ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF A LANGUAGE TEACHING/LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, I will first examine what constitutes theory and practice and then talk about my personal theory. Later on, I will give an overview of some of the language learning theories. Finally, I will talk about my experiences as a language learner of Spanish and Nyanja (Malawi Language).

THEORY AND PRACTICE

It is often possible to teach without any theoretical understanding of our practice and we may still do it very well. However, recognizing that our teaching is good necessarily requires theoretical understanding of what we are doing and why because it is the theory that provides the standards by which quality is judged. As Dearden (1984) says `Good practice often precedes theory'. In order to judge and improve our practice we need to know what we should teach and why as well as what we are teaching and why. As Ramani (1987:3) puts it;

Teaching practice sessions are often marked by a heavy reliance on procedures, and participants are trained to use particular techniques without being required to understand the theoretical assumptions underlying them. As a result, teachers often see themselves as `practitioners' who have little or nothing to do with theory.

Fullan (in Hopkins and Reid 1985: 195) gives an education oriented definition of theory, which, in my view, place it firmly in its rightful place:

Theory concerns the beliefs, philosophical basis, pedagogical assumptions, conceptual understanding, and rationale related to such questions as what should be taught, why teach it, and how to teach it effectively.

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The meanings of the term "theory" according to Dearden (1984) are;

1- impracticality (it is fine in theory but it won't work in practice)

2- propositional, knowledge of valid general principles

3- what is the case with questions as to what should be done values regarding how to act.

Mclaughlin's (1987: 3) definition "a way of interpreting, criticising, and unifying established generalizations" is a bit distant from classroom concerns.

Stern (1983: 25) distinguishes three levels of the term 'theory'. According to him it refers to:

1- "Systematic study of the thought related to a topic or activity... A theory offers a system of thought, a method of analysis and synthesis, or a conceptual framework in which to place different observations, phenomena or activities"

2- teaching 'methods', 'approaches', 'philosophies', or 'schools of thought' (eg. Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method etc.)

3- scientific hypotheses that have either been verified by observation or experiment, or have explanatory power.

Argyris (1985) distinguishes between two theories of action 'espoused theory' and 'theory-in-use'. This apparently is a true distinction since, in most cases, there is discrepancy between what we say and what we actually do.

Practice, in my view, relates to the choices, decisions and actions taken by the teacher and learner in relation to teaching and learning both inside and outside the classroom. Such steps may relate to planning, selection of materials, activities and models of interaction between learners and between the teacher and students. At the level of classroom procedure it concerns how and when to employ specific techniques in the conduct of a lesson.

Dearden (1984: 6) summarises the ambiguity in the theory-practice relationship as follows:

What is already clear, I think, is that the distinction between theory and practice is not just one distinction but a shifting set of contrasts made to serve different, although possibly equally valid purposes. Just as we use the term 'belief' sometimes to include and sometimes to exclude knowledge, so

may theory sometimes cover everyday assertions of commonsense, but at other times contrast with commonsense a more abstract and systematised understanding.

PERSONAL THEORY

As an EFL teacher, I generally follow the principle of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), unless there is a good practical reason for not to, and the aspects of various learning theories that I believe are compatible with the practice of CLT.

My personal theories about teaching are influenced by a combination of many different sources. Some of these are my past experiences as a learner at different levels, including postgraduate studies, my earlier teaching experience, professional meetings (eg.seminars, symposiums and conferences), discussions with colleagues and their opinions and also professional reading and writing. All these sources may have had some influence on my personal theories and thinking to different extent. With experience, through reading and reflection, and through observation of and feedback on my teaching, I gradually refined perceptions of theory and practice. I distinguished between theories of language (eg. structuralism) and theories of language learning (eg. behaviourism), and viewed theoretical perspectives as essential in enabling me to evaluate both materials and classroom decisions and procedures in a principled way.

