Implication of Structuralist and Generativist Theories in English Language Classrooms at Community Schools in Morang

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the two linguistic theories: structuralism and generativism and their practical aspect in English language classrooms in the context of Urlabari, Morang. This paper deals with the theoretical bases of these theories, global trends, and their practice in teaching and learning from secondary teachers' perspectives and the issues related to theories of teaching and learning in the context of community schools. This study employed a survey design and explored the participants' experiences and practices in teaching English at community schools in Urlabari Municipality. Although teachers had an idea of these two theories, they prefer structuralist theories and follow the activities guided by them such as pattern practice, and rote learning and memorization rather than communicative activities such as pair work, group work, role play, information gap, and language exchange games. Also, it reflects that, unlike the communicative approach, structural approaches have been used as dominant methods of second or foreign language teaching in English classrooms.

Keywords: behaviorism, communicative approach, generativist, mentalism, structuralism

Introduction

Language learning and teaching are based on some philosophical theories and principles. Behaviorism and mentalism are the two fundamental theories of language learning and teaching. The behaviorist theory of language teaching is concerned with psychological theories like classical conditioning theory and operant conditioning theory. In contrast, mentalism is concerned with the Gestalt theory and the cognitive theory. Both of these theories claim to be better than the others. As a practitioner, I have experienced that a single theory or a method may not be complete or suitable to be applied in diverse classroom situations such as multilingual, multicultural, and diverse geographical specificities. However, in structuralism mode, teaching language in contexts as a part of the structure or system is found to be effective in the context of effective areas.

The concept of structuralism was developed by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and extended widely in the 1960s (Joseph, 2017). The essence of structuralism is that everything can be understood or interpreted in the context as a part of the structures. Thus, structuralism is the way of seeing everything through the structures or patterns in a sequence of stimulus-response-reinforcement. Structuralism takes language as social behavior and the subject matter of linguistics is focused on a total set of habits. This theory also claims that there does not seem to be universal grammar because every language has its grammatical system for learning the language. In language teaching, this theory prioritizes different techniques and strategies like drilling, memorizing, structure practice, and imitation or copying. These strategies have been found more effective and motivating to EFL learners. For instance, the desirable responses are enriched by providing appropriate reinforcements. To understand the language through this perspective, both the teacher and students require getting the proper structures and the patterns of the very language in advance. This empowers the proficiency level of the learners to meet achievable goals. To be more specific, the structure reflects the combination of meaningful units in a language relating to morphological and syntactic constructions.

Similarly, the theory of generativism has developed by the effort of Chomsky's Transformational Grammar (TG). Generative Transformational Grammar (GTG) has

been developed as a natural outcome of structuralism, a special type of structuralism (Anttila, 1978). The main goal of generativist theory is to learn the language through innate capacity. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a theory that began from a communicative model of language focusing on communicative competence as opposed to a theory of structure (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This linguistic theory believes that the speaker is supposed to have abstract abilities to produce grammatical sentences in a language. So this theory is based on a cognitive view of language. This theory claims that language is not a set of habits that is developed by repetition or recitation, but it is acquired through the irrespective of knowledge that he is exposed to. This theory further claims that a child is supposed to have a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) and by the effort of it, language is acquired. Thus, all the languages are similar in this perspective. Further, this theory believes that the human mind is a crucial factor in learning language as it is innately pre-programmed with linguistic universals.

As a practitioner, I have experienced that both of these theories have been used in the classroom for a few decades. However, the effective practice of CLL is on the way to improvement.

Literature Review

Structural linguistics developed in the first half of the 20th century with the effort of Saussure's Course in General Linguistics (Joseph, 2017). In structural linguistics, language is viewed as a conventional symbolic system. In contrast, generative linguistics was developed with the effort of Chomsky's syntactic structure in 1957 which connects the grammatical units and meaning to expose the universal features of all-natural languages (Chomsky, 2002). Generativists have adopted many structuralist notions of a system to understand the meaning through the mind. However, the generativist model has emerged as an alternative approach to structuralism (Cornejo, 2004).

