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Classroom roles of English language teachers: The traditional and the innovative

İngiliz dili öğretmenlerinin sınıfıçı rolleri: Geleneksel ve yenilikçi

Anindya Syam Choudhury¹

Abstract

This paper looks at the classroom roles of English language teachers in the second language/ foreign language context with particular reference to the Indian one. In the beginning, it considers the notion of 'role' in English Language Teaching (ELT) and how different practitioners and methodologists have conceptualized the roles played by teachers. This is followed by an analysis of the characteristics of the traditional roles of teachers in a teacher-centred classroom in which the teacher becomes someone like the Greek Titan, Atlas, bearing the burden of the whole class on his or her shoulders. It is shown that this sort of unilateral and unidirectional pedagogy fails to nurture the resourcefulness of learners and is, in fact, detrimental to the development of his or her personality. The paper then goes on to highlight the important aspects of the alternative, innovative paradigm in which the focus is on the learner and the role of the teacher is basically that of a 'facilitator'.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, role, facilitator, teacher-centred, pedagogy

Özet

Bu çalışmada yabancı dil bağlamında ikinci dil olarak İngilizce öğretmekte olan öğretmenlerin sınıfıçı rollerine özellikle Hindistan bağlamında bakılmaktadır. Çalışmada önce, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi çalışmalarında farklı uygulayıcılar ve yöntemciler tarafından öğretmenler tarafından gerçekleştirilen roller ne şekilde kavramsallaştırılmaktadır buna bakılmaktadır. Geleneksel sınıflarda öğretmenin rolü Yunan mitolojisindeki Titan, Atlas gibi olur ki öğretmen omuzlarında tüm sınıfın yükünü taşıyan bir lidere benzetilmektedir. Bu tek taraflı ve tek yönlü pedagoji öğrencilerin gereksinimlerini karşılamaktan uzak kalmakta ve hatta onların kişiliklerinin gelişmesi için zararlı olmaktadır. Çalışmada daha sonra, güncel ve alternatif paradigmalardan ışığı altında öğretmenin son dönemdeki rolü olan kolaylaştırıcı öğretmen rolüne değinilmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: İngiliz Dili Eğitimi, rol, kolaylaştırıcı, öğretmen merkezli, pedagoji

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Assam University, Silchar, India,
anindiasyamchoudhury@gmail.com

Introduction

In any teaching-learning situation, the role of the teacher in the classroom is of paramount significance because it is central to the way in which the classroom environment evolves. Moreover, the role adopted by the learner in the classroom also hinges on the role adopted by the teacher. Therefore, teachers must be clear about their role in the classroom so that there is no chasm between their perceptions of their role and what they actually practice in the classroom. Of course, when I talk of the classroom role of teachers here, I take a restricted view of the role(s) of a teacher by focusing on what they do or should do inside the classroom only, leaving out of consideration the institutional or societal roles that they have.

The notion of ‘role’ and teacher roles in ELT

The term ‘role’, as Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) point out, is a technical term “which originally comes from sociology and refers to the shared expectation of how an individual should behave. In other words, roles describe what people are supposed to do” (p. 109). In the domain of English Language Teaching (ELT), several methodologists (Littlewood, 1981; Richards and Rodgers, 1986; Tudor, 1993; Harmer, 2001) have suggested many potential roles for a language teacher. Richards and Rodgers (1986) consider teacher roles as part of the ‘design’ component of a method, pointing out that these are related to the following issues:

- (a) the types of function teachers are expected to fulfill,
- (b) the degree of control the teacher has over how learning takes place,
- (c) the degree to which is the teacher is responsible for determining the content of what is taught, and
- (d) the interactional patterns that develop between teachers and learners (p. 24).

Littlewood (1981) conceptualizes the role of the language teacher broadly as the “facilitator of learning” (p. 92) in the context of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) instead of the rather narrow concept of the “teacher as instructor”. According to Littlewood, a teacher’s role as a facilitator entails the sub-roles of an “overseer” of student’s learning, a “classroom manager”, a “consultant” or “adviser”, and sometimes, a

“co-communicator” with the learners. Harmer (2001) looks at the term ‘facilitator’ in a much broader way than Littlewood does, and points out that the ultimate aim of all roles is to facilitate the students’ progress in some way or the other. He talks about using certain “precise” terms for the roles that teachers play in the classroom: controller, organizer, assessor, prompter, participant, resource, tutor, and observer. Tudor (1993) looks at the role of the teacher in the context of the notion of the learner-centred classroom, a kind of classroom in which the focus is on the active involvement of the learners in the learner process. However, before considering what entails the role of the teacher in such a changed view of the classroom, it is worthwhile to have look at the traditional roles that an English language teacher has been performing (especially, in the Indian context). This is important for us if we want to understand the factors which have necessitated a change in the perspective, and if we want to consider to the extent to which that change is acceptable in the Indian context.

