

## Classroom Sociology and Language Learning

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### Abstract

*The main objective of this study is to see if language classes in the government-aided schools in western part of Nepal are aware of the importance of the classroom sociology and how students engage in power sharing in class and group dynamism and also if language teachers pay attention to this while forming groups. The study has also tried to find out the constraints in the application of the factors that come under classroom sociology and micro-politics in the class.*

### Introduction

Teaching and learning have undergone a sea change. It is not because the context has changed but because the way the learning as a process used to be looked at has been updated along the line of Language Acquisition Theories and perceptions. Earlier behaviorists claimed that language learning is a unidirectional process whereby language teacher implants language into the *tabula rasa* brain of the learner. The learner was merely considered a receptacle and passive receiver. This theory encourages habit formation rather than a construction process in which the learner gets actively engaged in the formation of knowledge regarding language.

Of late, constructivism has brought students to the centre of class as a community. It is because students spending time reacting and being reacted to come to bear on their knowledge construction. In other words, knowledge acquisition particularly language acquisition is a community act and a class forms a society. In this light, under classroom sociology different relational and physical components are studied. This helps to understand different barriers-social, economic, and gender perception-that students bring into the class and even develop in the class through interaction and social discourse. These interactions and social discourse give birth to micro-politics which come into play in relation to the issues of power structure that students share among themselves and with teachers. If this power structure is lop-sided, it may develop powerful barriers to whole communication and collegiality.

### Social significance of classroom discourse

Experts discuss on general features and functions of language which make communication so central in school. To begin with, language transmits curriculum; despite the wealth of technological advancements

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available for presenting information in the classroom, spoken language remains the primary medium for providing instruction and demonstrating what has been learned. Language is used to initiate, monitor, adjust and evaluate cognitive process.

Secondly, language communicates control; classrooms are "crowded human environment" in which one person—namely the teacher—is responsible for preventing and coping with disruptions, as well as encouraging and enhancing learning processes (ibid.). While naturally occurring crowded environments are characterized by numerous "simultaneous autonomous conversations" (ibid.), the classroom situation relies on language rights and mores—usually created by the institution and enforced by the teacher—to establish and maintain social relationships.

Similarly, language reflects personal identity; language is such an integral part of culture and socialization that students experience the sensation of vulnerability when asked to put themselves and their speech "on the line," so to speak, in front of peers and superiors. The increasing prevalence of diverse linguistic backgrounds and levels or types of cultural literacy combined in one classroom only further complicates the matter. Additionally, teachers, like students, bring personal perspectives and anxieties with them in their classroom talk. These issues of communication are brought to the forefront, as the primary way in which speakers express their identity and attitudes within the classroom setting is through language.

### Components of classroom sociology

Classroom sociology has many defining constituents that should be considered as components of classroom sociology. They are:

#### Classroom layout

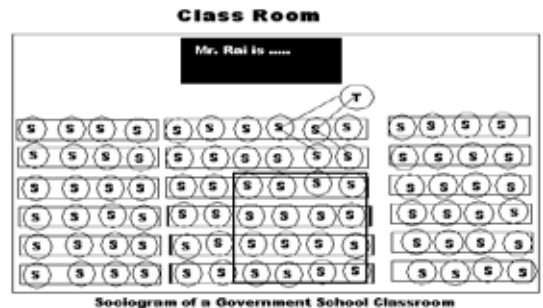
For a language teacher it is required that classroom layout is taken into best of considerations. The furniture arranged is to enhance enough space for the teacher to move about and reach upto each and every individual student.

The teacher should convey the message—through his visual kinesics—that he is available and facilitating, not the one who is 'evil-eye'.



### Relationship between students and the teacher

The teacher should ensure that he/she goes upto each student having problem so that he/she can handle his/her queries. The diagram shows what mostly happens in the classroom of the third world countries. It is found that this diagram represents most of the language teachers' classroom movement in the Nepalese context.



### Who controls the teaching/learning?

It is a fact that language teacher occupies a central source of knowledge. However, this goes against the new tradition of belief that students are to lead the class, not the imparter.

### Constructivism vs. instructivism

If language learning is to be reverse to the behaviourists standpoint, it should be assumed that it is the students who construct language knowledge independently with a language teacher only as a catalyst.

## **Group formation**

The group formation depends on the class size, the students' micro-politics and power sharing dynamics and gender differences present and felt by the students. Another point not to be forgotten is that peers play an important role to dictate their say in language learning and mode of teaching. In other words, language should accommodate these dividing lines to keep them fused.

## **Methodology**

We picked out four large government-aided schools which are thought to represent the government scenario in terms of language teaching and learning and how classroom sociology was taken care of, if any. We observed the whole period of 45 minutes so that we could discern composite teaching and learning activities along with patterns of class or cluster formation and if the teachers were aware of fact as to why a certain student or group was forthcoming and why the other sulked. We also made sure that classes of different level were observed and studied.