Theoretical Basis

In language teaching, learning refers to a change of behavior mastering the new role over the existing behavior (Irmawati & Hum, 2014). They may bring a change in attitude, performance, actualization, and potential. Presenting the model of foreign language learning and teaching, Muhammadi (2016) reveals that there are two factors

involved in the success of learning: external and internal factors. External factors are concerned with the observable elements that may cause the change with the effort of a learner. In contrast, internal factors are concerned with the abstract and innate power of an individual. Language is the process of internalizing the rules through intuition, known as a mental process. The concept of language can be viewed from the perspective of how people practically use the language in their lives rather they observing correct or incorrect expressions from the view of fixed rules and regulations (Muhammadi, 2016).

Structuralism is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes the significance of language as a system and gives the place of linguistic units like sounds, words, and sentences within the system (Xia, 2014). This theory came into existence against traditional grammar as it seems to be scientific and describes the language objectively. Behaviorism was established as a guide for structuralism and the Audio-lingual Method (ALM) was the key to forwarding it. Structuralism claims that every language has certain structures that help the learners to master the language by repeating the same several times. However, the same study reveals that Chomsky's syntactic structure developed as a breakthrough of structuralism in which he believes that every child is born with a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) to internalize the universal grammar. Prioritizing the LAD, Jie (1992) reveals that this seems to be capable of identifying, analysing, distinguishing, and synthesizing grammatical units like phonemes, morphemes, words, and phrases. Generative linguistics was developed against the structuralist tradition in which language was treated as a system of regular patterns within internal and universal consistent features (Whong, 2007). The same study further states that the gap between self-correction and natural language development may be a central point of generativism.

Thus, the audio-lingual method was developed as the theoretical ground of behaviorist psychology and structural linguistics. In contrast, Communicative Language Learning (CLL) emerged rejecting the principles of structural linguistics to achieve communicative competence. However, the data reveals that the practical aspect of the CLL is being progressed in the classroom.

Global Trends in Teaching and Learning

Various changes can be seen in the field of English teaching and learning such as changes in contents, approaches to teaching, integration of ICT, and roles and responsibilities of teachers (Jora, 2019). However, ELT in Nepal does not seem to have a great influence on these changes. Teachers and educators are searching the current theories and methods to meet the needs and demands of the students and the modern world. However, Abate (2015) reveals that the limited CLT practitioners and their vivid understanding of novice theories may have become a great challenge in the world.

As an ELT practitioner, I feel that the majority of the trainings, workshops, and seminars are limited and found inefficient in addressing the demands of the teachers of the day. As a result, the teachers from the urban are not as familiar as a town to new approaches. This reflects that teachers should be updated in teaching-learning approaches. Prioritizing the importance of the newly adopted method, Larsen-Freeman (2000) states that the eclectic method (pluralistic approach) to language teaching and learning may be effective in maximizing the learning opportunities by various means like encouraging learner's autonomy, integrating language skills, and raising cultural awareness.

Teaching and Learning Model in Nepal

There are many theories and principles for language teaching and learning. However, in the context of Nepal, there has still been practicing the traditional theories and methods for learning and teaching in the classroom (Bhattarai et al., 2022). EFL teachers play a significant role in promoting the English language by enhancing innovative teaching methodologies from different educational theories and principles. However, Joshi et al. (2018) reveal that EFL teachers in Nepal may be confined to traditional professional strategies like workshops, training, meetings, and course dissemination programme in formality. As a result, the effect of these strategies can be reflected in educational institutions. Teachers participated in training and workshops organized by Nepal Government or any other non-government organisation, however, they have not brought any changes in classrooms. Bista (2011) reveals that trained and even professional teachers and educators solely depend on lectured methods (traditional method of teaching) and Grammar Translation Methods. This reflects that students are

not given better opportunities to participate in teaching-learning activities. This model of teaching and learning orients toward memorization and mechanical drilling.