If we adopt a reflective teaching model, which I would define as conscious and thoughtful monitoring, judgement, and revisions of theories-in-practice, on going activity of teaching itself may became a powerful source for developing our professional thinking and personal theories about the teaching/learning process. Reflection on action is more meaningful when it is done in the light of knowledge and theory related to practice.

LEARNING PROCESS

Kolb (1984) defines learning as: "The process whereby knowledge is created by the transformation of experience". This learning process, as Thatcher (1990: 278) suggests, involves a number of separate but related ideas:

Process (a dynamic activity which begins with some kind of stimulus, which continues in a variety of different ways)
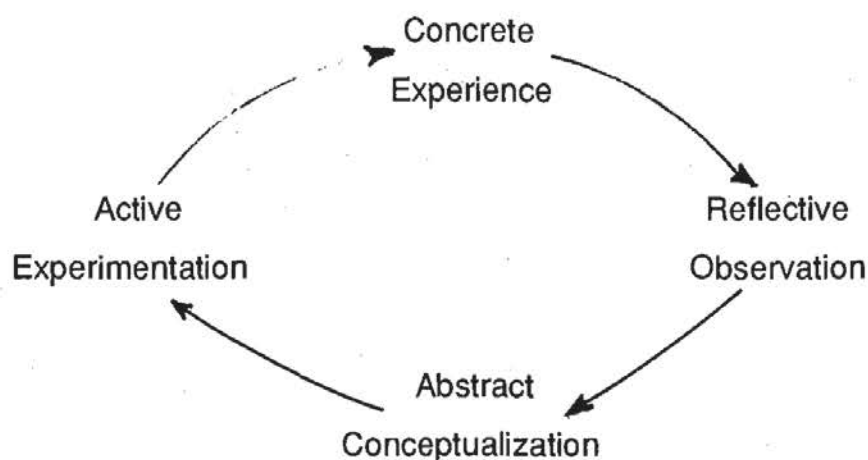
Knowledge (a range of elements or factors;subject knowledge; knowledge of process; knowledge of self; skills; attitudes and values)

* **Experience** (the event or occurrences which happen to us or in which we are involved)

* **Creation** (suggests something which is absolutely fundamental to learning which is that, in the last resort, all knowledge is personal.

* **Transformation** (the process by which we create something out of something else).

Teacher (1990:283), then presents the Cycle of Experiential Learning which was put forward by David Kolb. Kolb postulates a four-stage cycle in which learning takes place:

Concrete
Experience

Active   Reflective
Experimentation   Observation

Abstract
Conceptualization

Now, I would like to try to map my experiences onto this model. The first stage in the cycle is Concrete Experience: "events and occurrences which happen to us or in which we are involved" (eg. Nyanja lesson in my MA TEFL course). It is "concrete" because we were actually present and taking part by our presence. In Nyanja lesson; some of us may have learned all of what was being taught, others may have learned, from experience, that they disagree with the teacher's method; yet others might be feeling bored, or wishing to be somewhere else and thus uninvolved.

The second stage in the cycle is Reflective Observation which is probably the most important part of the cycle and the part where the real process of learning takes place. Reflective Observation is "the process by which each of us starts to think about, to question, to sort out and to classify the main events of the Concrete Experience". It helps us to clarify our

ideas, to help us to make some sense of the event, which is learning a strange language, Nyanja. In the process of learning, the role of the teacher or the promoter of learning is to help this process by assisting the reflection through asking questions and drawing out comments. Going back to the Nyanja lesson, reflective thinking about what happened afterwards is a very important part of the process of learning from experience.

The next stage is Abstract Conceptualization (to formulate to talk). If we make some mistake while practising Nyanja, we return to our notes as a guideline for further utterance. After each utterance, we were building up an abstract idea.

The final stage is Active Experimentation (taking actions and applying) when we anticipate an experience by drawing from our store of abstract knowledge the facts, ideas, skills, processes and attitudes or values which we think will be of help to us in the experience which we are anticipating.

LANGUAGE LEARNING THEORIES: An Overview

According to Skinner's `Operant Conditioning Theory` the events or stimuli-the reinforcers-that follow a response and that tend to strengthen behaviour increase the probability of a recurrence of that response constitute a powerful force in the control of human behaviour.

