
> · Integrated Security solution with various types of cameras
>
> To be able to get in touch with dealers and distributors dial :...............
>
> Toll free no: ....
>
> YOUR SECURITY IS OUR CONCERN
>
> Name of company, their email and website Products available at ....

To cite another example, a poster on 'Run for a Healthy Tomorrow/Ek swastha bhavishya ki oar' which shows a bunch of persons from different age groups running enthusiastically, can be analysed too. This poster would perhaps also carry in its corners, pictures of political figures with the logo of the party that is organizing it.

The slogan could be 'Come and join us in our quest in making Preetpur healthy and happy,/Aayiye Daudiye Preetpur ke swasthya ke liye'. The poster could have the logo of the political party along with the slogan of the day. It might announce gifts and certificates that would be given to people. This poster could be analysed using the above parameters and the students could delve into the real purpose, the real meaning, the tall claims, etc. that are being made. A poster advertising consumer goods could also be analysed as shown above. This will not only give the students an insight into the living language, but also the games people can play with creative use of language.

Use of media, guest lectures, storytelling, recalling anecdotes, or even asking puzzles in a language leads to language acquisition because in all these activities the focus is not so much on the language but on the meaning, the content, or the answer. Learners stand to benefit immensely by visiting different places and interviewing people regarding their work, lives, etc. Children can ask grandparents about life in their times, and recreate it in the form of pictures which they can present in the classroom to their fellow mates in a kind of 'Show and Tell' activity.

Thus, we can see that the language teacher, instead of despairing in the classroom, and bemoaning the paucity of resources, can just look around and put the rich material in the environment to good use for language development. Vygotsky 'repeatedly stressed the importance of past experiences and prior knowledge in making sense of new situations or present experiences. Therefore, all new knowledge and newly introduced skills are greatly influenced by each student's family environment.' (Dahms et al, 2008)

References

Dahms, M. G., K.; Passalacqua, D.; Schilk, J.N.; Wetzel, A.; Zulkowsky, M. (2008). *The educational theory of Lev Vygotsky: An analysis.* Retrieved from http://www.newfoundations.com/GALLERY/Vygotsky.html

Rose, K. (1982). *Teaching language arts to children.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc.

Shaffer, D.R., Kipp, K., Wood, E., & Willoughby, T. (2009). *Developmental psychology: Childhood and adolescence.* (Third Canadian Edition). Toronto: Nelson.

Acknowledgements

Shefali Ray, is an ELT person who has been faculty of SCERT, Delhi. She has authored and co-authored schools books and educational material for teachers in the area of English Language Teaching for various government and non-government organisations. In addition, she has national and international scientific publications and currently is a moderator for TESOL Mentoring Group.

shefali_ray@hotmail.com

For the national focus group on the Teaching of Indian Languages at NCERT, the challenge in 2005 National Curriculum Framework was to provide a new perspective for a multilingual country. It was hoped that the gaps resulting from different constitutional provisions and the Three Language Formula would be overcome and there would be a set of recommendations that could actually be implemented and ensure substantially high levels of proficiency in the languages that children would study at school. Most of all, it was hoped that the new language policy will help reduce disparities in society.

It was only after a series of discussions that the group agreed to certain fundamental guiding principles based on contemporary research. These among others included:

·   Multilingualism is a normal human state of affairs; it is an asset; it should be treated as a resource, a teaching strategy and as a goal.

·   There is a strong positive correlation between multilingualism on the one hand and cognitive growth, divergent thinking, scholastic achievement and levels of social tolerance.

·   It is imperative that children achieve substantially high levels of proficiency in different languages. This is particularly true of languages that would be the media of instruction in different subjects. It is inevitable that if language proficiency levels are low, performance levels in content areas will be poor.

·   Mother tongues defined as languages of home and neighbourhood must be the media of instruction at school.

·   Language teaching should be sensitive to the relationship of language with thought, gender and social power.

It is important to ensure that the language of each child be respected in the classroom. Languages of children of diverse abilities such as sign language and Braille need special care. Ideally, every child should be aware of them and should be able to appreciate their systematic nature.