As an ELT practitioner, I have experienced that each teacher has to perform different roles at different periods regarding the theories and methods. Teachers and educators are worried about the application of modern theories in the classroom. However, Paudel (2018) reveals that prescribed methods and theories in the course or textbooks for teaching and learning are the barriers to effective teaching. Teachers and students are not free to choose the methods and theories they prefer because the reading materials are designed just to transfer as the Banking Model of Freire. This reflects that Nepali ELT classrooms are imposed with conventional structural methods. The same study further states that no methods themselves are proven to be universally applicable.

Teaching and Learning Issues

In the context of Nepal, most of the ELT classrooms are like a cinema hall consisting of 60 to 80 students in a single class. Moreover, classrooms are diverse groups of people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. There are many philosophical theories related to learning and teaching English as a second or foreign language like linguistic theories, psychological theories, cultural theories, and social theories. Among these theories, skinner's behaviorism advocates language learning as a habit formation, and Chomsky's nativism sees language as a natural phenomenon (Cook, 2007).

Regarding this issue, Panthi and Belbase (2017) reveal that choosing an appropriate method to fulfill the needs of learners in diverse situations is a big problem in ELT classrooms. With the change of time, the methodological practice in teaching science has been changed. This has made a measurable change in teaching science. The locally and globally available resources, contextual pedagogical practices, innovative supports, and networks have played a significant role in the change in teaching science from behaviorist/traditional approaches to modern approaches (Acharya, 2016). The majority of the research shows that no methods themselves are approved as universally applicable. This may depend on the context or the demand for the texts to be delivered. For instance, Grammar-based methods known as a structural approach were practiced as a modern method in the UK and audio-lingual method in the USA in the 1950s (Karn,

2007). The theories and methods that were relevant in the 1950s foreign context have become relevant and prominent in the present context in Nepal. Similarly, Nepal (2017) reveals that although there emerged new theories and methods like the communicative approach, natural approach, and so on, translation (so-called traditional method) has still been used as a current method of second or foreign language teaching.

The above researches reveal that communicative language teaching has gradually shifted to the audio-lingual method, emerging as a modern method of teaching. This method places more emphasis on communicative functions which can be performed through varieties of classroom activities like pair work, group work, role play, information gap, and language exchange games. This method focuses on a child-centered method aiming to accomplish communicative competence. The application of this method needs careful understanding to practice in the class to promote learners' multiple proficiency. However, CLT practitioners are limited to practicing/applying this approach in the context of rural areas in Nepal.

Methodology

This study is qualitative. This study explored the participants' experiences and practices in teaching English through the perspectives of two linguistic theories: structuralism and generativism at community schools. I obtained their experiences of teaching English through a questionnaire. For this, I employed a survey design and explored the participants' experiences and practices in teaching English at community schools in Urlabari Municipality. I obtained their experiences about the two linguistic theories: structuralism and generativism and their practical aspect for language teaching and learning in the context of community schools through the questionnaire. So, the questionnaire was a method for data collection. As an English teacher of community schools, I decided to choose the teachers of community schools as my participants. Also, I believe they could provide rich information to meet my objectives. Then I requested ten English teachers who had at least five years of teaching experience to voluntarily participate in this study. I tried to balance the gender of the participants to ensure the representation of both genders and the diverse experiences of both males and females. I have replaced their original names with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Results and Discussions

Based on the information collected from the English language teachers teaching at the secondary level, this section presents the results of the data analysis of whether they are confined to the traditional professional strategies (structuralist approach) like rote learning, drills, workshops, training, meetings, and course dissemination programme or transferred in innovative teaching-learning activities(generativist approach) like, group work, storytelling, debate, open discussion, peer coaching, and ICT based programmed instruction. The focus of my study was on the experiences of secondary teachers teaching at community schools in Urlabari Municipality, Morang.