The *cognitive theory* of learning put forth by Ausubel contrast `rote' and `meaningful' learning. Meaningful learning is described as a process of relating and anchoring new materials to relevant established entities in cognitive structure. As new materials enter the cognitive field, it interacts with and is appropriately `subsumed' under a more inclusive conceptual system. The material is meaningful as it is relatable to established elements in cognitive structure.

According to Rogers' *humanistic psychology*, learning how to learn is more important than being `taught' something by a teacher who is superior and decides what shall be taught. What he believes to be needed is real facilitators of learning. Teacher as facilitator must provide the appropriate contexts for learning.

Krashen believes that conscious learning makes only small contribution to communicative ability. He states that communicative competence is acquired through communication not through conscious structure practice.

McDonough (1986) states that the work in conversational analysis, classroom discourse and the input hypothesis is often used to justify the use of communicative activities in the classroom (eg.information gap, functional tasks, role-play etc.)

Richards and Rodgers (1986) believe that it is possible to detect elements for an underlying learning theory in communicative language teaching practices. They describe these elements as;

1- "the communication principle" (activities that involve real communication promote learning)

2- "the task principle" (activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning)

3- "the meaningfulness principle" (language that is meaningful to the learner supports the earning process)

Elliott, (1984: 38) says that "Theories of learning are dependent on metaphors, because they are centrally concerned either with mental acts and conscious processes or with operations of mental mechanisms below the level of consciousness, all of which are describable only by metaphorical means". Theory-derived metaphors with a strong explanatory power become, as Thornbury (1991) says, a part of the shared "folk theory of teachers". As I mentioned above, Krashen's (1982) *monitor model* is an example. Teachers talk about *habit-forming* and *reinforcement*, without ever having read Krashen or Skinner. As Thornbury (1991) says, "since the metaphor is powerful enough not only to speak for itself but, directly or indirectly, to influence their classroom practice".

We can give examples of the use of metaphors from our learning experience of Nyanja. In our post-lesson meeting, most of us depended on the use of metaphor when it came to verbalize our experience:

e.g.   1- `I got lost in the amount of information'

        2- `we shouldn't have covered so much stuff'

        3- `we were getting too much input'

        4- `I switched off (turned off) at the end'

        5- `I started playing with the language (having fun)'

In these examples, as Thornbury (1991) says, learning is seen as a "mechanical or computational process" (as in 3 & 4), as "puzzle solving" (5), "as matter or commodity" (1). All of these metaphors for learning share a common view of language.

The metaphor of language as matter is very widespread in recent learning theory. For example, language can be `chunked' and `segmented'; or can be `filtered' and `blocked' ; as a commodity it can be `picked up' or `acquired': it even fossilizes on occasions.

As Schon (1979 in Thornbury, 1991 has argued, through the discovery of new metaphors, new perceptions, explorations and inventions are generated.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980 as in Thornbury, 1991:3) say that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature". It is claimed, therefore, that "one fruitful way to begin to understand the substantive content of the metaphors that appear when teachers express themselves" (Munby, 1986: 201)

THE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

With a view to experiencing the role of the students and sensitizing the trainees to the significance of how they talk about teaching and learning, Nyanja lesson was taught in our Theory and Practice option (MA TEFL course, Reading University, Centre for Applied Language Studies). As Thatcher (1990) says we learn something from each experience but what we learn may not be what it was intended that we should learn. Possibly if the experience has been a negative one the lesson which has been learned is to try to avoid a similar experience in the future or it can be just the opposite, the learner may have learned alternative strategies to enjoy himself despite the negative environment. My previous language learning experiences were all positive and I thought my Nyanja learning experience will be the same but I was disappointed. I must say that, in general, my Nyanja learning experience has been a negative one and unfortunately it didn't match my expectations as a learner and as a teacher for the reasons discussed below.