We did not inform the concerned teachers about what we were supposed to do. This was because we thought that that might promote the teachers to contrive a mock teaching which would ultimately have given a false picture. Several snaps were taken so that upon the later visits we could tally them.

Afterwards when a picture of the language classes in government-aided schools in Nepal was ascertained, we put it through different theories like constructivism, theories of class room sociology and the theories of group dynamism in the class to name a few.

## **Government-aided school research (observation based)**

Even if we can talk of many lofty principles and strategies, what we should not ignore is that the down to earth scenario is a big say. In Nepal, the constraints we talk about are myriad and varied. Upon our observation, we felt the constraints that impede the language learning/acquisition process which are as follows :

## **Class size**

The schools we observed were government-aided schools. The class size was huge and unmanageable to some extent.

## **Students' background**

What we believe and feel is that students form a cluster along the line of either their economic status or race. The status capital was playing a role in group division in these schools and the students mostly identified with it.

## **Gender and race**

For a class to be homogenous in every sense, a teacher has to be not only expert in content but also exposed to social composition of the locality from which the students come to school. A new teacher may teach well but if he leaves out the necessity to study the community he might fail to understand the social identification of the students, which will affect the interpersonal milieu of the classroom. A tightly clustered classroom is an area of micro-politics rather than a smooth, fluid entity. In observation, we found that teachers preferred frontal teaching and students clustering pattern was ignored as a result the back benchers were always at the back throughout the academic year. We asked the teachers as to why it was so they simply said that it was the way they did. Ignoring the classroom sociology led to a very poor language learning and most of the students felt left out.

## **Basics of classroom management**

To manage a classroom better, it is essential to manage the following components which will allow every individual learner to participate in learning opportunities of the classroom.

*Classroom furniture:* Each classroom is equipped with a set of furniture. Almost in all government-aided schools of Nepal, the furniture is usually a long rectangular wooden desk paired with a bench fixed into two or three columns in the classroom. As the furniture is fixed, conducting group activities is limited to students of the same desk. The seats

of the students are determined by the teachers to ensure that they are occupying seats according to the relation with the other students. The seat arrangement is based upon the idea of combining the students of mixed ability to enable learning from each other. As language teaching demands a high level of practice to enhance the language skills, the existing type of furniture becomes the barrier to an easy access to the other groups to participate in various language tasks.

*Classroom sounds:* Classroom sounds refer to the nature of sounds produced by the teacher and students during the period of learning a language. The sounds create an overall atmosphere of the classroom. It is a common problem that the voice of a teacher being produced from the front of the classroom is hardly audible at the back of the classroom with over 60 students which results in engagement of students in undesirable personal chat among themselves no matter how hard the teacher exerts pressure upon them. The students feel either being left out or take as an opportunity to engage in some private chat. This region of the classroom becomes passive zone and the front of the classroom becomes the action zone of learning where the attention of the teacher is mostly focused on. We found the same during our observation.

*Classroom tasks:* In a language class, language tasks determine the level of involvement that teacher and students establish. If the tasks are not selected and designed considering the requirements and interests of students, the involvement becomes less active and language learning does not take place as expected by the teacher. If tasks do not contribute to the examinations of the students, it is common that students simply skip it no matter how important it is in terms of communicative competence.

### **Classroom management techniques**

The classroom management techniques play a pivotal role to foster language learning. Various techniques can be suggested to ensure an active learning atmosphere in a language class. It is useful to keep a regular record of each individual student being involved in various tasks and their roles. The

purpose of the record is the display of role play in the tasks and sharing different roles to the same student. The roles can be exchanged as new tasks are set for the students. Another technique is to put up a sign up chart on the classroom wall. The open display of the record is the reminder both to the teacher and students to encourage participation in further activities. It is true that silent listening without active participation is not real learning.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations below are made based upon our visit, observation and analysis of the real classroom practices in some government-aided schools of the western region. Upon the above findings, the following recommendations have been put forth:

- Since the furniture of the classroom can't be replaced with tables and chairs right a way in the government-aided schools in Nepal, the teacher should explore and devise the techniques to have the students work in pairs and groups in the existing furniture of the schools. The pair and the groups can be formed from the same desk. Considering the power sharing, gender and ethnicity of the students, the teacher needs to work out a plan to divide the roles of the students in language tasks.
- The teacher needs to pay attention to the backbenchers, who mostly stay idle in language learning.
- We observed that the sitting arrangements of the students were fixed; this should be made flexible and the teacher should see to it that every student is required to sit around the class.
- It was also found that girls and boys were watertight compartments. This should not be the case.
- Frequent change in leadership should be ensured. This will distribute power sharing dynamism and the students will feel that they own the class equally.
- Girls should be encouraged and given a little

more opportunities so that gradually they shed their earlier inhibitions.

- A systematic record keeping of leadership roles will serve the basis of reminding students and teacher constantly about the kind of student participation in language learning.
- The school management should assume that language classes are sometimes noisy and the teacher should convince the headmaster about it. The teacher should not be scared to introduce discussion activities in the classroom.

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