

Synthesizing the Approaches and Critical Pedagogy to Tibetan English Classroom

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Abstract

The primary aim of teaching English in India is to enable the learners to communicate in the target language. The learning experience is also attached to social status as well as employability. To ensure effective delivery, the teachers in the language classes experiment and, most of the time, struggle to find the right approach to teaching. There are various approaches, principles and methods of teaching in an English classroom, but the challenge of teaching in an English classroom where the students come from Himalayan or Tibetan community pose a different challenge to the teaching and learning experience altogether. Though the Britishers did not colonize Tibetans, the community living in exile in India faces the challenge of learning the English language in the colonial framework. The present paper aims to analyse and find a balance between the different approaches like Structural, Functional, Participatory and Critical Pedagogy. It not only aims to synthesize but present an effective teaching and learning model based on the critical participatory pedagogical model of Paulo Freire as an alternative for a Tibetan English classroom.

Keywords: Structural Approach, Functional Approach, Participatory Approach, Critical Pedagogy, Paulo Freire, Tibetan Community

With the introduction of the National Educational Policy (NEP 2020) in India, the roles of teachers and learners must be reviewed again. It not only breaks the old stereotype of the teacher but also infuses the relationship between teacher and learner with new vitality. The traditional role of a teacher has been that of the controller, the organizer, the assessor, knowledge provider, tutor, observer etc. But now, both the teachers and learners are more than mere stakeholders. The relationship must be that of mutual prompting and active participation. The new education policy insists a lot on the role of the mentor and the mentee. Let's not forget one thing; even a learner can be a potential teacher. The mutual relationship between the teacher and learner should also enrich the other stakeholders and, in due process, must enhance the curriculum. The learners should also be ready and open to reviewing their learning through peers and self-assessment. Let's not assess the students to fail or pass in the class, but rather help them grow as responsible citizens. In this radically changing scenario, it becomes imperative yet challenging to find proper methods, approaches, and teaching techniques, especially when you are teaching at a university populated by the students of Tibetans living in exile in India.

The primary purpose of teaching language in India is to train the students to understand and communicate well in the target language¹ and to seek better job opportunities.

In my opinion, teaching and learning a language inevitably connects the students with the teacher as it binds them together in a mission mode to achieve something prone to be assessed in the end. In the present era of social networking, the primary purpose of teaching languages can be for employability. Still, it can also have an aesthetic and political dimension associated with it (Freire; Giroux; Macrine). Whether it is the need to translate a text from the mother tongue to the target language, enabling the learners to read the literature of different languages or even introducing the cultural milieu of 'the other language'; the purpose of teaching language can vary according to the needs and times (Harmer).

In my experience as an English teacher teaching in India, I have always realized that if you teach in a class where students have an excellent knowledge of their mother tongue, it becomes straightforward to teach them the other language, which is English in my case. The role of the first language in another language classroom is vital as it allows the students to have an automatic comparative framework and notice the diversity between the languages. However, like other teachers, I also face the literal transliteration issue where students also try to speak English with the heavy influence of their mother tongue. I teach at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath, Varanasi, India. The students are predominantly Tibetan living in exile in India or the Himalayan region Buddhist students who are well-versed with Tibetan Language and culture. At my university, the respect for the ancient Tibetan Bhotiⁱⁱ language is so powerful that the students consider it their religious duty to preserve and promote it via the English language. But at the same time, one can also feel the fear of losing the linguistic identity while teaching in the colonizer's language. For the Tibetan community, living in exile in India, teaching in the English language offers a different experience as Britishers were not the direct colonizers of the Tibetan community. Yet, they feel affiliation and resonance in their present condition with China while being taught in a colonizer's language (MacPherson; Palfreyman; Phap).

