Chapter – 6

Conclusion
CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

In one of Isaac Asimov’s science fictions, *The Fun They Had*, the little girl Margie tells her brother, Tommy, “...my mother says a teacher has to be adjusted to fit the mind of each boy and girl he teaches and that each kid has to be taught differently” (2011:74). These words incidentally indicate that learners are not alike; they possess different intelligences and different cognitive make-ups, and if we want maximal ESL learning to happen, study materials cannot be one-set-fit-all type. This is true for all learning including second language learning.

The existence of diversity or many-sidedness in respect to innate talents, skills or capabilities drives learners not to follow the same route to learn the target language. As a researcher, I have found that individual learners are endowed with dominant and less dominant intelligence types and their learning styles follow from the dominant intelligences they possess. This creates a distinction in learning styles and differences in preferred learning strategies from learner to learner, and substantiates the views on learner strategy theories of Rubin (1975) Stern (1975), O’Malley al (1985), Oxford (1990, 2011), Fenner and John (2012) and Larry and Katie (2012).
Indeed ESL classrooms can be deconstructed using the research insights from Oxford (1990, 2011), Gardner (1983, 1993, 1999), Nunan (1996) and many more, who suggest a diversity in learning styles of ESL learners, diversity in their strategy use, and diversity in their mental constitution.

The central concern of my work has been deeply rooted in discovering the learners’ different strategies that would suit their personality traits and which make them active participants in the language classroom. My research objective was to train all learners to depend on their own resources and apply their distinctive learning strategies to self-direct and self-monitor their learning, and eventually become responsible for their own performances in the second language. This concept of learner autonomy propounded by Holec (1981), Dickinson (1987), Ellis and Sinclair (1989), Little (1991, 1997), Scharle and Szabó (2000) and Benson (2001) has provided the inputs to examine my learners’ diverse potentials and strategies to develop their proficiency in ESL. So I engaged them in different meaningful activities which provided them opportunities to learn and use ESL in different contexts without much teacher assistance.

On the basis of the theoretical principles discussed, e.g. the MI theory, theories on learner strategy and learner autonomy, the present research has explored the possibilities of learner autonomy if they are allowed to use their choices in materials and strategy use for learning.
6.1 A summary of the work

The first chapter recorded my personal experience of teaching ESL in a secondary school in a rural area in the district of Birbhum, West Bengal, where I have spent over ten years of my life teaching. I have attempted to explore my research proposition that different learners approach ESL learning differently and they require different types of materials to maximize their learning potential. I also construed that allowing learners to follow their preferred strategies for learning, they would become relatively less teacher dependent in learning.

To keep all learners actively engaged in the ESL learning process, I designed activities and planned the methodology to match with the eight types of intelligences. Short stories, rhymes, newspaper articles and photographs were used as supplementary materials along with the prescribed textbook to meet the requirements of different learners. Pair and group activities as well as individual work were used to enable learners think and do the tasks without much stress.

By executing the lesson plans in the actual classroom, I evaluated the effectiveness of the proposed activities. I have observed that giving answers to the referential questions, arranging the jumbled up events of a story in the right sequence, blank filling exercises, making rhythmic movements and above all, having meaningful interactions between learner and learner, between the teacher...
and the whole class had a good potential to generate learner interest as well as learning opportunities.

6.2 A discussion of the findings

This research confirms the established research views that each learner prefers different learning styles and techniques. Learning styles group common ways in which learners learn using a combination of styles. Some learners have a dominant style of learning, with far less use of the other styles. Others use different styles in different circumstances. There is no right mix or any one correct learning style and strategy. Nor are the styles and strategies rigidly fixed. Learners can develop their ability in less dominant styles, as well as further develop the strategies that they already use well.

Using multiple strategies and multiple intelligences for learning is a relatively new approach. This approach is one that educators have only recently started to recognize.

Traditional schooling used, and continues to use, mainly linguistic and logical teaching methods. It also uses a limited range of learning and teaching techniques. Many schools still rely only on classroom and book-based teaching, much repetition, and pressured examinations for learning, reinforcement and review. A result of this existing approach is that we often label those who use these two
learning styles, linguistic and logical, and the matching strategies as bright. Those who use less favoured learning styles and strategies such as, visual, kinesthetic etc., often find themselves at a disadvantage in the education system. This creates positive and negative spirals that reinforce the belief that one is 'smart' or 'dumb', and is not a true description of a learner most of the time.

The education system's recognition and understanding of the learners’ learning strategies and learners’ awareness of their preferred styles can help in using techniques, materials and approaches better suited for learning. This improves the speed and quality of learning and enhances learner autonomy.

Conclusions drawn from this study emphasize that the classroom pedagogy requires teachers to trust learners’ distinct abilities which should be considered a significant attribute in the ESL learning process. So, teachers need to employ suitable learning materials and adopt methodology that would agree with the individual learner's learning styles and preferred strategies.