Traditional role of English teachers

When I searched for the synonyms of the word ‘traditional’, I came across many words: old, legendary, historical, handed down, customary, conventional, long-standing, established, correct, proper, etc. All these words (except the last two, perhaps!) could be used to describe the ubiquitous traditional method of teaching English in the Indian context. What, then, are the main features of this traditional method of teaching English? For one thing, the traditional method is largely teacher-centred, with the teachers hogging the limelight always. They lecture at length on particular topics and students listen to them with rapt attention – this has been the methodology for teaching English for decades now. Using this methodology, teachers have been teaching discrete points of grammar or phonology in separate lessons, focusing mainly on the formal features of the language at the expense of encouraging students to use the language. Repetitive practice, mechanical drills and memorization of grammar rules are certain important aspects of this approach to language teaching. This approach could be regarded as what Wilkins (1976) calls a “synthetic” approach in which “different parts of the language are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been built up” (p. 2). Perhaps this sort of an approach

has its germ in the belief that the purpose of all teaching is to simplify learning, and one way of doing that is to break down the contents into smaller parts and then present them in a sequential and graded manner. This 'linear' approach to language learning is explained well by Nunan (1996). Nunan likens it to the construction of a wall in the following manner:

The language wall is erected one linguistic 'brick' at a time. The easy grammatical bricks are laid at the bottom of the wall, and they provide a foundation for the more difficult ones. The task for the learner is to get the linguistic bricks in the right order: first the word bricks, and then the sentence bricks. If the bricks are not in the correct order, the wall will collapse under its own ungrammaticality.
(p. 65)

The responsibility for constructing "the language wall" well is, of course, on the teacher who is viewed not only as the organizer and the controller of all classroom activities but also as the evaluator of the learners' performance. Thus, traditionally the English teacher has always played a very dominant role, perhaps based on the supposition that the teacher is the source of all knowledge. The learner, on the other hand, has always been viewed as a receptacle to be filled with the knowledge given by the teacher.

Freire (1982) calls this the "banking" system of education in which the learners are considered to be similar to bank accounts into which regular deposits are made to be drawn later for specific purposes like examination. Obviously, the onus here lies on the individuals making the deposits for it is they who are responsible for earning the money and it is only they who can make the bank accounts swell. Using this analogy for the traditional language classroom would inevitably mean that the teacher is almost like the Titan, Atlas, of Greek mythology. Just as Atlas bore the earth and the heavens on his back, the teacher here bears the burden of the whole class on his shoulders and the learner merely listens to the teacher and may be sometimes repeats or reacts to the teacher's directions. Hence, the learner is reduced to play a passive, reactive role with no control over content or methods. This authoritative role (sometimes verging on the 'autocratic'

or the ‘authoritarian’!) of the teacher, I believe, stems from the long-cherished traditional notion that pedagogic success depends on how articulately a teacher teaches.

However, it is a fallacy to believe that learning depends on articulate or ‘eloquent’ teaching for, as Kumaravadivelu (2006) points out, “teaching, however purposeful, cannot automatically lead to learning for the simple reason that learning is primarily a personal construct controlled by the individual learner” (p. 44). Hence, the teacher can at best create and maximise learning opportunities by involving the learners in the learning process because teaching and learning are essentially collaborative in nature. This is quite unlike what has always been traditionally considered sacrosanct - that teaching is basically the transmission of items of knowledge, and learning accretion of them.

