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The Mediators: Providing Access to Texts in a Semi-urban Maharashtrian College Community

The Mediators: Providing Access to Texts in English in a semi-urban Maharashtrian College Community

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This paper is based on an ethnographic study of the enactment of an English curriculum in a semi-urban Maharashtrian community college in western India. It addresses the issues of cultural competence and cultural continuity in second language education in a multilingual, non-western society. Systematic investigation of classroom behavior reveals the role identity that learners expect and teachers maintain in the classroom in response to the language learning situation. As mediators, teachers are observed providing access to English texts in a traditional culture of rephrasal and narration. Jacob perceives implications for developing the learner's communicative competence from a passive to an active level of classroom interaction, i.e.: restructuring, if it is to take place, must have its origin primarily in the community's self-inquiry and deliberations directed towards existing cultural competence; and any attempt to restructure the curriculum make demands on existing cultural competence.

Introduction

In addressing the problem of accessing academic texts in English by second language readers, linguistic studies have been essentially 'text-bound', focusing on: 'simplification and adaptation' (Beck et al., 1984; Bhan, 1988), 'readability counts and formulae' (Bormuth, 1973; Klare, 1977), 'selection criteria lists' (Huus, 1971; Wallace, 1986) and others. Regarding cross-cultural features of the code, some studies recommend cultural accessibility of written texts in relation to their decodability from a second language reader's point of view (Johnson, 1981; Steffenson et al, 1979). Pathak (1988) provides contextual evidence of such decoding studies with specific reference to Maharashtrian college students. In a more recent study, Sharma (1990) provides an elaborate 'pragmatic model' for the teaching of literary texts in a second language learning situation and some of the culturally sensitive components are

identified as 'topical accessibility', 'inclination accessibility' and 'credibility accessibility'.

While the above studies provide useful resources for text de-construction, they remain context-free speculations being based on assumptions of an ideal, universal, autonomous second language reader who is not very different from a native reader in cognitive style. By overlooking cross-cultural variations in text negotiation, the larger reality of traditionally upheld attitudes to written texts and modes of accessing them, particularly in developing non-western societies is unrepresented. In contrast, anthropological accounts of school success or failure operate on the premise that context-specific interpretations transcend the assumptions of uniform cultural arrangements by relating linguistic and cognitive performance to the contexts of interaction. Anthropological accounts also provide sequentially organized, culturally significant patterns of social behavior (Diaz, Moll and Mehan; 1986). By tracing academic skills to the origins of cultural transmission, new meanings are constructed for explaining what is understood as communicative failure. A growing body of research in this tradition focuses on issues related to cultural congruence/ incongruence of social participation in classrooms (see Erickson and Mohatt, 1982; Erickson and Schultz, 1982; Heath, 1982; Ogbu, 1987; Philips, 1973 and others). In the field of second language education and literacy there is a focus on contexts for language learning that has shaped goals for language teaching which are pragmatically and socially variable (see Hornberger, 1989, 1990; Watson-Gegeo and Ulichny, 1988). Looking beyond linguistically defined parameters for text negotiation towards socio-cultural factors and contexts, the diversity of educational situations is discovered.

Focus and Methodology

This study addresses the issue of second language learning as contextualized by traditional teaching styles, and cultural competence within academic communities as a social reality. The two sets of analyzed texts used for this study yield verbal behavior in the classroom which reveals the scope of the instructional activity. The instructional activity is then seen to serve as an indicator of language learning options. Supporting evidence is provided in the form of information from interviews with teachers and through personal experience as a team-teacher in the academic community. The study has implications for curriculum planning and dissemination from a community-oriented view. This paper contends that any attempt to restructure

the curriculum makes demands on existing cultural competence in the form of knowledge, skills, beliefs, attitudes and roles.

The motivation for this study stems from futuristic concerns for 'restructuring' the English curriculum at the university level. These concerns are shared by members of curriculum planning bodies in the context of a felt need to revitalize classroom learning processes in Juana. Most piece-meal attempts result in conflicts between esoteric curriculum prescriptions and cultural continuity of day to day life in classrooms.

