Communicative Competence and Second language Teaching: Lessons Learned from the Bangalore Project

A review of N.S. Prabhu (1987) **Second Language Pedagogy** by N.S. Prabhu. 1987. New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press

N. S Prabhu's objectives in *Second Language Pedagogy* are twofold: to present the "communicative comptence" theory of second language acquisition, and to describe the Bangalore Project which consisted of a small number of elementary and secondary English classes in India. This five-year project, which illustrates the importance of grounding practice in theory, is relevant for adult ESL programs like Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) because of its transition from direct instruction to communicative competence through "meaning making" in real contexts. Prabhu's book is full with provocative insight about second language acquisition (SLA) that practitioners and theorists would do well to explore whether or not they agree with all of Prabhu's assumptions.

One purpose of the Bangalore Project was to develop a methodology in a "sustained teaching" environment consistent with theory in part as a way of refining the theory, but also to shape practice according to a specific theoretical framework. This kind of interaction between theory and practice is a special concern among teacher researchers in the United States (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993). If the theory comes out of a struggle to make sense of perplexing realities it can provide a pathway to more effective action because it satisfies the longing for coherence. In second language acquisition, the theory of communicative competence maintains that language learning takes place in an integrative manner through an emphasis on making meaning, in large part by unconscious assimilation of knowledge through much practice in real contexts over time.

The project stemmed from the professional debate in India on second language acquisition and a quest among those who held a "strongly-felt pedagogic intuition" (p. 1) that

communicative competency represented a major key to effective learning. This view challenged the "Structural-Oral-Situational method," which may be viewed as roughly analogous to the Audio Lingual method popular in high schools and colleges since the 1960s based upon a scripted dialogue as the organizing center to practice listening comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary, and various principles of grammar. These principles were reinforced through substitution-like drill work.

An underlying principle of both the SOS and Audio Lingual methodologies is that language learning can be taught through direct instruction. This perception serves as the basis for the voluminous ESL texts and workbooks based on structured dialogues and skill-based drills. A major difference between SOS and the theory of communicative competence is that in SOS the rules of grammar are absorbed through practice of artificially constructed language while the communicative competence view assumes that a focus on "meaning" (rather than form) is the most effective path to learning correct grammar.

While the communicative competence theory undergirded the project, its specific methodology was that of "task-based teaching." This emerged through trial and error during the project's early history and served as a contextual response to students' expectations for a scool-like given classroom reality of the project. Specifically students expected a school-like classroom environment focused on "real" learning with the teacher playing an important leadership role in the process.

Task-based teaching followed the Vygotskian scaffolding model where "the demand on thinking made by the activity was just above the level which learners could meet without help" (pp. 23-24). Specifically, students responded most favorably to "[r]easoning-gap activity, which involves deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns" (p. 46). Prabhu argues that, at least in the context of this school-based project, the most effective teaching took place through activities that pushed the cognitive boundaries of the students.

Prabhu does not view this model as leading directly to communicative competence but "the expectation is, rather, that success in reasoning activity will support sustained engagement in such activity [critical reasoning] and that sustained engagement is a condition favorable to the development of grammatical competence" (p. 53). Project planners, therefore, never viewed task-based teaching as an end in itself, but as the most effective means possible of developing an internal system of grammatical competence at the level of usage rather than conscious rule articulation. This is so, Prabhu argues, because language coherency (grammatical competence) is invariably linked to the quest for meaning making. Because the "rules" of language are so complex, they cannot be effectively learned through an overt teaching of them, which requires an abstraction from authentic language use. Rather, with the instructor acting as a critical bridge between current abilities and mastery of new knowledge, connections are made within the subconscious mind that result in quantum leaps of new learning. Those familiar with the whole language theory of Frank Smith (1985) will easily recognize this position, whether or not they agree with it.

The pedagogical assumptions supporting the theoretical foundations of the project are most fully developed in chapter four, titled *Learning*. What makes this chapter particularly important is that the assumptions on second language acquisition articulated by Prabhu extend well beyond the task-based methodology of this particular model which, as stated previously, was an accommodation to the expectations of students in a classroom setting.

Central to his support of the communicative competence theory is his belief that concentrated effort of meaning-making leads to subconscious assimilation of form, which remains an important dimension of effective communication. Such attention to meaning-making and subconscious processing is not meant to suggest that any attention to language forms or rules is irrelevant, only that they should be presented in the context of solving real problems. Mastering them is satisfying, moreover, not because there is something in the rules themselves that bring coherency, but because they represent responses to needs identified by students in the process of grappling with real issues.

The fifth chapter is titled *Syllabus and Materials*. Since in Prabhu's theory, teaching (meaning-making through task-type activity) serves ultimately as a bridge for what is learned (grammatical competence) he stresses the dangers of overly detailed and "fixed" syllabuses. Instead, a teaching plan should provide a framework and guidance rather than "answers" or mandates to the complex phenomenon of teaching and learning.

Prabhu's discussion on materials is particularly tantalizing since he links broad principles with concrete suggestions. He stresses the value of "source books for teachers" rather than actual texts since the object of instruction is the stimulation of learning rather than coverage or mastery of particular material. Prabhu, then, argues that "'loosely constructed' teaching materials" are preferable over "tightly constructed" ones since the primary purpose of second language instruction is the enhancement of critical thinking skills through the building up of bridges between what students know and what they might learn. "[L]essons in the classroom are not acts of texts, or language presentation, but rather contexts for discourse creation" (p. 95).

