

**A Discourse Analysis of Learner-controlled
Culture-related Episodes in Undergraduate English as an
L2 Classroom in Assam, India**

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Abstract

The primary objective of this paper is to present an analysis of the moments of co-constructed cultural understanding achieved by the spoken interactions in which the learners take the initiative in classroom discourse. The data presented here is part of a study conducted on an advanced-level English as an L2 course at North Lakhimpur College, Assam. The study was primarily on the integration of culture teaching and language teaching in the teaching of L2. This paper is an attempt at an analysis of those culture-related episodes or moments of cultural discourse which were created by the interaction among the learners themselves in which the role of the instructor was relatively non-participatory or less participatory in nature.

Key words: L2, Culture Teaching, Pedagogy, SLA, ELT.

1. Introduction

Teaching of Culture in L2 classroom is a process of teaching in which teaching of cultural information provides instances for language use or the collaborative understanding of the cultural perspectives in the target culture facilitates scope for language learning in the classroom. Taking this perspective, the culture-related episodes or Moments of Cultural Discourses (MCDs) are understood as the key moments of oral classroom interactions in the L2 under study between the instructor and the learners and among the learners themselves about the cultural practices or perspectives of the language community that speak the L2 in question as its mother tongue. The Moments of Cultural Discourses (MCDs) in which the cultural understanding was initiated and achieved spontaneously by the collaborative negotiation of meaning by the learners themselves in the oral class discourse were termed as the learner-controlled cultural episodes in a study of an

undergraduate English as an L2 course designed to integrate teaching of culture and teaching of language.

2. Example a of Learner-controlled MCD

In this section, an analysis of the Moments of Cultural Discourse initiated by learners is presented. The following example of learner-controlled Moments of Cultural Discourse is quoted to illustrate the nature of these MCDs.

Example I: Bhola mastor, Tarun: learner participant, Mukesh: learner participant, Gitali: learner participant, Ss: majority of the learners).

You could not be friends with everyone in Elizabethan England. It's class distinction. You have to choose only those as friends who belong to your class. It was divided into class. Classes of higher class and?

- 2 Ss: Lower class.
- 3 I: Lower class, right.
- 4 Tarun: We have high class and low class here in India too.
- 5 I: Yes. Such as what?
- 6 Tarun: Such as the rich and the poor.
- 7 I: Rich people are in which category?
- 8 Tarun: Rich people are in the high class and poor people are in the low class.
- 9 Mukesh: But that's not like theirs. We can still make friendship.
- 10 Tarun: Yes, I have rich friends too.
- 11 I: So, your society seems to have no such problems.
12. Gitali: No, we have this caste problem. Things are changing, of course.
- 13 Mukesh: Yes, Caste divisions.
- 14 Gitali: Yes, that's very bad. Especially in marriage, it is still very strong.
- 15 I: How?

- 16 Gitali: It's not possible for a Brahmin boy to marry a Shudra girl.
 In some places, even friendship between Brahmin and Shudra is not allowed.
- 17 Mukesh: That's too bad. Is this class difference similar to our caste
 divisions? One of my uncles who teaches English literature in a college told me about it
 sometime back.
- 18 I: Yes, quite a bit. The situation is much better now, right? People are more egalitarian.
 People are leaving those age-old thought habits. They are coming out of those confinements.

The interaction presented in this example was around the concept of class distinctions in Elizabethan England in the context of the discussion on friendship between members of different class in relation to William Shakespeare's friendship with the 'fair youth' referred to in his sonnets.

3. Teacher Initiation at the Start

In turn 1, the instructor is informing the learners about some English socio-cultural perspectives in relation to English socio-cultural history. He brought up the topic of the friendship between the patron of the poet and the poet in the explanation provided just before the present extract. He was directing the attention of the learners to the fact that English society had class divisions during the Elizabethan time by saying, "You could not be friends with everyone in Elizabethan England. It's class distinction. You have to choose only those as friends who belong to your class. It was divided into class. Classes of higher class and?" He ends his explanation of the topic with a demonstrative question as part of his verbal strategy to engage the learners' attention to the discussion.

The students respond with the correct answer, which is expected from advanced-level learners. The instructor repeats their answer to confirm that the response was correct. From here, the interaction takes an unexpected turn as far as the instructional strategy of the instructor for that particular moment was concerned.

4. Learners' Initiative in the Middle

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In turn 4, one of the learner participants, Tarun, takes the lead role in the discussion by breaking in with the statement: “We have high class and low class here in India too.” The learner participant is driving home the point to the instructor as well as the other learner participants that class division was not just an English issue, this distinction is rampant in his country as well. The instructor understands the learners’ motive in the statement and he follows up his comment with an explanatory question in turn 5: “Yes. Such as what?” Tarun explains his statement by pointing out to the division of the rich and the poor in the country in the next turn: “Such as the rich and the poor.” In turn 7, the instructor further questions Tarun about the concept of class division by asking him, “Rich people are in which category?” This question is a demonstrative question used to ascertain the clarity of understanding of the learner participant with regard to the concept of class distinctions. Tarun replies to the instructor’s question in turn 8 providing the instructor exactly with the information that he was looking for: “Rich people are in the high class and poor people are in the low class.”