The observations presented herein are based on data drawn from an extensive field-study (see Jacob, 1988) in a semi-urban community college in Maharashtra, directed towards a description of existing 'cultural competence' which Goodenough (1971) defines as a 'system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating and acting.' It may be equated with Hymes' notion of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), wherein members of a community are found to possess the knowledge of appropriate speech in terms of a set of rules regarding "when to speak, when not to speak, where and in what manner" (Hymes, 1972). Hence contexts of verbal and non-verbal interaction serve as indications of the larger culture that a speech community maintains and preserves.

The data is contained in the form of field notes of participant observations and interviews, audio-recordings of classroom interaction and site documents over a period of three years of systematic ethnographic study.¹ The research focuses on: (a) contexts for classroom decisions and (b) patterns of classroom interaction. The

Accessing texts: contexts for classroom decisions

Developing societies continue to maintain a remote access to the written text and the unfolding of its mysteries is entrusted to 'learned' teachers or 'gurus' as gatekeepers of knowledge and wisdom (cf., Osterloh, 1980). The physical reality of educational contexts in India provides supportive evidence for this observation. For example, the University of Poona governs over a hundred affiliated colleges serving the rural communities in which they are located. The overwhelming number of colleges partly attests to the strong faith that most developing communities hold in viewing education as a means to social change.

Ahmednagar College, located in the rural district center of Ahmednagar town represents one of the progressive colleges of the University of Poona. It draws a large body of rural students from nearby villages and towns who compose seventy percent of the college population. A significant proportion of students are urban; they are children of industrialists and military personnel who hold transferable positions in industrial corporations and in the army respectively. They represent linguistic communities of a diverse nature from across the country and are fairly fluent speakers of English as a national language which they cultivate in the national network of 'central schools' and 'convent schools' run by Roman Catholic organizations. Yet another urban faction of the population is local Maharashtrian students, residents of Ahmednagar town.

In the multicultural learning environment of the classroom, the sub-culture of the rural learner has a predominant influence on classroom decisions and the pace and style of teaching. Coming from regional schooling backgrounds they possess a fair amount of passive knowledge of English as a third language. My conversations with them were often in a mixed code of Hindi, Marathi and English. Rural students often invited me to their villages for important festivals like 'hurda' which marked a stage in the ripening of the staple crop, 'jowar' (sorghum) or 'pola', the festival of the bullocks. It was in the context of these interactions that I was able to gain insights into a rural student's identity in the college community. The following is an excerpt from one of my case studies.²

#M.4.1³

One afternoon in December, we are seated under a shady Babul tree by the jowar fields of Shivaji Mhaske's ancestral farm. The sun is mellow on the ripening ears of jowar and gushing water from the pump floods the canals that run around the fields. Mhaske and his brothers are roasting the jowar on the coal fire while we converse with his father and a few elders who have come to entertain us city folk. We sit in a wide circle relishing the freshly roasted jowar spiked with Chili and dipped in yogurt. Mhaske's mother is inside the farmhouse with the other womenfolk brewing hot strong tea for the guests. A short distance away in a shed the bullocks rest peacefully chewing while most of the activities are centered around the 'hurda party.

Mhaske's father tells me that his farm is doing well and will one day be inherited by his son. The education of his son is costly considering the time that he spends away at the college twenty miles away. Mhaske commutes daily on his bicycle. Sometimes he takes the local bus, but it's expensive and so are his western trousers and manilla

shirt and sandals. He wants me to use my influence to gain admission to the college hostel (residence hall). He tells me that here there is no facility to study after dark. The single bulb which illuminates his home sheds a dim light and in any case by the time he is through with his chores at the farm he is too tired to study. His father does not comment but I can see that he has reservations.