In the final chapter, *Pedagogic Change*, Prabhu raises the critical issue of teacher acceptance of curricular innovations. He points to a "sense of plausibility" which allows a teacher to adopt change. A variety of factors: previous training and education, actual classroom experience and current "theories-in use" that may influence teaching orientation shape plausibility. He argues that the sense of plausibility of teachers will most likely be stimulated when there is no external mandate for change, but rather, when new theories, approaches and methodologies "are able to invoke some corroborative experience in teachers" (p. 105). This, in turn, will depend "on how powerful, well-articulated, or accessible the new perception is" (105). He believes that teacher perception is the single most important factor in stimulating a successful instructional environment.

> A good system of education, from this point of view, is not one in which all or most teachers carry out the same recommended classroom procedures but rather a system in which (1) all, or most, teachers operate with a sense of plausibility about whatever procedures they choose to adopt, and (2) each teacher's sense of plausibility is as 'alive' or active, and hence as open to further development or change as it can be (p. 106).

The continued debate among schools of thought is still essential because innovations, themselves, are only ideal constructs designed to bring increased effectiveness and coherency to teaching and learning. They are tools rather than panaceas and are effective only to the extent to which they resonate with instructors, and, it should be added, students as well.

Second Language Pedagogy is an important text for adult basic learning communities like LVA which are undergoing a shift in their theoretical base from audio-lingualism to a communicative competence perspective. This transition that mirrors the pedagogical transformation detailed by Prabhu in the Bangalore Project. Thus, the themes articulated by Prabhu, particularly his theory of language acquisition and the importance of a sense of plausibility in shaping the practices of instructors are particularly important. In this transition, there will invariably be practitioners from both camps as well as those who mix and match theoretical assumptions for quite pragmatic purposes.

This is not meant to deny the importance of theory, far from it, for good theory channels intellectual energies that often resolves problems that would otherwise remain intact. Communicative language teaching provides a compelling rational to ground instruction in meaning-making activity as an antidote to the profusion of skill-based activities and artificial language use pervasive in the field of ESL instruction. Whether this will result in more effective learning remains to be seen, but at the least, it provides a way of moving forward against what would otherwise be viewed as an impasse by many.

The move to communicative competence will need to be viewed by communities like LVA less as "the new truth," than as an experiment that will require both practical and theoretical refinement over time. As we engage our colleagues in the debate about second language theory and practice, we will do well to respect each other's perceptions and sense of plausibility.

At the least, it is important at to point out that Prabhu's assumption that learning takes place "subconsciously," through a somewhat mystical internalization process has been unchallenged in other second language acquisition research. McLaughlin (1990) finds the

discussion of "conscious" and "unconscious" learning "unscientific," and for him, therefore, not very useful in explaining how learning takes place (p. 620). He prefers the terms "controlled" and "automatic" processing and views more of a bridge than a quantum leap between them. If there is a relationship between controlled and automatic processing, perhaps there is a need for patterned drill work in second language instruction. The issue requires a closer examination as McLaughlin's concerns represent a core challenge to Prabhu's assumptions.

A more fundamental concern that I have with *Second Language Pedagogy* is that it is contains very little supportive case-study evidence. In fact, we do not hear the voices of teachers and students at all, except for some transcribed material placed in the appendix. This is a major shortcoming for a book detailing the results of a project stemming from classroom experience. As LVA begins to orient its ESL program toward the communicative competenc model, such "voices from the field" must play a major role. Any evaluation of ESL theory and practice should draw deeply the experience of students, tutors, and program managers.

From the point of view of adult education theory, another major concern that some readers may have with *Second Language Pedagogy* is the strong role of the teacher in shaping the instructional program. In Prahbu's model, there is clearly an authoritative role for teachers mediated by Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. This is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Gaffney and Anderson, 1991, p. 184).

It is this central role of teachers, which is at least "problematic" in adult education settings grounded in a vigorous participatory ethos where students are the subjects of their own learning. Many adult ESL tutoring sessions in the United States stimulate a traditional classroom setting where students expect to "learn" something from the teacher. The extreme formulation of this is the "banking" model of education condemned so vigorously by Paulo Freire (1970) as an oppressive pedagogy that robs learners of their own authentic voices. Proponents of progressive adult education and adult literacy who argue that the focus of learning emerges from the group,

echo this view by sharply condemning authoritarian pronouncements of teachers (Fingeret and Jurmo, 1989; Cheatham and Lawson, 1990). Prabhu, also, condemns authoritarian behavior among teachers, but supports their authoritative role as expressed methodologically through Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.

Thus, there is a tension within ESL programs between the participatory ethos and the scaffolding model of Vygotsky. Clearly there is a powerful desire among many adult ESL students for language mastery that may be stimulated by the authoritative presence of an effective instructor. Simultaneously, students desire active involvement in the learning process in ways that make sense to them. While they may be entertained and captivated by a wide range of instructional content, they will respond with the most compelling motivation, if the content is geared to areas that concern them the most. Thus, they desire to speak of their personal experiences and to learn of those of their colleagues. On this they are interested in cultural as well as purely personal experience. They also desire also to learn how to master basic requirements that they face in their every day lives and more broadly to learn about many facets of life within the United States. In short, they desire a holistic instructional program that contains both teacher-led and participatory opportunities that extends well beyond the cognitive task-based emphasis that Prabhu found effective in India.

The scaffolding methodology of the Bangalore Project may provide a mid-way point between participatory and banking approaches to education. Such a mediating methodology may prove extremely useful in facilitating the critical work of meaning-making, a core objective of the communicative competency theory of second language acquisition. As should be evident by now, there is much for an adult ESL educator to draw upon from *Second Language Pedagogy*, notwithstanding certain caveats about its limitations.

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