Implication of Structuralist and Generativist Perspectives on Language Teaching

Regarding English language teaching at the secondary level, all ten participants showed their vivid experiences with the way of delivering the lessons (content) at grade ten in community schools. Out of ten teachers, five teachers responded that they felt comfortable with the creative learning activities-based generativist approach. However, three teachers opined that they enjoyed translation and pattern practices inspired by Behaviorists which saved their time to accomplish the objectives. Two teachers showed their experiences with blended activities. The experiences and practices of English teachers were explored by analyzing the responses from the English teachers and how they delivered/transferred the lesson (content) in the ELT classroom. Also, I explored the concept of two linguistic theories: structuralism and generativism, and their influence on teaching.

Regarding teaching reading, Pramesh, a teacher of Radhika Secondary School said that he prioritizes the reading texts and goes thoroughly with verities of reading texts to support their pedagogy and content mastery. Similarly, the other two teachers, Nawaraj from Laxmi Secondary School and Sujan from Sarada Secondary School shared similar ideas with Pramesh. They said that they focused on structures grammar and individual words to understand the meaning of the text. It showed that they draw the meaning of the text through word meaning and the relationship between sentences. Also, it reflects that students understand the meaning of the texts through pattern practice and rote memorization. Although they had an idea of communicative methods of teaching English, they could not follow due to unknown reasons. However, Tanka, a

teacher at Shree Secondary School said that he always encouraged his students to read the texts and involve them in communicative activities such as role play, storytelling, debate, and discussions to find contextual meaning. Likewise, Naresh, a teacher at Sirjana Secondary School, Deepa, a teacher at Singha Devi Secondary School, Meena, a teacher at Saraswati Secondary School and Rupesh a teacher at Janata Secondary School shared a similar experience with teaching reading. It means they encourage students in creative activities to convey the meaning of the given texts. It also shows that they are guided by the Chomskyan school (Generativist approach). However, the two other teachers Roshan a teacher at Mahendra Secondary School, and Nima, a teacher at Amar Secondary School had different experiences and practices. They said that they adopted new strategies (i.e. participatory approach) and techniques based on students' needs and interests. Also, they focused on students' level and class size. It indicates that they are flexible in applying the classroom activities. They do not focus on rigid techniques and activities. It implies that teachers enhance students for their creative learning.

Regarding teaching grammar, Nima said that students enjoy generating creative sentences rather than using set rules. Also, he added that he let the students engage in activities such as storytelling, debate, and discussion which encourage them to apply grammar rules in real context. It implies that he focuses on meaning rather than teaching rules. Prioritising the Chomskyan theory, another teacher, Naresh said that he teaches grammar implicitly. In his words, For example,

A: *What is wrong with your finger? It is bleeding now.*

B: *What tense does it indicate?*

This indicates that he gives an example rather than saying it is present simple tense. Supporting him, another teacher Meena said that she gives more priority to indirect ways of presenting grammar points to the students. This view seems to be based on the generativist approach. This indicates students participate in various activities that focus on fluency rather than accuracy such as roleplay, question-answer, production, and interaction.

On the contrary, Nawaraj said, he was highly influenced by Behaviorists and felt comfortable teaching grammar rules explicitly. Similarly, another teacher, Pramesh said

that he encouraged students to use set structures that support learning through imitation, repetition, and memorization. Supporting his idea, another teacher Sujan said that students like to participate in control practice activities such as reading exercises, gap-filling, transformation exercises, and rearranging exercises. Also, another teacher Nima said that she immediately corrects the errors of students focusing on accuracy. It suggests that she facilitates students to build solid sentences based on the established structures. However, the other two teachers Naresh and Deepa said that they do not emphasize a single model of teaching. Instead, they prefer various activities based on students' needs and levels such as dialogue practice, guided writing, storytelling, and picture description. They believe these activities are enough and appropriate to develop communicative activities. Also, these activities enhance students' work collaboratively and engage in conversations with the teachers and their peers using different language functions. It implies that no teachers use fixed methods of teaching while delivering the lessons. Also, it reflects that they teach grammar explicitly and implicitly.