Some of the other students commute from even greater distances by bus. The college hostel houses over five hundred students and many needy students are unable to afford the cost of housing and living in the town not to mention the cost of books and stationery. It is a common sight to see rural students with 'the bare minimum' which is usually two or three notebooks clutched in their hands while walking across the campus to their classes. Satchels or bags are not a usual accessory considering that there is not much to carry by way of books. I decided to look more closely into how Mhaske and his friends used these bare academic resources.

#M.8.3

Mhaske and his buddies sit together, closely huddled attentively listening to the teacher. In response to appropriate cues from the teacher, they enter detailed paraphrases of textual content systematically presented in the form of dictated notes. The pages are filled with tiny letters that I can barely read. No space is 'wasted' for margins on the sides or at the top and bottom. The book must stretch for the entire duration of the course if possible. As they listen they are unable to catch some of the teacher's words, they peer into each other's notebooks or leave blanks to be filled in later. I notice numerous spelling mistakes and incorrect sentences. Occasionally the students would ask the teacher to spell out the words or repeat sentences.

#M.8.13

I ask Mhaske when he plans to buy his text book for the course. He is not sure. He feels he can make do with a copy from the college library whenever he can manage to get hold of one. He complains that there aren't 't enough copies to go around. In any case the teacher gives good notes and between him and his buddies there is at least one copy of the book. What he definitely will buy later, close to examination--towards the end of the year are 'bazaar notes' based on the most likely questions. Then he can prepare thoroughly and is quite confident that he will pass.

It is common knowledge that students do not read the prescribed texts in the context of the existing pattern of examinations and evaluation . Teachers bemoan the situation but feel helpless. The biggest threat are 'bazaar notes' and private tutors who run parallel classes.⁴ As for the examination questions, they are fairly predictable and content-based, requiring an understanding of the main ideas and character sketches within a closed set of possibilities. Over the three years that a text is prescribed by the university sufficient indirect sources of support become available to the student in the form of 'notes' which the teacher may have dictated to the previous class and 'bazaar notes'. The answers that they produce are learned by rote and almost identical, but accepted as a minimum requirement for passing. A sizable amount do not meet even this requirement and the rate of failures in general English courses remains high, ranging from 30 - 50 percent on the average.

Accessing texts: Patterns of classroom interaction

An attitude of resignation and pragmatic confrontation is resonant in the teaching community as they fall back upon traditional skills for classroom behavior appropriate to the context and a common culture of expository teaching of written texts. The primary concern expressed among teachers was to make the content accessible as a secondary resource given the fact that most students could not access the text directly. In the expository mode, the student listens while the teacher systematically negotiates the content line by line in a sequence of loud reading, paraphrasing and explanations⁴. At other times the teachers dictate notes based on anticipated content questions for the annual examination. The dictation of notes would often stretch for the entire length of the class hour and into subsequent hours (J:1; J:2:J5) ⁵. The teacher's role appears to be mediatory as he/she provides interpretations of textual content to match the learner's level of comprehension in an arbitrary but experiential assessment of communicative competence. Difficult concepts are simplified through paraphrases or translations into Marathi or Hindi depending on the teachers linguistic background and familiarity with the regional language.

The extracts from three analyzed segments of teacher talk are reproduced below. The segments are self-explanatory in terms of the categories of analysis i.e., communicative acts and topical sets. Communicative acts are informative and topically sequential in relation to textual content. Attempts to elicit student responses do not really signal verbal interaction but silent acknowledgement of negotiation on