Elements and/or Skills of Language Emphasized

Before analyzing the various approaches, which can be merged with effective critical pedagogy, I would like to discuss the elements of the language classroom. There are multiple elements and skills aimed at in a language classroom. A holistic and integrative approach must bring a delicate balance of diverse elements like phonetics, lexis, grammar, LSRW and make it interesting for the learners. The elements which I emphasize in the classroom are speaking and writing. As I mentioned earlier, I teach at a university where all the students come from the Himalayan region or are Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns living in exile in India. It is imperative to help my students have their voices heard on the international level; the issue is not only of learning but also of their identity and survival. To serve this purpose, I strongly use the 'Pedagogy of Hope' of the renowned educationalist Paulo Freire in my classes,ⁱⁱⁱ where every skill is used as a weapon for social activism. Henry Giroux highlights the political aspect of the critical pedagogy of Freire in his seminal book *"Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope: Theory, Culture and Schooling"* (1997):

Freire offers the possibility for organizing pedagogical experiences within social forms and practices that "speak" to developing more critical and dialogical modes of learning and struggle. But Freire's theory of experience is rooted in a view of Language and culture that links dialogue and meaning to a social project emphasizing

the primacy of the political. In this case, "empowerment" is defined as central to the collective struggle for a life without oppression and exploitation. (132)

One crucial element in the whole process of learning is errors and their handling in the classroom. Errors in the process of learning accelerate the process itself. Not as paradoxical as it sounds, the errors committed, especially in speaking and writing exercises, help us understand the intricate relationship between two languages. Most of the time in my classes, I point out the students' errors in a suggestive manner. I don't immediately give them the answers but open their eyes to the other possibility where they get motivated to find the answers. Most of the time, I have realized that if, as a teacher, you become very strict with the students and do not allow them to commit mistakes, the comparatively shy Tibetan students don't speak or write at all. Of course, errors must be corrected, but when, how much, and where becomes a sensitive issue when students struggle to acquire a second language (Rodriguez).

The main objective of teaching in a language classroom is to enable the learners to understand, analyze, speak, read, and write with the proper use of the language. The right approach helps a teacher to attain this objective. It provides an excellent account of the essential elements and structure of the language. An interconnection between approaches further gives rise to methods and techniques to help learners learn effectively. Teachers usually select the implication of various techniques based on the need of their learners. The learning approach is very dynamic and alters and gets adapted while interacting with the students in the classroom. I like to use the eclectic approach with the integrated methodology of learning.

Usually, when teachers teach in the traditional classroom set-up, they are not aware of the subtle distinctions like the teaching approach, the method of teaching or even the principles of teaching. The terms of such nature clash and collide as it becomes difficult to observe them. However, a better understanding of the various approaches, methods and principles enables a teacher to design and deliver the lecture better. Let me spend some time pointing out the subtle differences between these terms.

The approach is more related to the language, theories, structure, and usage we adopt and adapt in the classroom.^{iv} The approach is conditional and should be governed by the students' feedback in the sense that a teacher should be dynamic enough to alter and adapt the approach as and when needed. The nature of the subject also determines the approach. So the approach of a science classroom or a teacher can be different from that of a literature teacher (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson).

The syllabus conditions the design/method, yet it includes and allows the teacher's ingenuity to engage with the class. The tasks, activities, assignments, pattern of delivering the lecture, the material used in the class, the degree to involve the students, assessment techniques etc., determine the fabric of the method. It must attain its objectives in the end.

In other words, a teaching method is a delicate balance that is brought with the participative role of the students in an institutional context governed and controlled by the teaching and learning material. So a trained teacher becomes an embodiment of the teaching

principles, which ultimately, according to the material and the qualification and demand of learning, picks up either a strategy or combination of systems which we can call a method in this context. The inventiveness of the teachers in the classroom enables them to use the same techniques for different methods and vice-versa. The problem with the methods in India is that they are governed mainly by the nature and structure of the syllabus- linguistics, literature and situational based. However, passionate teachers can bring some 'innovative moreness' to it.

The procedure/technique is about how the method is used in the class. It is more oriented towards the learner's behaviour pattern and the learning process itself. The same method can have different types of procedures in the hands of the same or different teachers. The procedure can be dull or lively method based on the equipment and tools used. The techniques used across the globe unite the different teachers in a community. Techniques are like tools; the more you have, the better are the chances to be effective in the class. But what matters the most is selecting the proper method to use the tools. Without a suitable method, techniques are like darts thrown in the dark. Techniques are the external manifestation of covert principles by which it is guided. There are various approaches to teaching, especially in the language classroom, but I would like to stress a few of them in my research paper. The first half of the paper deals with the structural, functional, and participator approaches and the designing of various tasks, and the latter deals with the functional approach.