Paradigm changed: Focus on the learner

As we have already seen, the traditional method of teaching English makes the teacher the all-powerful authority in the classroom, almost obliterating the existence of the learner sometimes. Long back, Dewey (1938) objected to this kind of spoon-feeding of knowledge, and pointed out the importance of the role of the learner as an active agent in his or her learning. Dewey laid the foundation of what we now call ‘learner-centredness’, a term which has now gained tremendous currency in English language teaching. It reflects, as Tudor (1996) points out, “a widespread desire in the language teaching community to develop means of allowing learners to play a fuller, more active and participatory role in their language study” (p. 1). However, learner-centredness in ELT is not a product of a single school of thought, but a result of the confluence of several innovative perspectives on language teaching. Among them, mention must be made of

- (i) the humanistic approaches to language teaching which developed during the later half of the twentieth century and which talked about giving equal attention to both the intellectual and the emotional development of the learner, and
- (ii) communicative language teaching, which developed in the 1960s and 1970s and which was both a reaction against the prevalent structure-oriented drill methods of language teaching popular during the time and a result of the

desire to make language teaching ‘more flexible and more responsive to students’ real world communicative needs’ (Tudor 1996: 7).

Innovative role of the teacher in task-based language teaching

In the current paradigm of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), which is basically an offshoot of communicative language teaching, learner-centredness has found a new expression. The main conceptual basis for TBLT is, as Nunan (2004) points out, “experiential learning” or “learning by doing” (p. 12). In this way, TBLT goes a long way in breaking down the hierarchies of the traditional classroom because the very act of trying to complete a communicative task involves planning and using strategies on the part of the learner. A communicative task has been defined by Nunan (2004) as

a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. (p. 4)

Hence, we see how in a learner-centred approach to language teaching, like TBLT, for instance, the role of the learner is significantly altered, as the learner is in the thick of all classroom activities getting a hands-on practical experience of using the language for communicative purposes. But does it mean that the role of the teacher in such a case is diminished? The answer is a firm ‘NO’, because though the teacher is not really the focus here, the teacher performs an important ‘mediational’ role (Feuerstein et al., 1991) which encompasses a wide range of responsibilities, albeit qualitatively different from the traditional role of the teacher as the disseminator of information. In teaching through mediation, the teacher becomes a true facilitator of learning for the language learners, guiding them through dialogic communication (Vygotsky, 1978) as they co-construct knowledge with the teacher. In this process, the teacher’s role of the instructor who teaches new language to the learners is not shunned altogether, but it is restricted. The teacher is expected to be ‘a guide by the side’, an advisor who advises his learners after

monitoring their strengths and weaknesses. S/he also plans the tasks for the future and stimulates the learners' intellect by presenting new language and motivating them.

One important thing that needs to be understood is that however much teachers teach, they do not have any real control over a learner's natural process of acquiring a second or a foreign language and achieving communicative ability in it. Therefore, the teacher could at best create a classroom environment that is conducive to language learning. The communicative skills of the learners can be developed if they are motivated. Hence, teachers should facilitate this process by creating diverse communicative activities, especially intended for pair-work and group-work, that are interesting and challenging to the learners, as they progress in the path of acquiring and using the target language beyond the textbook and the classroom.

Conclusion

The innovative role of the facilitator that a teacher is supposed to play in a CLT or a TBLT classroom is absolutely different from the role of the controller and organizer of all activities that s/he plays in a traditional classroom. Facilitation involves empowering learners by giving them more initiative and responsibility. Whereas in the traditional teacher-fronted classroom, the learner is always under the firm control of the teacher with the latter determining who says what to whom and when, in a learner-centred one, the teacher (or rather, facilitator!) is expected to let go of some of his or her power. In other words, learner-centredness allows the learner to have greater say in the determination of the course of the lesson. However, though this sounds well in principle, in practice, especially, in the larger Indian context, it would be quite difficult for a teacher of English to play the innovative role of the facilitator given that our education system is strictly syllabus- and textbook-oriented and examination-driven. Moreover, our learners and teachers might not be ready for such innovative roles in attitudinal terms. Of course, this can be surmounted by orienting the learners and the teachers towards the benefits of the innovative practices. One more crucial issue that needs to be mentioned while advocating the case of innovative teacher roles is the importance of the social context in which the language classroom is situated. What I have suggested here is the overhauling

of the power structure of the traditional classroom, and a reconceptualisation of the whole process of language learning. However, this ‘overhauling’ and ‘reconceptualisation’ should not jar on the cultural beliefs and assumptions of the teachers and learners regarding the modes of behaviour in the language classroom. Hence, cultural patterns should be taken into account while considering the innovative roles of both teachers and learners in the language classroom.

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