behalf of the students. It is also a way of checking on the listener's attention in the process of mediation as a rhetorical device. The segments represent the teaching styles of three teachers who varied in age and experience but were found to adhere to a common culture of text exposition. Providing access through mediation between textual content and assumed comprehension by learners becomes apparent in the steady sequence of alternations that the teachers use in collective meaning negotiation. Paraphrases are lengthy accounts of the textual context into which the actual lines of the text fit and serve as cohesive devices for collective understanding. At another level, paraphrases provide the context for the teacher's personal style in oration in 'driving home' textual meaning and significance. For example, in sample B3, the teacher has a humorous aside, true to his reputation for combining fun with learning, when he refers to John Osborn's poem. Sample B9 represents a fairly senior teacher well known for discipline and firm action. The lesson on toddy drinking is a fitting context for his oration, considering that the teacher was morally inclined towards promoting abstinence in the academic community. A younger and more contemporary teacher is represented in sample B7. She was observed trying to hold the attention of a large science class of over sixty students. I could sense an element of haste as she proceeded quickly with the text negotiation in her effort to manage her students well known for their restlessness in the English classroom. ⁷

Sample B9

Topic: 'A pair of Sandals' by C. Rajagopalachari

| | | | |
|------|--------------|--|---------------------------------|
| 9.8 | (Reads) | Our cobbler hamlet too was well in the clutches of the toddy tavern until the year relief work began. | Informs |
| 9.9 | (Defines) | ... cobbler hamlet is a very small village | Informs |
| 9.10 | (Paraphrase) | this Manyanoor is a small village and the cobbler community there was in the clutches of the toddy tavern . . . that is, - - most of them were in the habit of drinking toddy and that is the reason why this particular social welfare committee, so to say, was concentrating its attention on this village. | Reinforms (with back reference) |

| | | |
|-------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| 9.11 (Reads) | Then at our insistence they went to pledge total abstinence and they have on the whole kept their word. | Informs |
| 9.12 (Paraphrases) | These people approached them they got the elders of the cobbler community they brought them together they had a talk with them they explained to them the situation they were in. . they told them the harm that comes out of drinking toddy and how by abstaining from drinking . . . by keeping themselves away from this particular drink how they can improve the condition of their life. . . . that's how after a good deal of explanation. . . . these people agreed to stay away from this particular vice. . . . which is drinking. | Reinforms (with back reference) |
| 9.13 (Reads) | But now something happened. . M- came to my house one Thursday leading a group of his fellow cobbler villagers | Informs |
| 9.14 (Paraphrases) | So M- is one of the important people there. . . . he comes to see Raja gopalachari he reports or complains that some people in the village have broken their pledge. . . . have gone back on their words and they have drunk toddy. . . . So Thursday was their day for taking grain from the ashram at half price now from this sentence you get a certain idea Thursday was their day for taking grain from the ashram at half price | Reinforms (with back reference) |
| 9.15 (Rhetorical Questioning) | what does this sentence suggest? (pauses for five seconds.) were the villagers so simple as to pay attention to the words of the relief workers that after some explanation they agreed to leave this dirty habit? were they so simple? what | Elicits |

made them take the pledge?
 (mumbled response from group)
 yes. . . . that is they were given the
 incentive that. . . . if you don't drink
 today. . . . we will supply you with food
 grains for half the market price. . .

Sample B8

Topic: 'The Mosquito' by D. H. Lawrence

- | | | | |
|------|--------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| 8.34 | (Reads) | you turn your head towards your tail (repeats) . . . you turn your head towards your tail | Informs |
| 8.35 | (Paraphrases) | the simple paraphrase of this would be the mosquito moves on suddenly it looks back not perhaps like John Osborn's poem look back in anger (laughter) not in anger but with a smile | Reinforms (with back reference) |
| 8.36 | (Rhetorical questioning) | now this smile as you have noticed is not a very simple smile. . . . in other words when the mosquito turns. . . . his head towards his tail and just smiles what does that smile indicate? It could be ironical. . . . it could be just mischief | Informs |
| 8.37 | (Reads) | How can you put so much devilry into that translucent phantom strain of a frail heart? | Informs |
| 8.38 | (Rhetorical questioning) | What kind of a person is this? Is there a simple answer to that? | Informs |