The Structural Approach

The structural approach is comparatively very famous in India because of its insistence that the English language can be best learned by understanding the different structures or patterns of sentences. First, let's be very clear that it is an approach, not a method. So Audio-Lingual, direct, and cognitive code approaches can be used (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson). In a structural approach, the different elements of language like phonemes, morphemes, words, structures, and sentence types play a vital role. Vocabulary teaching is secondary to grammar. It is imperative to teach the language in a structural approach rather than teaching about the language.

The method of the structural approach would point out its primary objectives first. And the most important objective would be to train the students in framing the structures so that they are well versed in written English. The teaching of grammar and composition has become a significant method. The different word orders and placing can be taught to the students in a prescriptive grammar manner with many exercises. Vocabulary teaching should be less, and if used, it should be used to support drilling the structures (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson).

While teaching the English language with the structural approach, I would focus more on the basic units of language structures popularly known as SVOCA.

The structural approach can use the following procedures-

- A. The teacher can motivate the students to observe their mother tongue's and English's structural differences.
- B. Different words can be taught by categorizing them in different parts of speeches.

- C. The small structural units can be taught to the students with active participation using the blackboard or the flashcards.
- D. The insistence on the content words
- E. An inductive approach to grammar teaching is adopted in the class

Participatory Approaches

As the name suggests, the participatory approaches do not rely upon any specific language items, elements, or functions to start with like the traditional language teaching classrooms. Instead, the process of learning is teleological. With the shared experience of the learner, the process gives birth to the final product of learning, let's say the poster, letter, application etc. Hence the curriculum is the result of an ongoing context-specific problem-solving process. In other words, in participatory approaches, one teaches through communication, develops shared experience, values the culture and, during the process, develops linguistic skills. Participatory approaches produce students capable of acting and making decisions to gain control over their lives.

The most crucial difference between participatory approaches and TBL (Task-based) and CBI (Content-based) is the nature of the content. In participatory approaches, the content is selected capable enough to generate discussion, which is of great concern and value. The text is contextualized in the culture of the learners so that they start to feel an affinity with it. Hence the learning becomes very involved, and the students learn simultaneously. They can also see the utility of the tasks.

On the other hand, both TBL and CBI are content and task-based learning where a specific disciplinary content or task is the centre of communication. The teacher prompts the discussion and gives feedback. Participatory learning-based tasks promote learning by active participation. Let me explain my point by designing some model tasks.

Tasks for Participatory Approaches

Context- The students, divided into two groups, were given Bama's short story "We too are Human Beings" to read. A small documentary on racism and discrimination was shown to them the previous night.

Task 1- Form the guidelines and the rules for a student anti-discriminatory cell on campus. Mention all the markers based on which some of you felt discriminated by others. Also, draft a policy on how can the instances of such discrimination can be reduced on campus. The second group was given the task of formulating the rules and regulations for the anti-ragging student cell.

Both groups were directed to swap each other's write-ups and observed the commonalities and differences in their writings.

Task 2

Context- Students were shown the newspaper images of the recent war between Russia and Ukraine. A brainstorming session was conducted with the help of the students to analyze the causes and the future repercussions of such a global war.

Task- Divide the class into groups. Group A will be representative of Russia, and group B will represent Ukraine. Sit down together in a room and have a role play for the peace conference. Design the posters, proposing possible solutions to avoid such wars in the future. Design some persuasive slogans and post them on social media accounts.

Task for TBL

The students were divided into four groups and took a local tour of Sarnath Deer Park.

Task- Take a free tour of the park and observe the anomalies. Design a minimum of 10 to 15 posters to display at some crucial junctures in the park for the outside visitors, mentioning clear-cut directions on keeping the historical monuments intact, maintaining cleanliness, and not deforming the ancient sites. Sit together, choose the best ten posters from the whole group, and install them in the park.

Task for CBI

Context- The teacher shows some pictures of certain Buddhist statues and artworks to a combined class of upper intermediate learning. The teacher also gives some keywords from the discipline of architecture like style, design, tools, visual dimension, ancient building material etc. The teacher also provides a short handout to each of the students, which has a write-up in 500 words about the architectural design of the Bodhgaya temple.