Concerned with the writing portion, Pramesh, a teacher at Radhika Secondary School said that he provides models of writing such as news stories, skeleton stories, messages of condolences, invitation letters, and biographies. It means he helps students complete the writing tasks based on the established norms and values. Highlighting the free writing part, Tanka, a teacher said, that varieties of writing activities such as writing letters, paragraphs, emails, news articles, conversations, condolence, biographies, book reviews, and interpretation of charts and tables are practiced in a group in the classroom. It means relevant topics are selected and encourage students to foster their creativity. The other teachers like, Naresh, Nima, Meena, and Deepa had similar practices on writing activities. It suggests that teachers not only use the specific methods of teaching writing to support students complete their tasks but also help them to complete their tasks critically and creatively.

Besides, reading and writing, listening and speaking skills are another prominent part of English textbooks. However, most of the teachers responded that very few activities are conducted to address these skills. Regarding listening skills, Deepa said that she encourages students to give specific information about the websites and listen to authentic texts to develop listening skills. It indicates that listening skills have become a

less important part of teaching at school level students. Additionally, another teacher, Rupesh put his view on listening and speaking skills and said he uses vivid exercises such as listen and do, prepared talk, speech, picture description, reporting event, presentation, and question-answer occasionally. It indicates that teachers are aware of these activities. However, these activities are less of a priority in practice. It suggests that teachers should focus on these activities without any sort of clause. Regarding the specific techniques and activities, Pramesh said that he preferred various classroom activities such as rote learning, memorization, copying, and discussion while delivering the lessons. While, Deepa, another teacher said that she engages students in communicative activities. However, it becomes worthless. They do not like doing exercises in the class. It indicates that teacher-centered methods are used in the class. They also help engage students in the classrooms.

Regarding the materials, Meena said that she uses the numerous learning sources available in schools, and she encourages her students to use them in a real context. However, students do not show interest in teaching materials. It reflects that teachers show their interest in the relevant learning sources to conduct teaching-learning activities in the classroom. However, students are not motivated by them. It shows that teachers use some other available sources in their schools. For this Neema said that she has ICT access in a school and she uses the internet to provide learning materials. It indicates that some of the teachers use the internet for searching information and make their content feel comfortable. It means teachers use technology devices in the classroom to support their study materials.

Some teachers denied that the no specific methods appropriate to the present context. Nawaraj said that classroom activities are developed without considering students' needs and interests. It indicates that teachers are not upgraded in time and again. Also, it suggests that teachers use very limited sources as learning materials in the classrooms.

Conclusion

The results reveal that learning is centered on behavioral practice rather than an intellectual process. In other words, structuralism seems to be an appropriate and effective teaching and learning method in Nepali contexts. In this mode of teaching and

learning, activities orient toward memorization and mechanical drilling from nursery to tertiary level. However, some of the teachers' views reveal that the communicative approach has emerged as an alternative modern method of teaching providing better opportunities for the learners to participate in the classroom actively. Those teachers who prioritize communicative activities believe that language learning is possible even without any practice or imitation. Also, those teachers believe the communicative approach is supposed to be democratic and appropriate to all levels of learners.

As an ELT practitioner, based on the results, the methods and strategies that the teacher attempts to transfer into the classroom are far beyond the real classroom situation. Some methods are easy to apply and understand. However, some methods need more advanced theoretical and practical knowledge to be implemented. Additionally, although teachers and educators are provided better opportunities with newly appointed pedagogical practices, they are changed only on themselves theoretically rather than the needs and demands of the contexts and concerns. Moreover, teachers and educators have failed to change their attitudes and behaviors to bring newness to the classroom. As a result, in the present context of Nepal, learners are still seeking classroom-based methods guided by psychological theories that suit the context.

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