Sample B7

Topic: "India's contribution to World Unity' by Arnold Toynbee

- | | | | |
|------|--------------------------|---|-----------|
| 7.14 | (Rhetorical questioning) | so what is unique about getting this freedom? Here was Ghandji a unique individual a special man who showed us a way of getting freedom. . . . not through bloodshed but through non-violence as a result he got freedom for this country. . . . who gave the | Reinforms |
|------|--------------------------|---|-----------|

freedom? in this case the Britishers
. . . . they were able to step out without
disgrace. . . . with a great deal of saving
of face

7.15 (Reads) There was not much dishonour involved Informs
unlike much of the different wars that are
fought . . . I should say that Ghandhji's
service to my country has been much
less than to his country

7.18 (Explains) I do not think this is an exaggeration Informs
. . . . Ghandhiji saved Britain as well
as India and he did this by
inspiring the people to keep the struggle
at a spiritual plane Arnold Toynbee
stresses this aspect of the spiritual Ghandhi
he was able to show that in a frenzied world
. . . . we need to have time to contemplate. . . .

7.16 (Reads) Non-violent revolution is I should say a
characteristic accomplishment it is
very much Indian

Discussion

By relating patterns of classroom interaction to their contexts, cultural continuity in language education is demonstrated as a process of support and maintenance of cultural competence that members of the community share in a given socioeconomic situation. Under the circumstances where rural learners are first generation college students for whom the text is only remotely accessible, it is not possible to assume that autonomous interaction of learners with academic texts can be taken for granted as culturally valued. The students of semi-urban or rural college communities in India bring into the classroom traditional values and attitudes toward learning in general. They entrust teachers, the knowers, with the responsibility of serving as mediators between the text as coded knowledge and its seekers, the students.

What is obvious is that the receptive language learning in the context of oral/aural communication supported at a passive level of second language proficiency. Restructuring the curricular experience for creating successful/desirable language learning environments needs to be perceived as a systematic cultural

reorientation, not overlooking the pragmatic constraints of contexts in which educational communities in developing countries are placed. When viewing learning communities as societies in transition, our efforts to restructure should be focused on academic processes rather than products in which real-life people act on the basis of their own knowledge and experience. Further, our concern for restructuring the curriculum in a top-to-bottom operation is challenged by existing teacher culture, which has the powerful potential of rejecting and translating new ideas into old ways of perceiving.

Old ways of doing serve as the take off point in developing learning societies for educational planning and promoting teachers and students as the custodians of cultural competence. A community-based, developmental approach would aim to trigger culturally appropriate processes of collaborative self-inquiry in which teachers and students jointly deliberate over desirable learning situations. This necessarily implies a fairer distribution of power and authority to make curricular decisions and/or restrictions on blanket curricular prescriptions from central decision making bodies at the University level.

As an ethnographic investigation this study has limited its scope to the question of why people in a developing multilingual society do what they do in accessing texts in English as a second language. These findings reflect on the need to address cultural competence as a basic issue for research and development in second language acquisition. Understanding the diversity of cultural situations and ways of second language instruction could provide the theoretical basis for a pluralistic model of second language learning.

¹ I am grateful to the faculty and students of Ahmednagar College for permitting me to conduct my observations and for sharing with me their concerns

² Both group interviews and individual case studies contributed to the study. Classroom and follow up observations extended to the family and home situations.

³ Citations of the type (#M.4.1) refer to individual case studies and represent excerpts from the larger body of data.

⁴ 'Parallel classes' is a form of self employment used by retired teachers and unemployed teachers in their homes. It is also not uncommon for serving teachers to conduct 'coaching classes' as an additional means of income.

⁵ During longitudinal observations of face to face interaction in the classroom, fourteen audio-taped sessions were analyzed and cited as Texts B in a series

⁶ Citations of the type (J:1, J:2, J:3) refer to compiled reports of journal notes for note-dictating sessions.

- 7 The corpus of data contains analyzed texts of all the seven teachers in the English department during the period of the study.
- 8 This paper was presented at the Twelfth Annual Ethnography Forum Conference, February 22-24, 1991.

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