Needs Analysis: First of all, it was a pity that the teacher didn't carry out a needs analysis which was necessary in order to obtain information about learners' background, motivation needs, interests and

priorities. This would give us as a learner some responsibility for deciding the agenda for our learning.

Motivation: I have to confess that right from the beginning of the Nyanja lesson I was de-motivated because of the language. I didn't know anything about Nyanja and I had no idea where this language is spoken, and I knew that I would never need or have opportunity to use the language, so I lacked the motivation which is perhaps the most important thing that a learner brings to the classroom. My short-term goal, the assignment for the course, was the source of any motivation I had. Depending on my previous language learning experiences (English and Spanish) I can say that I have an integrative motivation which reflects "a high level of drive on the part of the individual to acquire the language of a valued second-language community in order to facilitate communication with that group". (Gardner, Smythe, Clement and Clilesman, 1976: 199, in Dornyei 1990: 43). I have always an interest in foreign languages and a desire to interact with the community of those languages. I learn the language easily if I have a sympathy or a positive attitude towards the community of that language. Because the language was not contextualized in Nyanja lesson, I was de-motivated. But two days after the lessons while we were watching a video about Malawi in another option, two people began to talk in Nyanja (**Muli buanji**: How are you? and **Ndri bwino**: I'm fine). This authentic dialogue made me think more positive about the language and the people or the country where it is spoken. I really wanted to hear more Nyanja, but it was only a small dialogue. If we were shown such a video at the beginning of the Nyanja lesson I am sure we would be more motivated. So I can say that the more the language is contextualized the more motivation I have. This espoused theory of mine was proved to be true with my previous language learning experiences.

My other language learning experience-Spanish-was a part of a methodology option in MA TEFL programme at Bilkent University. I got really excited when we were told that we were going to learn Spanish at the end of the each Methodology option (6 hrs in a week) in order to demonstrate the methods we were taught. I was excited because I always wanted to learn Spanish or Italian. As I said before, I find that motivation is vital in the success of learning a foreign language. I wanted to learn Spanish because I had a Spanish pen-friend. I was also fascinated with the Spanish culture and people in general. So I found it such a thrill to learn the language and be able to communicate with my Spanish friend in his own tongue. Motivation and the opportunity to use the language were the two

most helpful elements in my Spanish learning experience. The teacher was an American but he had been living in New Mexico. Spanish was his second language. He talked about the people of the language and their culture then he played a short video about it, which enhanced the motivation I already had. So, another espoused theory of mine is that if you like the language or if you feel positive towards the language, it is more easier to learn that language.

Method and Presentation: At first, Nyanja lesson was not enjoyable. One of the reasons of this was that I didn't like the method he used. For me, his theory was faulty. Right from the beginning of the lesson he translated every single word he taught into English. I would prefer to understand the meaning of the language from the context rather than translating everything. I think, again, I was influenced by my previous learning experience with Spanish. Because in that course, the teacher used TPR (Total Physical Response) while teaching numbers, and some words or phrases which can be understood by mimicking or demonstrating. We were not required to speak and I was having fun while I was guessing the meaning of the language from the context and demonstration. I think this method is very suitable especially for beginners. For me, his theory to chose this as a starting point was the right decision. When we were given sufficient input he demonstrated direct method in the following lesson. While practising this method we had to speak the language and I think it was the right time, that is, we were ready to talk. We were now able to answer the teacher's questions such as `What is your name', 'How are you' and `What is this'. Everything he taught was building a meaningful conversation, dialogue for the following lesson. So in the next lesson we were presented a dialogue (Audio-Lingual Method). He was first modelling it and then we were mimickin g. The next stage was choral imitation, then individual response and role playing. When we got sufficient input we were ask to translate (Grammar Translation) short passages, dialogues which included the words we learned before from Spanish into English. Then we were presented communicative activities and asked to involve in communicative activities where we had a communicative purpose. In these activities the focus was on communication rather then language practice. (role plays, information gap activities). The purpose of the communicative activities was to create real-life situations where we can practice using the language (e.g. in a restaurant). I enjoyed this stage more, because as I mentioned before I learn a language in order to survive or communicate in the target language situation. He used a lot of authentic material when teaching the language

such as menu, numbered colourful cards, picture talk, charts, fruits (while teaching the names of fruits) etc.