Task-Write an application to the curator of your university's museum to tag all the historical statues of Buddha according to the style of the historical era and design.

Usually, in a traditional classroom, we try to train the students by keeping in mind some already determined skills like listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Whether students like it or not, they still must finish such activities. These classes are usually teacher-centric, and students do not enjoy learning from them. But the tasks given here involve the students so that either their issues or relevant problems find a reflection in the topic they are discussing. Consequently, the student's interest in the desire to learn more collaborative research is developed. The students can see the learning taking place outside of the classroom. They go on trips and the field to see meaningful learning in action. It is solution-oriented, and they can see the impact on society in front of their eyes. They're not scared of exams because the assessment in these tasks is based on their interest area and commitment.

The Functional Approach

The functional approach method, also known as the notional approach, is based on the fundamental principle of catering to cater communicative needs of our society directly. One of the very famous of these approaches is the grammar-translation method. The other traditional methods and approaches, such as the audio-lingual method and situational language teaching, are based on the practice of grammatical structure, vocabulary etc.

In my classes, functional approach-based methods have a significant influence, but I have often mixed the functional approach with the other more participatory approaches. One good advantage of functional approaches is that it provides the learner with communicatively

useful expressions in an efficient structure. As I mentioned earlier, my university students are Tibetans living in exile in India, and English as a second language has always created a big challenge for all of them. So, when they arrive in India, they need to communicate for personal identification, occupation, entertainment, travel, developing a relationship with other people, health and welfare, shopping etc. Here the functional methods play a vital role in giving them a set pattern of speaking and writing in English. So, the students are prepared to deal with basic situations and can effectively use the language they have learned in real-life situations. They find it very practical because they feel competent in their learned functions. So basically, the focus of language instruction is to learn about communicating meaning through a function.

In India, Tibetan students feel very comfortable using functional structures in class, but they fail to accurately produce the same sentences when the communication occurs outside the class. A more sophisticated functional approach was introduced to address this issue, known as communicative language teaching,^v which I often use in my classes. The methods of functional approach became more usable and practical with CLT. Since the communicative language is to be used in the natural context, the functional aspect of language is more authentic and intention driven. Multiple linguistic forms of the same function are sometimes used repetitively for better acts of communication. Since the listener's feedback is immediate in this approach, the meaning is based on interpersonal negotiation. Communication is seen as an event in the broader social context. The students enjoy the functions of the language they have learned in class and get an opportunity to practice it outside the classroom in a real scenario.

There are advantages and disadvantages to a functional approach like any other approach. First and foremost, it is usually challenging to determine the order to teach functions. Since students are often required to use language structures, this may lead to memorization rather than a complete understanding of a structure's form and use. In the other learning approaches like task-based learning, content-based learning or participatory approaches, the emphasis is on learning in action. You do while you learn. You learn while you do. The one almost opposite method of the functional approach is the silent way. In this approach, the teacher's silent non-involvement technique allows the students to solve problems and learn the language.

Moreover, an approach like multiple intelligences^{vi} is designed to appeal to different intelligences in the classroom. It is very suitable for a class with the students' diversified backgrounds. On the other hand, the functional approach provides the students with the same functional and structural patterns. You perform better if your memory can adapt to those functions quickly.

The reason I have selected various approaches like structural, functional, or participatory must be understood as an honest attempt to seek the balance between the traditional textbook approaches with more radical critical pedagogy. The critical pedagogy makes both the teachers and students aware of their political, social, cultural, and historical identity politics, which is the case with the Tibetan students reading in India. Nonetheless, merging the various appropriate approaches with critical pedagogy in the classrooms can

offer excellent constructive results and fulfil the pressing demands of Education Policy in India.

Notes

ⁱ It refers to the languages, learners learn. In language classes, it is usually English Language which is taught as the target language.

ⁱⁱ A trans-Himalayan classical Tibetan language

ⁱⁱⁱ The renowned Brazilian philosopher and educationist who is globally acclaimed for his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

^{iv} Consult Diane Larsen-Freeman for further clarification

^v CLT insists mainly on the interactive part of communication, consequently being a very supportive tool for cross-cultural communication

^{vi} The theory of multiple intelligences motivates all the learners as they are not assessed based on one criterion alone

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