Another unexpected turn in the interaction happens when another learner participant, Mukesh, retorts to the interaction between the instructor and Tarun so far in turn 9: “But that’s not like theirs. We can still make friendship.” He was referring to the fact that friendship is possible between a rich man and a poor man without the fear of social shame in India. Mukesh was giving his reply in relation to his reservations in equating the instructor’s information of difficulty in relationship between the rich and the poor in Elizabethan England and the factual information provided by Tarun with reference to class distinction of the rich and the poor in India. Tarun confirmed the statements made by Mukesh immediately in the next turn of speech: “Yes, I have rich friends too.” He was referring to the fact that the distinction of people into high class and low class in accordance with their wealth does not affect people’s private relationship so much as it did in Elizabethan England. The instructor makes a random comment in turn 11 only to provide motivation for more elaborate discussion on the topic: “So, your society seems to have no such problems.”

At this point in the interaction, another learner participant, Gitali, makes her entry into the discussion. In turn 12, Gitali responds to the instructor’s comment in turn 11 by disagreeing

with it. She says, “No, we have this caste problem. Things are changing of course.” She was pointing out to the fact that Indian society had the problem of caste divisions. Gitali’s comment was confirmed by Mukesh in turn 13: “Yes, caste divisions.” Gitali in the next turn of speech reiterates the point and introduces a socio-cultural information about Indian society: “Yes, that’s very bad. Especially in marriage, it is still very strong”. She meant that the effect of caste division on private relationships like marriage is highly disappointing. She elaborated on the issue in reply to the response given by Mukesh in the previous turn of speech. In the meanwhile the instructor was forced to keep silence as the interaction was between these two learners. Preventing the silence that might end the interaction, the instructor in turn 15, asks Gitali, “How?” Gitali responds to the instructor’s question by providing an example to illustrate her point in turn 16: “It’s not possible for a Brahmin boy to marry a Shudra girl. In some places, even friendship between Brahmin and Shudra is not allowed.”

5. Learners’ Arriving at an Understanding at the End

In turn 17, Mukesh indicates the explanation of the issue of social shame involved in friendship between people of high class and low class in Elizabethan England. He requests a confirmation of the comparison drawn between the effect of caste division on Indian society and the effect of class distinction in Elizabethan England from the instructor. He explained that this piece of information was provided by one of his uncles. Mukesh says, “That’s too bad. Is this class difference similar to our caste divisions? One of my uncles who teaches English literature in a college, told me about it sometime back.” The instructor’s confirmation of that comparison completes the discussion of the issue. In turn 18, the instructor says, “Yes, quite a bit. The situation is much better now, right? People are more egalitarian. People are leaving those age-old thought habits. They are coming out of those confinements.” But by the time the instructor makes this extended commentary, the concept of class distinction in Elizabethan England and its effect on human relationship had already been understood by the learners from their interactions as evident from Mukesh’s question in turn 17 of Example 6.

6. Analysis of the Excerpt

The excerpt presented in this example illustrates a moment in the classroom discourse in which cultural understanding is co-constructed chiefly by the learners who engage in a discussion that keeps the instructor's role to the level of a co-participant in the negotiation of meaning in relation to a linguistic expression in English. The interaction shown in the excerpt deviates in the middle of the interaction from the original question asked by the instructor with regard to class distinction in England: "Classes of higher class and?" The learner participants add information to the discussion and the instructor is relegated to the background during the discourse, at best he is kept at the level of co-participant in the interaction. The learner participants' comments direct the course of the interaction from issue related to the topic and another. The learner participants debate the topic and arrive at the conclusion that the significance of class distinction in the context of Elizabethan England is not similar with the class distinction found in India. Here, the instructor remains either as a listener or as a provider of links between the different opinions of the learner participants. To understand the concept and significance of class distinction in the context of Elizabethan England the learner participants raise the issue of caste division in India and its implications in the context of Indian society. The learner participants come to the cultural understanding of class distinction in the context of Elizabethan England by comparing it to the caste division in Indian society.

7. Conclusion

As one of the learner participants asks the instructor to check their conclusion of the discussion, the instructor assures them of their correct understanding of the linguistic expression in English. The process of cultural understanding constructed in this excerpt is different from the process of cultural understanding achieved by an interaction completely controlled by the instructor. Instead of the process of cultural understanding of the linguistic expression in English anchored and controlled by the cultural information and interpretation accorded singularly by the instructor, the process of cultural understanding is controlled more by the learners and less by the instructor in this type of culture-related episodes.

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