As a researcher, I realized that when learners learn according to their preferred style, they reflect on their experiences, feel relaxed, and enjoy the lessons. They are stimulated to take up the initiative of learning, which is autonomy for such learners in our context.
Contrarily, the same learners felt stressed when they were asked to read an unfamiliar story, write short notes, paragraphs or small descriptions of nature objects (5.1.1, 5.1.7, 5.1.8). A heavy reliance on the activities based only on the verbal-linguistic and logical intelligences demotivated them, and they did not focus on the strategies required for such task completion (5.1.1). On the other hand, they took up independent initiative when they engaged with activities that matched their distinctive ways of learning, e.g. music related activities (5.1.2), drawing (5.1.4), role playing, craft sessions (5.1.5), and field trips (5.1.8). In these contexts, learner motivation and interest to complete the activities without teacher dependence were much higher unlike in the contexts that demanded an exclusive utilization of verbal linguistic skills.

This research indicates that when there is no scope in any given syllabus to accommodate a variety of learning styles, strategies and intelligences, appropriate supplementary materials and a corresponding classroom approach will lead to learner motivation for strategy use and independent learning.

6.3 Applications of the findings

The utility of the findings lie in the fact that an ESL teacher should focus on how learners can use learning strategies for ESL learning rather than focusing on teaching. The following are the areas where the findings of this research can be applied to improve the prevailing classroom pedagogy.
Curriculum planning and syllabus designing

An effort at curriculum reform and syllabus reframing informed by learning styles and strategy use should be considered a significant step towards learner autonomy. The findings of this research can be applied to modify the present state of ESL curriculum planning, syllabus designing and preparation of materials. The readiness of the pedagogy would facilitate learners to grow and become autonomous learners.

Textbooks and material preparation

The present course books do not cater to the variety of learning styles that exist in learners. Very often textbook activities have no correspondence with the different learning styles, as they focus only on two types of intelligences, viz., verbal-linguistic and logical. These lead to a lack in motivation on the part of the learners. Textbook writers and materials producers may use the insights of this research and incorporate appropriate learning inputs, which can keep the attention of the whole class engaged and support their use of personal strategies.

Approaches to classroom teaching methods

The approaches to classroom teaching would require a radical change to create learner motivation and learner autonomy. The sample lesson plans and the methods of using them in class as demonstrated in this research may be of use to
implement a variety of approaches so that different learning styles get activated and learners get to use their typical strategies for ESL learning. Learners can engage themselves in the activities, solving problems by working alone or in pairs/groups. The emphasis is on motivating and inspiring learners to involve in the language activities on their own rather than merely producing the fixed answers from memory.

Testing and evaluation

As the composition of any class is heterogeneous, as shown in Chapter 3, using one type of test for all categories of learners is as fruitless as using one type of material and activities for all. To measure how well different types of learners know and use ESL, different types of testing items should be implemented. These testing items will be instrumental in determining the kind of learning that should take place before the test. Since learner performance is considered a qualification, tests have to adapt to evaluate learning from different angles, and not just using the verbal-linguistic criteria. The suggested testing parameters can determine learners' actual learning achievements.

Teacher education

Teacher awareness of learning styles, strategies, and the importance of creating learner autonomy is a crucial aspect of second language pedagogy. The findings
of this research can help in developing teacher education programmes that can make teachers more responsive to learner diversities, and adjust the materials and methodology accordingly.

6.4 Limitations of the work

It is not possible to claim that this research has been either extensive or all-inclusive. The research was conducted with twenty learners and within the limited time of twenty two school periods as it was conducted simultaneous to my regular teaching of three classes, 8, 9 and 10, along with the other activities of the school. Although data has been validated through triangulation and an in-depth analysis of the data has been done, the work can be extended to include more learners and more teaching hours for a more convincing generalization. A combination of qualitative research and quantitative research with statistical data will yield firm results for application.

6.5 Scope for future research

Though this study has attempted to provide insights into ESL learning by a group of learners, the prescribed learning materials and the supplementary materials prepared by me, and the complex issue of learner autonomy, further research can be conducted in the areas of teacher awareness of learner diversity, materials preparation to match with different learning styles, learners training to be become
self-reliant in their learning through a conscious use of strategy, and preparation of alternative methods of testing.

Introduction of pre-service and in-service teacher development programmes on multifarious materials preparation will supplement the prescribed course books, and teaching methodology. Teachers should be able to design tasks and activities and judiciously administer them as additional inputs.

Research in these areas would help learners having different intelligences and learning strategies, and permit them to gain hands-on experience in ESL learning and use. These will help them acquire a critical perspective on their own roles as independent users of the target language.

6.6 Conclusion

learning, often suppressed by institutionalized education policies. I have also tried to find ways to achieve better autonomy for ESL learners. My research makes it evident that learner autonomy is achievable using conducive materials and methodology.

All these innovative propositions are expected to promote learner independence that allocates the controlling role to learners in their learning context where they take advantage of all practice opportunities, rehearse and apply learning strategies, combat inhibition, and gradually get equipped with “the means necessary to self-direct and self-monitor their own learning” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006: 39).

That kind of active engagement with English can be expected of our learners if the environment is facilitative. Learner independence is possible if the system as a whole becomes sensitive of learner diversity, and respects that diversity.