In Nyanja lesson, on the other hand, I don't think that the teacher planned a syllabus. The lesson was student led rather than teacher led. He was asking questions such as `What do you want to learn now?'. Some of our friends, for example, were asking questions like `How do you say this, or that in Nyanja' and this was leading the lesson to another direction. I didn't like this and I didn't want to learn those things and this was, again, de-motivating for me. It is true that one can easily de-motivate some students (like me) while trying to motivate a learner by valuing her/his question or trying to satisfy others' expectations. That's why the teachers must be very careful when teaching to a dynamic group who have different backgrounds, experiences, needs, interests and learning preferences.

As for the methodology, I am not totally against Grammar-Translation because, meaning can not always be made clear without translation. As there are grammatical complexities which can not be made clear by supporting visuals alone, these can be clarified by using English as a reference system. The use of English was good for learning about the language but I would also like to "struggle for meaning", which was missing in Nyanja lesson. I wish he had given me more opportunities to use the language in class.

We were also given too much input, more then the digestible amount for beginners. There was no time to internalize the language input. We were learning a word or a phrase and then learning another thing which has nothing to do with the previous one and forgetting them. The things that he taught were not building up a dialogue, for example. He was teaching how to say "how are you" and how to say "I am alright" and then making us practice it. We would like to know how to say "I am not alright" or "I am ill" in order to continue the conversation or the dialogue before we practice it. Again, when we were taught how to say "good morning" we were asked to practice it in pairs. How many times can you practice "good morning"? In short, I can say that pair work activity was a failure because there was not a dialogue or enough language input to practice. This was perhaps because of the time limitation (five lessons only). His allocation of pair was not also clear. There were people who didn't have a pair, for example, and they felt left out. I would expect him to form groups or pairs not us. He was not going around the groups and monitoring our works. `Managing' the classroom and

creating a classroom climate in which students are willing and eager to learn are clearly important aspects of a teacher's work.

Another critical incident was the presentation of pronouns and prepositions which were not urgent for us to learn at that level. We used only two of them anyway. He also gave a list of country names and their languages in Nyanja (eg. Muluya: Arab, Aluya: plural, Arab people and Chiluya: the language, Arabic). This was also purposeless. During this period I 'switched off'. I didn't even copy them down. I can say that there was not a theoretical basis for what I was taught. What were we going to do with all that list of words or pronouns or prepositions? Finally I can say that all I learned was a list of words and phrases but I didn't know how to use them and where.

It is surprising that despite of my negative attitude towards the language, I still remember some words and phrases, especially those which sound nice and funny (eg. **"Kodi, ali kuti ?"**:I wonder, where is he? and **"Cabvuta n'ciani ?"**: What is the matter ?). I also realised that it was really exciting being a learner again.

CONCLUSION

Whether we profess it or not, we generally believe in and follow some teaching methods and have a more or less routinized ways of teaching. This seems natural as we all have our own perceptions of learning and interpretations of the teaching process which may well be compatible with one method or another. This does not present a problem unless we are open to change and as Prabhu (1990) indicates, we do not feel insecure against a threat to our teaching routines.

In looking to future, I wish to view the classroom as a place where you can collect soft data and reflect on theory. My own theory which is in a way modified by the Nyanja learning experience, is that both teachers and students are involved in a cooperative work to bring about effective learning, by the shortest possible route.

I would like to conclude quoting from Widdowson (1984: 88):

"Good language teachers have an instinct for operational research and will adjust teaching procedures, modify plans, vary class activity in accordance with the way learners respond, and in general related instinctive hypotheses to different classroom variables. They will refer technique back to principle, testing one out against the other in a continual process of experimentation, guided by implicit theory, or by intuition".

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